Journal of Gender Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjgs20

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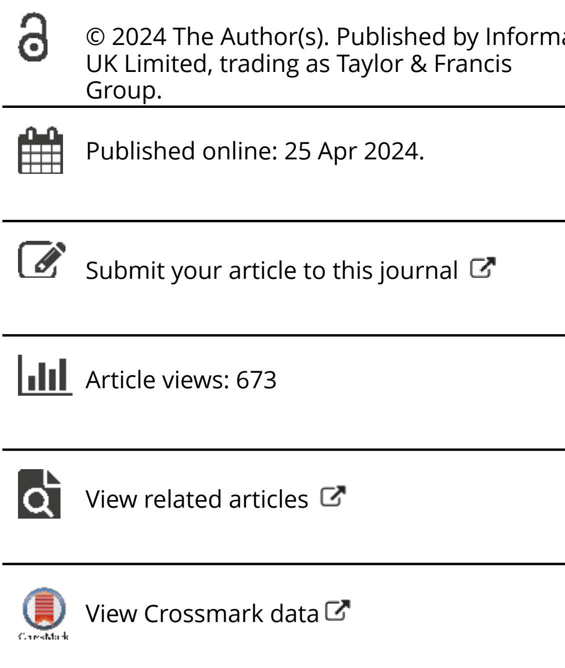
To cite this article: Fiona O’Rourke & Craig Haslop (25 Apr 2024): ‘We’re respectful boys … we’re not misogynistic!’: analysing defensive, contradictory and changing performances of masculinity within young men’s in-person and digitally mediated homosocial spaces, Journal of Gender Studies, DOI: 10.1080/09589236.2024.2335627

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2335627



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Published online: 25 Apr 2024.

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JOURNAL OF GENDER STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2335627

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

'We're respectful boys . . . we're not misogynistic!': analysing defensive, contradictory and changing performances of masculinity within young men's in-person and digitally mediated homosocial spaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines and theorizes how digital technologies and forms of communication, such as men-only private chat groups, facilitate and mediate the forms of masculinity young heterosexual men in the UK co-construct, perform and negotiate in their homosocial interactions. Qualitative data is drawn from 8 focus groups and 17 one-to-one interviews with young men aged 18–25 years, who identify as cisgender and heterosexual (*N* = 40), which is analysed using critical masculinity theories, including the concept of homosociality. Key findings indicate that the characteristics of online communication, including 24/7 connectivity and the ability to rapidly share online content, such as texts in men-only private chat groups, via the infrastructure of digital platforms, technologies and devices, facilitate 'digitally mediated homosociality', which changes in response to gendered hierarchies, relational norms and interactional needs. While participants often use online communications to engage in non-hierarchical homosociality via practices that enhance camaraderie, solidarity and emotional intimacy with other men, they also use them for hierarchical homosociality to acquire masculine status via practices that include non-consensually sexting teenage girls and women's 'nudes', though they defensively distanced themselves from misogyny. We conclude by outlining how these findings can inform educational interventions that tackle misogyny and promote non-hierarchical masculinities.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 June 2023
Accepted 22 March 2024

KEYWORDS
Masculinities; heterosexuality; homosociality; digital cultures; misogyny

Introduction

In recent decades, scholars have argued that progressive shifts in gendered norms in Anglophone countries, including the UK, mean that some young heterosexual men in these contexts are more likely than older generations to hold attitudes and practise behaviours that undermine hierarchical forms of masculinity, which dominate other men and women (Anderson, 2008; Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Blanchard et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2017). These studies, which examined in-person interactions within all-male homosocial groups, observed low levels of homophobic language and behaviour and little to no overt misogyny in these spaces. Though men's engagement with digital realms is under researched (Maloney et al., 2018) an emerging body of research is documenting how these progressive shifts are manifesting in digitized spaces. For example, Maloney

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et al. (2018, 1705) observe how three *YouTube* gaming vloggers perform heterosexual masculinities by openly expressing their affection for their male friends through comments such as 'I love you!'. Morris and Anderson (2015, p. 1200) document how three young, heterosexual men, who are Britain's most popular video-bloggers on *YouTube*, present a 'softer masculinity' than that associated with men of older generations, which eschews misogyny. Similarly, Potts' (2015, p. 183–184) analysis of *YouTube* 'vlogs' that accompanied multi-player online video games, which largely involved discussions between young, heterosexual men in the UK, found that 'female partners are rarely featured, and when they contribute to gameplay, sexual innuendo and other forms of taboo discourse are infrequent'. Some scholars argue that such progressive forms of masculinity, which are not predicated on dominating other men or women, reflect broader shifts in contemporary youth culture (Morris & Anderson, 2015).

However, in recent years, a number of media reports have revealed how groups of young men in a range of locations across the UK engage in misogynistic forms of masculinity, that includes threatening and/or perpetrating sexual abuse, harassment and violence against women, some of which have involved digitized forms of communication, such as private group chats that were later publicized. Examples include a group of young men attending Warwick University who posted messages in a *Facebook* group chat titled 'Fuck women. Disrespect them all', including fantasies about raping women on their course (Lee & Kennelly, 2019; see also Busby, 2019). Similar misogynistic comments were observed in *WhatsApp* private group chats between young men attending Exeter University who exchanged 'jokes' about raping women on their course (Williams, 2018). References to sexual violence were also evident in private group chats between young men at Durham University, which included discussions about how to use date rape drugs to sexually assault female students (Wright, 2020). Another example includes a private *WhatsApp* group chat between young men in Belfast where they boasted about having sex with a woman they were subsequently accused of raping (Rutherford, 2018). These incidents, which link groups of young men from a range of locations across the UK to misogynistic comments and behaviours, including sexual abuse, harassment and violence against women, often associated with 'lad culture'[1] (Phipps & Young, 2013), challenge claims that there have been progressive shifts in how this demographic group is performing masculinity within their homosocial groups and elsewhere. Moreover, these incidents suggest that digital technologies and forms of communication, including men-only private chat groups that are concealed from public view, are playing a role in facilitating these homosocial interactions. However, the way in which digital technologies and forms of communication facilitate and mediate the homosocial interactions of young heterosexual men from geographical locations across the UK remains under-researched and under-theorized.

