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Young people's perspectives on intimate relationships: more than sex, schooling, and risk

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examined the ways young people come to understand and negotiate intimate relationships, beginning from the vantage point of everyday youth experience, not adult constructions of that experience. In doing so, I sought to interrogate widespread understandings of young people and intimacy that remain predominantly framed in terms of risk, danger, immaturity, and vulnerability. While not diminishing the very real difficulties and dangers experienced by some young people, the aim of this thesis was to open up other ways of understanding young people's perspectives and experiences, looking particularly at how views on intimate relationships connected to their imaginings of the future and their sense of a 'good life' (Berlant, 2011). Engaging with feminist, participatory and arts-based methodologies, I conducted interviews and repeat group sessions with students from a secondary school located on the outskirts of Melbourne, Victoria. Informed by feminist and queer theories, and working with concepts of affect to analyse intimacy, I drew on participant narratives and visual artefacts to examine the ways young people learn about, experience, anticipate, and regulate intimate relationships. This included an examination of the role of digital social media, the place of 'ordinary affects' and 'public feelings', and in-depth exploration of the processes of meaning making in which young people actively engaged, arguing that these constituted powerful if sometimes uncertain and ambivalent forms of learning and becoming. I further argued that some of the most powerful learning was not in classrooms or via formal curriculum but took place in other spaces and interactions, which become evident when taking a youth-centred approach.

The fieldwork showed, first, the ways in which young people navigate and make meaning out of their intimate relationships and how this is fundamentally connected to their future thinking

and notions of the good life. Second, it revealed that while young people may be setting new definitions and norms around intimacy, they are *also* doing this in ways that in some respects are rearticulating old gender binaries and heterosexual privileges. Third, it showed how young people also imported some of the public anxieties surrounding their relationships – particularly to do with risk, sex, ephemerality, immaturity and ‘realness’ – into their narratives and meaning making. I analysed the impact of the persistence of this type of framing for young people, in particular the effects of its potential regulatory functions. Overall, throughout this thesis, I build a case for the agentic and creative ways young people are learning about intimate relationships, genders, and sexualities and argue that these capacities warrant greater recognition in research, in curriculum discourses, and in program reforms.

DECLARATION PAGE

- a) This thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy;
- b) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and
- c) This thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of tables, bibliographies, and appendices.

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

This thesis investigates young peoples' perspectives on intimate personal relationships. It explores their feelings, views, experiences, definitions, and expectations of and about intimate relationships. One immediate impetus for the study was heightened public anxiety about young people's sexuality (Attwood, 2006; Lamb, 2010a; Renold & Ringrose, 2013). This had been compounded by concerns about the perceived risks of digital and social media (Angelides, 2013; Dobson, 2015; Livingstone, 2008), along with renewed attention to the role of schooling in promoting healthy and respectful relationships, specifically in response to intensified public concerns about sexuality and gender-based violence and harassment (Allen & Rasmussen, 2017; Ollis, 2014; Quinlivan, 2018). A further impetus was the predominance of deficit and risk discourses about young people's attitudes and behaviours in relation to genders, sexualities, and intimacies (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Sarigianides, 2014). Young people are typically positioned as not sufficiently knowledgeable or as holding immature understandings of sexuality and intimate relationships; in addition, the behaviour of some young people is seen to be reckless or potentially placing them 'at risk' (McLeod, 2011). Educational and public health interventions thus tend to concentrate on providing information and promoting strategies that limit risk. This orientation persists despite considerable research critiquing such a focus and calling for an approach that also recognises pleasure and desire (Ollis, 2016b; Sundaram et al., 2016). While education and risk reduction do have a place in the gamut of approaches to relationships and sexuality education, this study began with an alternative premise, starting with the subjectivity and perspectives of young people as they navigate what they see as important and positive about intimate relationships. In seeking to re-frame widespread understandings of young people's experiences and negotiations of intimate relationships, this thesis begins from the vantage point of youth experience, not adult constructions of that

experience.