Despite this dearth of research, there are a few studies that have contributed valuable empirical data to this field of scholarship. For example, Roberts (2018, p. 202) examined the in-person and digitized homosocial relations and dynamics of young working-class British heterosexual men from the South East of England and found that '[a]ll-male friendship settings are *sometimes* arenas in which sexist and derogatory language is used'. Other studies have indicated that young heterosexual men in the UK located within specific sites, like university campuses, are using digital technologies and forms of communication to engage in misogynistic comments and behaviours, including sexual abuse, harassment and violence against women (Haslop & O'Rourke, 2021; Jackson & Sundaram, 2020; Phipps & Young, 2013), though digitized forms of homosociality are not the focal point of these studies. The dearth of research about the digitized homosocial interactions of young heterosexual men in the UK prompts a number of questions. How do the characteristics of online communication, including the ability to rapidly share online content, such as text messages in men-only private chat groups via digital devices, like smartphones, facilitate and mediate the forms of masculinity these gendered subjects co-construct, perform and navigate in their homosocial spaces? To what extent do digitized forms of homosociality maintain and/or undermine hierarchical forms of masculinity, which are predicated on subordinating gendered subjects, including women? The absence of in-depth research about these digitally mediated forms of homosociality means that they are not fully

understood, which impedes efforts to challenge harmful practices that have been associated with these spaces, including misogyny.

This paper addresses this empirical gap by critically analysing and theorizing how digital technologies and forms of communication, such as men-only private group chats, facilitate and mediate the forms of masculinity young heterosexual men in the UK co-construct, perform and negotiate in their homosocial interactions. A key focus of this paper is to examine how the characteristics of online communication, including 24/7 connectivity and the ability to rapidly share online content, such as text messages in men-only private chat groups, via the infrastructure of digital platforms and technologies, facilitate and mediate digitized forms of masculine homosociality. We are particularly interested in critically analysing the extent to which these digitally mediated forms of homosociality maintain and/or undermine hierarchical forms of masculinity within these all-male spaces, specifically in how young heterosexual men relate to each other and women in their online and offline interactions. This analysis aims to contribute new empirical and theoretical insights to critical masculinities studies, particularly the relationship between gender, masculinities and digital technologies, which remains under-researched and under-theorized. In addition, this paper outlines how its key research findings can be used to develop educational interventions that engage men in co-constructing non-hierarchical forms of masculinity within their homosocial spaces that work to tackle and prevent harmful practices associated with hierarchical forms of masculinity, including misogyny. The next section of the paper will provide a brief overview of research literature that examines and theorizes the relationship between young men, masculinity and homosociality in order to contextualize our key research concerns.

Young men, masculinity and homosociality

The concept of homosociality, which describes and defines non-sexual bonds and social relations between people of the same sex (Flood, 2008; Hammarén & Johansson, 2014), has frequently been used in studies about men and masculinities in recent decades. A significant number of studies have conceptualized male-to-male homosociality as a dynamic that enables powerful men to collectively maintain and reproduce a patriarchal social order that dominates women and other less powerful men via hierarchical or hegemonic forms of masculinity (e.g. Bird, 1996; Connell, 1987, 1995; Flood, 2008). Hegemonic forms of masculinity in contemporary Anglophone societies centre upon a number of characteristics, which include heterosexuality, dominance, competitiveness, homophobia, misogyny and emotional stoicism (Bird, 1996; Flood, 2008; Kimmel, 2009; Pascoe, 2013). In the UK, young British men who engage with 'lad culture' and 'laddish' forms of masculinity, which have been associated with a range of practices that include misogyny and homophobia (National Union of Students [NUS], 2010; Jeffries, 2019), are often seen to embody hegemonic forms of masculinity (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020). Critically, hegemonic forms of masculinity are not innate characteristics of men, but rather are performed via an ongoing 'pattern of practice' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832), often in front of other men. Boys and men participate in practices within their homosocial groups that adhere to the hegemonic ideal so that other men will perceive them to be masculine. In that sense, masculinity is largely a relational 'homosocial enactment' (Kimmel, 2009, p. 64), which is performed for, and judged by, other men (Arxer, 2011; Bird, 1996).

Empirical studies using the concept of homosociality have explored the social dynamics, methods and mechanisms by which men collectively maintain hegemonic masculinity in and through their homosocial relations (e.g. Bird, 1996; Flood, 2008). For example, Flood (2008, p. 353) observes how the homosocial bonds and relations between young heterosexual men (aged 18 to 26) at a military university in the United States often involved telling 'sexual stories' about women, which bred 'intragroup competition' as men strive to achieve status on the masculine hierarchy. Teenage boys and young men who do not engage in these homosocial behaviours, such as sexual acts with numerous teenage girls and women and/or challenge this behaviour, can be 'othered' through homophobic discourses (Pascoe, 2013), which can deter them from challenging these behaviours in

future. These empirical studies conceptualize male-to-male homosociality as a social dynamic that enables young heterosexual men to maintain hegemonic forms of masculinity and gendered hierarchies through a range of practices that can include sexualizing women and subordinating other less powerful men, including those perceived to be gay.

However, Hammarén and Johansson (2014) have argued that this dominant use of the concept of homosociality has tended to reduce it to a hierarchical term, which does not account for how hierarchical and non-hierarchical relations can co-exist within a gendered subject's homosocial interactions. They propose a more dynamic understanding of homosociality that encompasses the 'contradictory and ambivalent aspects of the concept' (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014, p. 2), which they feel reflects the complex ways in which same-sex individuals can interact and bond. They use the terms 'vertical' and 'horizontal' homosociality to conceptualize these homosocial dynamics: 'vertical homosociality' is a means 'of strengthening power and of creating close bonds to maintain and defend hegemony' (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014, p. 1), which can be used to conceptualize how homosocial bonds function to sustain masculine hegemony or hierarchical relations over women and subordinated men. In contrast, 'horizontal homosociality', resists and rejects hierarchical relations between gendered subjects through social connections and 'relations that are based on emotional closeness, intimacy, and a nonprofitable form of friendship' (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014, p. 5), which can be used to conceptualize more inclusive relations between men. However, they indicate that there are no absolute boundaries between these two forms of homosociality: vertical homosociality may co-exist alongside horizontal homosociality. This is evident in Roberts (2018, p. 202) study, which examined performances of masculinity among young British heterosexual men using ethnographic and social media data, and found that vertical homosociality within their close friendship groups, such as engaging in 'sexist and derogatory language', can co-exist alongside horizontal forms of homosociality, such as progressive approaches to opposite-sex romantic relationships (see also Roberts et al., 2021). These theoretical frameworks enable one to recognize that men may co-construct, perform and navigate hierarchical and non-hierarchical forms of masculinity in their homosocial groups in response to shifting situational settings, relational norms and interactional needs. These homosocial practices indicate that masculinities are not static, fixed and unchanging, rather they are fluid, malleable and contextually dependent (Darcy, 2019).

We will draw upon these theoretical frameworks to critically examine and theorize how digital technologies and forms of communication, such as men-only private group chats, can facilitate and mediate the forms of masculinity young heterosexual men in the UK co-construct, perform and negotiate in their homosocial groups. A key theoretical aim of this analysis is to explore what the data can tell us about how hetero-masculine homosociality operates via the infrastructure of digital platforms, technologies and devices, such as smartphones, and interpersonal forms of online communication, with a particular focus on the mechanics of 'vertical' and 'horizontal' homosociality (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014). By so doing, we seek to use our key research findings to empirically and theoretically build on understandings of how hierarchical and non-hierarchical forms of masculinity operate in digitized spaces.

Research methodology and data

This paper employed a qualitative methodological approach to collect and analyse relevant empirical data via focus groups and one-to-one interviews. Research participants were recruited in the following way. The research project was advertised online via social media platforms, including *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Twitter*, which provided a weblink to a recruitment website that outlined details of the study and invited those interested in participating to provide their demographic characteristics. Participant eligibility was determined by their age (18–25 years), gendered identification (cisgender male) sexual orientation (heterosexual) and country of residence (United Kingdom). Individuals who were deemed eligible to participate were contacted by the researchers who

provided them with relevant information about the study and a consent form, which they signed if they wished to participate.

Research participants were recruited from seven geographically dispersed locations across the UK – London, Brighton, Cardiff, Glasgow, Liverpool, Belfast and Basingstoke. 8 focus groups in total were conducted with participants from the aforementioned locations ($N = 40$). Table 1 provides information about focus group participant's demographic characteristics – gender, sexuality, age, race, ethnicity and educational qualifications attained. The majority of participants were either

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of focus group participants (N = 40).

Focus group (FG) participant no.	Gender	Sexuality	Age	Race	Ethnicity	Education Attained	Location
Focus group (FG) 1							
FG 1, Participant 1	Male	Hetero	20	Black	African Caribbean British	BA degree student	Liverpool
FG 1, Participant 2	Male	Hetero	19	White	English/British	Further education	Liverpool
FG 1, Participant 3	Male	Hetero	20	White	English/British	BA degree student	Liverpool
FG 1, Participant 4	Male	Hetero	20	White	English/British	Further education	Liverpool
FG 1, Participant 5	Male	Hetero	24	White	English/British	BA degree	Liverpool
Focus group (FG) 2							
FG 2, Participant 1	Male	Hetero	23	White	English/British	BA degree	Basingstoke
FG 2, Participant 2	Male	Hetero	18	White	English/British	BA degree	Basingstoke
FG 2, Participant 3	Male	Hetero	25	White	English/British	Secondary level	Basingstoke
FG 2, Participant 4	Male	Hetero	21	White	English/British	BA degree	Basingstoke
FG 2, Participant 5	Male	Hetero	22	White	English/British	Further education	Basingstoke
Focus group (FG) 3							
FG 3, Participant 1	Male	Hetero	21	White	English/British	BA degree	Brighton
FG 3, Participant 2	Male	Hetero	21	White	English/British	BA degree	Brighton
FG 3, Participant 3	Male	Hetero	20	White	English/British	Further education	Brighton
FG 3, Participant 4	Male	Hetero	19	White	English/British	BA degree student	Brighton
FG 3, Participant 5	Male	Hetero	21	White	English/British	BA degree	Brighton
Focus group (FG) 4							
FG 4, Participant 1	Male	Hetero	18	White	English/British	BA degree student	London
FG 4, Participant 2	Male	Hetero	18	White	English/British	BA degree student	London
FG 4, Participant 3	Male	Hetero	19	White	English/British	BA degree student	London
FG 4, Participant 4	Male	Hetero	18	White	English/British	BA degree student	London
FG 4, Participant 5	Male	Hetero	18	White	English/British	BA degree student	London
Focus group (FG) 5							
FG 5, Participant 1	Male	Hetero	18	Brown	Pakistani/British	BA degree student	London
FG 5, Participant 2	Male	Hetero	18	Brown	Pakistani/British	BA degree student	London
FG 5, Participant 3	Male	Hetero	18	Brown	Indian/British	BA degree student	London
FG 5, Participant 4	Male	Hetero	18	Brown	Pakistani/British	BA degree student	London
FG 5, Participant 5	Male	Hetero	18	Black	African/British	BA degree student	London
Focus group (FG) 6							
FG 6, Participant 1	Male	Hetero	22	White	English/British	BA degree	Glasgow
FG 6, Participant 2	Male	Hetero	21	White	English/British	BA degree	Glasgow
FG 6, Participant 3	Male	Hetero	24	White	Scottish/British	BA degree	Glasgow
FG 6, Participant 4	Male	Hetero	21	White	Scottish/British	Further education	Glasgow
FG 6, Participant 5	Male	Hetero	22	White	English/British	BA degree	Glasgow
Focus group (FG) 7							
FG 7, Participant 1	Male	Hetero	22	White	English/British	BA degree	Cardiff
FG 7, Participant 2	Male	Hetero	23	White	English/British	Further education	Cardiff
FG 7, Participant 3	Male	Hetero	20	White	Welsh/British	BA degree student	Cardiff
FG 7, Participant 4	Male	Hetero	25	White	Welsh/British	Further education	Cardiff
FG 7, Participant 5	Male	Hetero	20	White	Welsh/British	BA degree student	Cardiff
Focus group (FG) 8							
FG 8, Participant 1	Male	Hetero	20	White	Irish	Further education	Belfast
FG 8, Participant 2	Male	Hetero	21	White	Irish	BA degree student	Belfast
FG 8, Participant 3	Male	Hetero	20	White	Northern Irish/British	BA degree student	Belfast
FG 8, Participant 4	Male	Hetero	23	Brown	Indian/Irish	BA degree	Belfast
FG 8, Participant 5	Male	Hetero	25	White	Northern Irish/British	BA degree student	Belfast

studying for an undergraduate degree ($n = 18$) or had acquired one ($n = 13$). The remaining participants had further educational qualifications ($n = 8$) and secondary level schooling ($n = 1$). The majority of participants identified as White English/British ($n = 24$). The remaining participants identified as White Scottish/British ($n = 2$), Brown Pakistani British ($n = 3$), White Welsh/British ($n = 3$), White Irish ($n = 2$), White Northern Irish/British ($n = 2$), Black African Caribbean British ($n = 1$), Black African/British ($n = 1$), Brown Indian Irish ($n = 1$) and Brown Indian British ($n = 1$). While there is some racial and ethnic variation in the sample for this study, this is not a dominant feature of the data analysis. This is in part because the majority of research participants identified as White English/British, as indicated above – a point that will be elaborated on in more depth later when the limitations of this study are addressed.

Focus groups explored how digital technologies and forms of communication, such as men-only private group chats, can facilitate and mediate the forms of masculinity research participants co-construct, perform and negotiate in their homosocial interactions. Three broad themes were covered: Experiences of masculinity, including those associated with 'lad cultures'; Men, masculinity, 'lad cultures' and friendships; Sexual and gendered norms and behaviours in hetero-masculine spaces, which all explored the role of digital technologies and forms of communication in facilitating and mediating different forms of masculinity in participant's homosocial groups. The focus groups were semi-structured to facilitate fluid conversations between interviewers and participants (Kvale, 2007). Research participants were encouraged to share additional information they felt was relevant to the discussion, such as personal experiences and narratives that were important and meaningful for them (see Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004), particularly those that relate to their homosocial groups. While the focus groups were effective in generating data on participant's collective views and experiences of their homosocial interactions, they were not ideal for understanding their subjective views and experiences of these gendered practices. Therefore, 17 follow up one-to-one interviews were conducted remotely with focus group participants, which enabled us to gain some insight into their subjective understandings of and responses to these gender-making practices. Table 2 provides information about the demographic characteristics of research participants who took part in interviews.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when national-level travel restrictions prevented in-person meetings. Consequently, all focus groups and interviews were conducted remotely using video conferencing technologies and software, which enabled data collection that would otherwise not have been possible during the COVID-19

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of interview participants ($N = 17$).

Interview participant no.	Gender	Sexuality	Age	Race	Ethnicity	Education attained	Location
Participant 1	Male	Hetero	20	Black	African Caribbean British	BA degree student	Liverpool
Participant 2	Male	Hetero	19	White	English/British	Further education	Liverpool
Participant 3	Male	Hetero	20	White	English/British	BA degree student	Liverpool
Participant 4	Male	Hetero	21	White	English/British	BA degree	Basingstoke
Participant 5	Male	Hetero	22	White	English/British	Further education	Basingstoke
Participant 6	Male	Hetero	21	White	English/British	BA degree	Brighton
Participant 7	Male	Hetero	21	White	English/British	BA degree	Brighton
Participant 8	Male	Hetero	19	White	English/British	BA degree student	London
Participant 9	Male	Hetero	18	Brown	Pakistani British	BA degree student	London
Participant 10	Male	Hetero	18	Black	African/British	BA degree student	London
Participant 11	Male	Hetero	21	White	Scottish/British	Further education	Glasgow
Participant 12	Male	Hetero	24	White	Scottish/British	BA degree	Glasgow
Participant 13	Male	Hetero	20	White	Welsh/British	BA degree student	Cardiff
Participant 14	Male	Hetero	25	White	Welsh/British	Further education	Cardiff
Participant 15	Male	Hetero	21	White	Irish	BA degree student	Belfast
Participant 16	Male	Hetero	23	Brown	Indian/Irish	BA degree	Belfast
Participant 17	Male	Hetero	25	White	Northern Irish/British	BA degree student	Belfast

pandemic. Focus groups were approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes long. Interviews lasted 1 hour on average. All focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with the consent of participants. Focus groups and interview transcripts were analysed thematically, using codes generated from the relevant literature and those that emerged during the research process. All data collection and analysis was conducted between April 2020 and September 2022.

The research team practiced reflexivity – a process that involved critically evaluating how our social identifications, including our race, gender and sexual orientation, influenced how we collected and analysed the qualitative data for this study (Berger, 2015). The lead author identifies as white, Irish, heterosexual, cisgender female, and the second author identifies as white, English, queer, cisgender male. Consequently, we are both 'outsiders' to hetero-masculine men-only homosocial spaces, including those of our research participants, which would likely have influenced how they spoke to us about these spaces in our focus groups and interviews (Richards & Emslie, 2000). To address this issue, we used specific qualitative research skills in our focus groups and interviews to enhance participation and engagement, such as creating a non-judgemental space where participants felt comfortable to speak; building and maintaining rapport with them; showing empathy and capturing their voices, while maintaining a critical distance from their discursive practices (Patton, 2015). Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the research ethics committee at the author's host institution – The University of Liverpool.

Key findings

This section presents the key research findings from this data analysis. We divide these findings into three themes, which are as follows: Camaraderie, solidarity and emotional intimacy; Hetero-masculinity, misogyny and gendered hierarchies; Changing attitudes to misogynistic forms of homosociality.

Camaraderie, solidarity and emotional intimacy

Focus group and interview discussions with young, heterosexual men who participated in this study revealed that they perform a range of masculinities within their homosocial groups, including non-hierarchical forms that strive for camaraderie, solidarity and emotional closeness or intimacy. This is evident in the following focus extract where a young man speaks about the relationships he has with men in his friendship group, who he refers to as the 'lads':

> FG 1, participant 1: 'I call the lads "my boyz", it's like a term of endearment . . . it describes brotherly-like closeness within our group, we laugh, we joke, and we do stuff together, it's almost like forming a family outside of your family . . . and the fact that you're doing stuff together, it just strengthens your bond and it means that you can share stuff with one another, like personal stuff'.

In this extract, this young man describes the homosocial relations and dynamics between men within his all-male friendship group using affectionate terms, including 'my boyz' and familial references like, 'brotherly', which clearly convey the close bonds he has with them. His response suggests that these close affectionate bonds are formed through their shared collective experiences – 'we laugh, we joke, and we do stuff together', which indicates camaraderie and solidarity between the men in this friendship group.

Some young men who participated in this study spoke about how they relied on their close male friends for emotional support, which is evident in the following extract:

> Interview participant 12: 'I just think like if you have a shit day or like something doesn't go your way, they're always there to just like chat to . . . . like not necessarily like sort everything out with you, but they're just kind of there for you'.

In the following interview extract, another research participant speaks about how he asks his close male friend for advice about a range of issues, including opposite sex relationships:

> Interview participant 4: 'Being able to chat to your mate . . .and ask them for advice . . . that's just like such a good thing and sometimes you just like need someone to chat to about something whether it's about a girl or just literally anything'.

A number of participants described the emotionally close relationship with their male friends as 'bromances', that is, a same-sex friendship between men that is based on 'trust and self-disclosure' (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 850). This is evident in the following extracts:

> FG 5, participant 2: 'My mates, we're really close, it's like a bromance, we go to each other with issues . . . we talk about our emotions . . . we help one another out'.

> FG 6, participant 4: 'I've a close relationship with one of my mates . . . it is entirely a bromance . . . .it was . . . probably last year I actually told him that I loved him because he used to be my friend for over 10 years and I actually, I really care for him . . . he's my best friend and I do love him and I care about him'.

These focus group extracts reveal that these young heterosexual men perform non-hierarchical forms of masculinity in their homosocial groups that involve expressing love for one another, self-disclosure, care and empathy – all signs of emotional support, closeness and intimacy, which challenge hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell, 1995) that align 'manliness' with stoicism. Similar non-hierarchical forms of masculinity are also evident in Thurnell-Read's (2012, p. 249) study, which examined the homosocial dynamics of British men's friendship groups and found '[e] xpressions of intimacy and emotion were frequent and a high value was placed on group cohesion and fostering a sense of togetherness'. These homosocial relations align with Hammarén and Johansson's (2014) concept of 'horizontal homosociality' that was explored earlier, which conceptualizes how gendered groups, in this case young, heterosexual men, form and develop non-hierarchical social bonds and relationships with one another that are based on emotional support, closeness and intimacy.

Focus group and interview discussions indicated that digital technologies and online forms of communication, such as texting and men-only private chat groups, played a significant role in enabling young men to develop emotionally close and intimate bonds with their male friends. Smartphones are one of the most popular digital technologies used by young men who participated in this study for communicating with their peers, which is consistent with other studies (see Roberts, 2018). All research participants talked about regularly using their smartphones to have group chats with their friends via messaging applications, like *WhatsApp* or *Facebook Messenger*, where they share online content, including innocuous memes, photos and music videos, alongside comments about a range of topics, such as their nights out and personal experiences. Many participants had at least one men-only private chat group, made up of their close friends, which included self-identified 'lads'. In the following extract, a young man speaks about the private chat group he has with his male friends, which he calls his 'lad's group':

> Interview participant 3: 'I've got a private chat group with my close mates, it's our lad's group . . . it's like no girls or outsiders allowed. . .I feel like we can put anything into our *WhatsApp* group chat anytime, like personal stuff, and we'd be there for each other'.

Similar views are expressed in the following extract where a young man speaks about the close relationships he has with men in his 'lad's group' and how they use online forms of communication, such as their men-only private group chats, to reach out to one another for emotional support:

> Interview participant 10: 'Our lad's group, we're really close . . . like we share stuff with one another all the time and if you need help, you can reach out on our *Messenger* group chat whenever you need it and we'll help one another out'.

Within these extracts, these young men speak about how they and their male friends use their men-only private chat groups, which are closed online communities where women and other 'outsiders'

are excluded, to communicate with one another about personal matters and to ask for emotional support, if they need it. They make reference to *WhatsApp* and *Facebook Messenger* - digital messaging applications and platforms, which they use to communicate with one another. One participant states 'we can put anything into our *WhatsApp* group chat anytime … and we'd be there for each other', which suggests that the characteristics of online communication, including 24/7 connectivity and an 'always-on' lifestyle and culture (Boyd, 2011, p. 71), are enabling these young men to reach out to one another on an emotional level, which appears to support their homosocial bonds.

Thus far, data analysis has indicated that research participants are using digital technologies and online forms of communication to forge and develop emotionally close and intimate relationships with their male friends in ways that appear to enhance their face-to-face relationships (Chambers, 2013). The characteristics of online communication, including 24/7 connectivity and the ability to immediately connect with others regardless of time or place via the infrastructure of digital platforms, technologies and devices, such as smartphones, facilitate and mediate these emotionally close or intimate homosocial relations, which are intertwined with digitized modes of intimacy (Dobson et al., 2018). These digitized homosocial relations, which we refer to as 'digitally mediated homosociality', indicate how digital technologies and networked forms of communication have become 'infrastructures of intimacy' (Paasonen, 2017, p. 104), where close connections are formed not only with other people, but with 'devices, apps and platforms' (Paasonen, 2017, p. 104). In other words, these digitized forms of intimacy, which facilitate and mediate connections between individuals, are part of a larger networked, relational environment.

Hetero-masculinity, misogyny and gendered hierarchies

Focus group discussions and interviews with young heterosexual men who participated in this study indicated that they and/or their friends often simultaneously aligned themselves with, and distanced themselves from, hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell, 1995), including misogyny. This is evident in the following focus group extract where three young men in their late teens are asked what they post in their men-only private chat groups and whether it involves content that relates to women:

> Interviewer: 'What do you post in your private group chats? Do you talk about women, girlfriends and relationships?'
>
> FG 4, participant 1: 'Yeah, we chat about nights out, who we'd like to … there might be a little bit of chat if someone has hooked up with somebody…'
>
> FG 4, participant 2: 'But we're respectful boys…'
>
> FG 4, participant 3: 'We're very respectful…'
>
> FG 4, participant 5: 'We're respectful boys… we're not misogynistic cunts'

In this focus group extract, these young men talk about some of the content they post in their private chat groups, which includes 'chat about nights out', such as if someone has 'hooked up' – a slang term that describes casual sexual activity. All participants then hasten to state that they are 'respectful', which suggests that they are very keen to present a positive image of themselves as respectful to women. The last participant defensively states 'we're not misogynistic cunts!', which appears to be an attempt to dissociate himself and his friends from misogyny, though he uses misogynistic language to do this: the word 'cunt' - a pejorative term that refers to female genitals, has historically been used to demean and insult women (Rees, 2015). Thus, this young man is defensively distancing himself from misogyny, but is simultaneously maintaining and reproducing it through his discursive practices.

While young men who took part in this study were often keen to distance themselves from misogyny, their homosocial bonding practices, particularly those of participants in their late teens and early twenties, including those in the aforementioned focus group, can sometimes be predicated on misogynistic forms of masculinity. For instance, research participants acknowledged that they observed and/or engaged in the non-consensual sharing of sexual photographs and/or videos of teenage girls and/or women – a form of image-based sexual abuse (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017) in their homosocial groups. Some research participants spoke about 'nude collections' – a large number of semi-naked or naked photographs of teenage girls and/or women stored on smartphones. This is evident in the following extract where a young man speaks about how he created his 'nude' collection:

> Interview participant 2: 'You're with a girl for a while . . . .get a couple photos off her and then after you break up, you got all these nude photos . . . and then somebody finds out that you've got all them so they message you for them and you say . . . 'oh, you've got that one, you got this one, I've got this one, I'll give it to you for that'. . . . so it becomes like a trading card thing . . . .that's kind of like a proper connection where it's just guys sharing nudes'.

This extract reveals that these young men in their late teens are clearly prioritizing their homosocial relationships over the intimate sexual relations they had with teenage girls, whose 'nudes' they view and exchange in ways that suggest they have 'currency and value' (Ringrose et al., 2013, p. 313) in their hetero-masculine homosocial group. The participant likens this exchange of sexual images of teenage girls and/or women that occurs between himself and his male friends to a 'trading card thing' that he feels enables them to build 'a proper connection' with one another, which suggests that it works to support their hetero-masculine homosocial bonding. Some research participants in their late teens spoke about how possessing 'nude collections' often helped to enhance the status of their male peers in their hetero-masculine homosocial groups. This is evident in the following extract, where a young man describes how one of his male peers at college showed him his 'nude collection':

> Interview participant 9: 'There was a guy at my college . . . he was the ultimate lad . . . he showed me his phone one day and he had a file with over a thousand nudes in it and you can just scroll through and there were so many different girls in it and it was a hell of an accomplishment that he had so many'.

The manner in which this young man describes his male friend, who he calls 'the ultimate lad, and his collection of 'nudes' of semi-naked and naked photographs of teenage girls and/or women as 'a hell of an accomplishment' suggests that it has value within his hetero-masculine homosocial groups that enables him to acquire status. The process by which these teenage boys and young men are acquiring status via non-consensually sharing sexual photographs of teenage girls and/or women – a form of image-based sexual abuse (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017) in their homosocial groups can be seen as an example of 'vertical' or hierarchical homosociality (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014) that functions to maintain gendered hierarchies between men and women. Digital technologies and forms of communication, which enable the visual recording, sharing, exchanging and the potentially permanent circulation of these 'nudes', facilitate these non-consensual practices and provide teenage boys with a route to acquiring hetero-masculine status within their homosocial spaces (see also Salter, 2016).

Some young men in their late teens who took part in this study had ambivalent feelings about non-consensual sexting practices in their homosocial groups. This is evident in the following extract where a young man in his late teens recalls how teenage boys in his college non-consensually shared sexual photographs of teenage girl's bodies via their smartphones:

> FG 5, participant 4: 'My friends were sharing sexual pictures of girls from our class . . . nudes and stuff, without their permission . . . and a lot of the boys will just come around watching it even though everyone knew it was wrong, it's just that . . . when you've got other lads watching it with you, it's like it makes you feel comfortable doing it.'

Similar homosocial dynamics have been observed by Ringrose et al. (2022, p. 246) who observed that teenage 'boys can demonstrate awareness of how image sharing is abusive', but still actively

participate in 'homosocial practices of showing and sharing without consent which normalizes harm and abuse of women and girls' as it enables them to acquire status within their homosocial spaces (see also Mandau, 2020).

Focus group discussions with young heterosexual men indicated that sexual activity with numerous women increasingly became the route to acquiring masculine status within their hetero-masculine peer groups as they moved from their teens to their early twenties. Some participants spoke about how men within their peer groups, including those identified as 'lads', would competitively brag about the women they had 'pulled' – a slang term that is used in the UK to describe the act of seducing someone and/or having sex with them, which is evident in the following extract:

> FG 2, participant 5: 'If the lads go out and they'd pull on a night out, they'll come back and they'll brag about it in our group chat . . . like whether they had sex or not, so, you know, everyone's bragging about their conquest . . . sometimes people send pics of them'.

These homosocial practices and dynamics, which involve young heterosexual men bragging about their sexual encounters with women to other men via online forms of communication, namely a private group chat that can include 'pics' or photographs of their sexual conquest, illustrate how hetero-masculinity can function as a 'homosocial enactment' (Kimmel, 2009, p. 64), which men perform for other men (Arxer, 2011; Bird, 1996; Flood, 2008). Some young men who participated in this study spoke about the competitive nature of these homosocial practices in their peer groups where they compete to acquire status and assert their dominance over one another. This is evident in the following extract, where a young man in his early twenties talks about his experiences:

> FG 1, participant 3: 'If your mates think that you're pulling . . . they're going to think that you're better than them kind of thing, and it's all this competition to be the alpha basically'.

The process by which these teenage boys and young men are competing to be an 'alpha' or dominant male in their homosocial groups via practices that involve 'pulling' women can be recognized as a form of 'vertical' or hierarchical homosociality' (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014) as it maintains gendered hierarchies between men and women. However, a few young men who participated in our research indicated that if they and/or their friends were over-sharing information about their sexual experiences within their homosocial groups, this could potentially detract from their masculine status. In the following extract, a focus group participant speaks about such scenarios within his peer group:

> FG 8, participant 3: 'Sometimes me and my mates will talk about who we're seeing, like the other day my mate told us "I met this girl on *Tinder*", and then if he was bragging and going on too much, we'll make fun . . . like some fella might say "Oh, you know, I slept with this girl last night", and we'd say "Oh, did you make it to 30 seconds this time?" that sort of stuff'.

This extract reveals that while these young heterosexual men may encourage other men to share information about their sexual experiences within their hetero-masculine homosocial groups, over-sharing or exaggerating their sexual performance is deemed 'counterproductive to proving one's masculinity' (Roberts et al., 2021, p. 30), which can potentially detract from their status in the peer group.

Collectively, these focus group and interview extracts indicate that the homosocial relations of these young heterosexual men in their late teens and early twenties can involve a range of misogynistic practices that adversely affect teenage girls and/or women, which include non-consensually sharing sexual photographs of them, sexually objectifying them and pursuing them as sexual conquests. However, some research participants indicated that men were mocked for oversharing information about their sexual encounters with women or exaggerating their sexual performance, which could detract from their masculine status in their homosocial group. While some men who participated in this research were ambivalent about engaging in misogynistic practices, they did not object to or challenge them and thus are complicit in enabling them to occur. These misogynistic practices within young men's homosocial groups, which emerge from and reflect

gendered power dynamics in the broader social context (Salter, 2016), maintain and reproduce hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) – a patriarchal social system that sustains the dominance of men over women. As previously indicated, Hammarén and Johansson (2014, p. 1) use the term 'vertical homosociality' to conceptualize these homosocial dynamics, which they state is a means 'of strengthening power and of creating close bonds to maintain and defend hegemony'. The characteristics of online communication, including 24/7 connectivity and the ability to rapidly share and exchange online content, such as non-consensual sexual photographs of teenage girls and women via digital technologies, such as smartphones, can facilitate and mediate these homosocial dynamics, which we refer to as 'digitally mediated homosociality'.

Focus group discussions with young, heterosexual men indicated that digital technologies and forms of communication, including men-only private chat groups can also play a role in concealing misogynistic practices. This is evident in the following extract:

> Interview participant 7: 'Men talking about women in a negative way . . . like saying sexual things about them . . . it's less acceptable now . . . so it has to happen in private, like in *WhatsApp* chat groups, for them to feel comfortable saying those things.'

This participant's extract reveals that he is acutely aware that misogyny is now stigmatized and is 'less acceptable' in public spaces. Consequently, he feels men, like himself, use digital technologies and encrypted messaging services, like *WhatsApp*, to conceal misogynistic comments and behaviour in private group chats from public view and thus avoid the charge of misogyny.

Changing attitudes to misogynistic forms of homosociality

Focus group discussions and interviews with some young, heterosexual men in their mid-twenties indicated that their perceptions of and attitudes to misogynistic forms of masculinity, such as non-consensual sexting, have changed over time. This is evident in the following extract where a young man in his early twenties talks about why he feels attitudes to these practices have changed in his homosocial groups:

> Interview participant 17: 'Sharing nudes of girls happens a lot more when you're younger. So, I remember back in my early to mid-teens . . . if someone got sent a nude, they'd be like, 'Oh, look, who's nude I got', and you'd share it around and you're really immature so you don't really understand like that's sort of a bad thing to do.'

In this extract, this participant explains that he and his teenage male peers shared nudes or semi-nude photographs of girls or women within their hetero-masculine peer groups when they were younger, which he attributes to them being 'really immature' and not understanding that it is 'a bad thing to do'. This comment suggests that this participant now recognizes that this practice was wrong and abusive, which suggests that this may be the reason they do not engage with this practice as much as they used to. Other participants attribute their changing attitudes to non-consensually sharing photographs of women bodies within their homosocial groups to other factors, which include having long-term relationships with women. This is evident in the following interview extract where a young man in his mid-twenties reflects on how attitudes to these practices in his homosocial group have changed over time:

> Interviewee participant 5: 'Photos of nudes in our group chats . . .that hasn't happened in years, it's probably partly down to people settling down a bit more you know, having girlfriends now, potential wives, I mean you're obviously not going to share that kind of content, like nudes of your girlfriend as it would have a bad effect on them and it's disrespecting their privacy'.

In this extract, this participant indicates that he and his friends, who are now young 'adults' no longer post or share 'nudes' of women in their homosocial groups, which he partly attributes to them having girlfriends, who are perceived to be 'potential wives', and recognizing that sharing intimate sexual photographs of them with other men would 'have a bad effect on them' as it disrespects their privacy. This response suggests that the men within this homosocial group are prioritizing their relationships

with their girlfriends over their homosocial relations with their male friends in ways that appear to be resisting hegemonic forms of masculinity that are predicated on misogyny (Connell, 1995).

In the following extract a research participant in his mid-twenties explains why he feels his male friend's attitudes to non-consensual sexting have changed by explaining why they would never ask him to send a 'nude' of his long-term girlfriend:

> FG 7, participant 4: 'I've been with my girlfriend for four and half years now and I still sort of go out with the lads but no one would dare ask me to send nudes of her or make a joke about me and her in a cruel way because there's that level of respect that we've been together four and a half years, it's not just a fling, if you know what I mean'.

In this extract, this young man reveals that he feels his friends, who he calls 'the lads', would not ask him to send nudes of his long-term girlfriend or 'make a joke about me and her in a cruel way' because there is a level of respect for her as she is not just a 'fling' - a casual sexual encounter. This comment suggests that the men in this homosocial group have more respect for long-term girlfriends than women they have 'flings' or casual sexual relations with. Similar findings have been made by Roberts et al. (2021, p. 33) who examined the homosocial practices of young heterosexual men in an Australian context observed a 'hierarchy of respect' where their girlfriends are perceived to be more worthy of respectful behaviour than women they have 'flings' or casual sexual encounters with (see also Roberts, 2018). These practices suggest that progressive approaches to opposite-sex romantic relationships can co-exist alongside less progressive attitudes towards women within these all-male homosocial spaces, which are indicative of vertical or hierarchical forms of homosociality (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014).

While some young heterosexual men who participated in this study said that they did not engage with specific misogynistic practices in their homosocial group, such as non-consensually sharing sexual photographs of teenage girls and/or women, as they got older, they admitted that they were still part of men-only private chat groups where these practices persisted. This is evident in the following extract where a young man speaks about his experiences:

> Interview participant 15: 'I'm in a group chat with men at work . . . they're a lot older . . . and that is the absolute main thing that would be on there . . . .women's nudes or women in bikinis or lingerie. . .that type of stuff . . . I don't call it out because they're colleagues and some are mates.'

This participant admits that he does not 'call out' men in his homosocial group who sexually objectify 'women's nudes or women in bikinis or lingerie' as the people in this group are 'colleagues and some are mates', which suggests that their homosocial bonds are playing a role in preventing him from objecting to these practices.

Conclusion

This paper examined how digital technologies and forms of communication, such as men-only private chat groups, can facilitate and mediate the forms of masculinity young, heterosexual men who participated in this study co-construct, perform and negotiate in their homosocial interactions. Key findings indicate that the characteristics of online communication, including 24/7 connectivity and the ability to rapidly share online content, such as text messages in men-only private chat groups, via the infrastructure of digital platforms, technologies and devices, including smartphones, can facilitate and mediate digitized forms of homosocial relations, which we refer to as 'digitally mediated homosociality'. Our data analysis reveals a complex picture of how these digital technologies and forms of communication facilitate and mediate the forms of masculinity research participants co-construct, perform and negotiate in their homosocial interactions, which change in response to shifting

situational settings, relational norms and interactional needs. For instance, research participants often use online forms of communication, such as men-only private chat groups, to engage in 'horizontal' homosociality, when it enables them to enhance camaraderie, solidarity and emotional closeness or intimacy with their male friends, alongside 'vertical' or hierarchical homosociality via competitive practices to acquire status over one another. These findings reveal that 'horizontal' and 'vertical' or hierarchical forms of homosociality (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014, p. 2) can co-exist within research participant's all-male homosocial groups.

This study also found that these 'horizontal' and 'vertical' forms of homosociality (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014, p. 2) were also evident in research participant's attitudes to and relationships with women. For instance, young men in their late teens and early twenties often began focus groups and interview discussions by presenting a positive image of themselves and their male friends as being respectful to women, but then subsequently talked about observing and/or engaging in misogynistic practices in their men-only private chat groups, such as non-consensually sexting women's 'nudes', to acquire hetero-masculine status within this space. Digital technologies and forms of communication, which enable the visual recording, sharing, exchanging and the potentially permanent circulation of these 'nudes', facilitate and mediate these non-consensual practices and provide a route to acquiring hetero-masculine status within these homosocial spaces (see also Salter, 2016). In a socio-cultural context where overt misogyny is stigmatized, men-only private chat groups created using digital technologies and encrypted messaging services, like *WhatsApp* and *Snapchat*, also conceal these practices from public view.

However, some young heterosexual men in their mid-twenties indicated that they no longer engaged in non-consensual sexting and did not post or share sexual photographs of their girlfriends with their homosocial groups as they respected their need for privacy, which indicated that they are now prioritizing their relationship with them above those with their male friends. The way in which these young men's relationships to women and their perceptions of and attitudes to misogynistic forms of masculinity, such as non-consensually sharing sexual photographs of women, have changed over time, demonstrates that masculinities are not static, fixed and unchanging, rather they are fluid, contextually dependent, which can change as they get older (Darcy, 2019). However, this study found that there appears to be a 'hierarchy of respect' (Roberts, 2018, p. 33) within some all-male hetero-masculine homosocial groups where long-term girlfriends are perceived to be more worthy of respectful behaviour than women they have 'flings' or casual sexual encounters with.

While some young heterosexual men who participated in this study indicated that they did not engage with the practice of non-consensually sharing sexual photographs of teenage girls and/or women in their homosocial groups as they got older, they admitted that they were still part of men-only private chat groups where these practices persisted, which they often did not challenge in part because they did not wish to be excluded from these spaces. Thus, while young heterosexual men in this study often co-construct and perform non-hierarchical forms of masculinity relative to other men in their homosocial spaces, such as engaging in positive and respectful relationships with one another, they did not always put this into practice in their attitudes and behaviours towards women. Similarly, Roberts et al. (2021, p. 38) observed young men's homosocial spaces in an Australian context and found that 'positive attitudes towards and relations with other men do not automatically or fully "spill over" into positive attitudes towards women and respectful men – women relations'. These findings challenge claims that there have been progressive shifts in masculinities in contemporary youth culture, particularly among young heterosexual men in the UK and elsewhere (Anderson, 2008; Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Morris & Anderson, 2015; Robinson et al., 2017).

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness about the prevalence of misogyny in UK society and how gendered norms, such as those that link masculinity and 'manliness' with the sexual conquest of teenage girls and/or women, underpin misogyny and violence against women and girls (Ringrose et al., 2022; Burrell et al., 2019; see also Phipps & Young, 2013; NUS, 2010). Consequently, there is an urgent need for UK-based government policymakers, educators and youth leaders to

develop and implement educational interventions to tackle and prevent these harmful gendered norms and behaviours, including those in hetero-masculine homosocial spaces. Critically, the findings of this study suggest that these interventions should take a balanced approach by acknowledging the positives of all-male hetero-masculine homosocial spaces, which can enable men to form emotionally close and supportive relationships with one another, whilst also working to tackle and prevent the harmful hierarchical practices associated with them, including those that are misogynistic. Ultimately, young men need to be equipped with the skills to recognize, tackle and prevent misogynistic practices within their homosocial groups. Studies have shown that men who challenge hierarchical forms of masculinity within their homosocial groups, including misogynistic practices, can be marginalized or excluded (Bird, 1996; Pascoe, 2013). Therefore, interventions that support young men in tackling and preventing hierarchical forms of masculinity in their homosocial spaces should aim to do so in ways that strategically mitigate these forms of marginalization and exclusion (see O'Rourke & Haslop, 2023).

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the majority of young heterosexual men who participated in this qualitative study ($N = 40$), identified as White English/British and had either acquired an undergraduate degree or were studying to acquire one. Therefore, this sample is not representative of the general population of young men in the UK and thus our findings are not generalizable to the larger population. Further research, which uses a larger, more racially and ethnically diverse sample of heterosexual men in the UK from a range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds, is needed to explore how digital technologies and forms of communication, such as men-only private group chats, facilitate and mediate the forms of masculinity they co-construct, perform and negotiate in their homosocial interactions. In addition, further research is needed to better understand the role that male allyship can play in challenging hegemonic forms of masculinity and the online and offline conditions, cultures and contexts that can foster and promote non-hierarchical forms of masculinity within men-only homosocial spaces and elsewhere.

Secondly, the participants in this study were self-selecting and chose to take part in this study via online focus groups and interviews, because they wished to do so. This may mean that they are more open speaking about the research topic, namely masculinities, lad culture and homosociality, in an online setting than the average young heterosexual man in the UK and thus they may not be representative of this demographic group. For instance, conducting focus groups and interviews remotely using video conferencing technologies and software may have excluded young heterosexual men in the UK who do not feel comfortable speak about these issues in these digitized spaces and/or did not have the resources or technical skills to use these technologies (Namey et al., 2020). Further research that engages such men in speaking about their in-person and digitally mediated homosocial practices is needed, which can inform the development of educational interventions aimed at preventing harmful practices.

Note

1. The term 'lad culture' has been used to describe a dominant form of masculinity among young British men (Phipps & Young, 2013), often described as 'lads', which has been associated with a range of practices, including sexist, misogynistic and homophobic abuse, harassment and violence (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020; NUS, 2010). Studies have argued that 'lads' and 'lad culture' should not be understood in a homogenizing way as men's 'laddish' behaviour can work to both challenge and bolster everyday discriminatory practices, including sexism (see Nichols, 2018). While 'lad culture' and 'laddish masculinities' are primarily associated with men, some women can also engage with these gendered practices, though so-called 'ladettes' are often critiqued for attempting to be 'like a man' while simultaneously being derided for failing to meet men's standards (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007).

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all those who supported this study. We are extremely grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council for supporting this research. We would also like to thank the research participants who took part in our focus groups and interviews and shared their life experiences with us. Two anonymous reviewers provided very helpful constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this article, which we are very thankful for.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [Grant number: ES/P010628/1].

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