To address these matters, during 2017 and 2018, I spent eight months researching with fourteen students aged 14-16 years who attended a co-educational secondary school located on the outskirts of metropolitan Melbourne. I have called this school Waratah Secondary College. I worked with two groups of students, conducting individual interviews with most of them, as well as what I have referred to as 'group research sessions'. In these sessions, I drew upon participatory and visual techniques to explore students' views in an interactive and informal manner, an approach that I hoped would promote participant-led exploration of research topics. My research questions were:

Research questions

1. How do young people aged 14-16 and attending school in metropolitan Melbourne come to understand, negotiate, and experience intimate relationships?
 - a. What is the combination of factors that influence their everyday understandings, narratives, and sense-making about these relationships?
 - b. What is the role of genders and sexualities in these processes?
2. What are useful methodological and conceptual approaches for investigating this?
 - a. How to build understandings of this outside predominant discourses of risk, harm and immaturity?

To set the scene, I begin with an excerpt from my fieldwork notes from the final group research session with Group Two. These give an insight into how the rhythms of research, including the many discussions that happen either side of the fieldwork, helped to crystallise the directions and approaches taken. I do not offer these to privilege my own autobiographical perspectives (although it does give a glimpse into the dynamics between researcher and participants); rather

these reflections serve as a way of introducing the methodological and theoretical approaches that emerged and shaped this research throughout.

Thinking with the 'ordinary': a scene from fieldwork

We all sat cross-legged and sprawled out on the stained carpet floor; there were nine of us in total, making a circle around the chocolates and lollies I had brought, extra this time because it was our last group session. Someone complained that I had forgotten the Tim Tams this week. 'They weren't on sale,' I told them, 'I'm a student, I'm on a tight budget!' and they laughed, taking another handful of snakes instead. We finished up the activity I had prepared, and some of the group started sharing stories about their relationships. 'When I was young', began Jeremiah, making the group burst into laughter because, he's 15 now, and oh-so old. 'Oh, back in year eight I mean', Jeremiah explained, alluding to the stretched-out understanding of time that had elapsed in the preceding two years (and everything that had happened in the space in between). Before the bell rang signalling the end of our time, I asked if the group had any questions for me. Something I had done every week and in every individual interview – with little success – but this time: *Can you come back? This is more fun than anything else. Are you going to be a teacher? You would be a good teacher. What do you do with this? Will you write an article for the Herald Sun¹? Miss, you have good style. Oh sorry, not Miss, Sam. Where is your dress from?*

Bob: Have you, like ever been in a relationship?

Dan: That's a silly question! [laughter]

¹ Tabloid newspaper published in the Australian state of Victoria by the Murdoch-owned News Corp.

Patrishia: She's like, 30 years old [more laughter]

Bob: Sorry, some people don't have relationships until they're like... (muffled)

Sam: Yeah, I've had good relationships and bad relationships.

Bob: Did you like think about doing a project like this because of your experiences with your relationships or?

Before I could answer Bob's question the focus of the group turned to a discussion about my age, how young I looked and how they couldn't believe that I was 30 (I was 33 at the time, which, had they remembered, would have made me ancient in their eyes). I've always struggled to provide an 'elevator pitch' of my PhD, but I eventually circled back to explain to the group that I had come to this topic because of my experience working with young people in a variety of different contexts and my desire to gain an understanding of relationships from their perspectives and experiences. What I should have said is that a key aim of this research was to gain a greater understanding of young people's lived experience and daily understandings of intimate relationships, beginning not from a vantage point that presumed risk and deficit but beginning with open questions and a presumption of youthful agency and capacity. I would also have added that this focus was not meant to deny or underplay the impact of unhealthy relationships or the reality of violent, exploitative, sexist or heterosexist relationships and social structures as experienced by some young people. Rather, I wanted to understand what else was at stake for young people, and in doing so, to find a way to move away from the predominant orientation to how and what they *should be* learning about or experiencing in relationships, and instead prioritise understanding how young people were actually learning.

I continued to reflect upon Bob's question as I sat in the car afterwards while writing my notes, thinking through my own past relationships – the ones that never really started, the friendships, the fleeting ones, the ones I ran away from, the significant ones – trying to identify some

specific ‘event’ or feeling that may have led me here, to this topic. There were ‘scenes’ and feelings that stood out, of course, but it was impossible to pinpoint the moment when I became a feminist, when I decided I was interested in boys, when I began demanding (and expecting) equality and respect from my partners, or when I failed at all of these things. Instead, thinking with Kathleen Stewart (2007), what I felt were ‘question[s] emergent in disparate scenes and incommensurate forms and registers; a tangle of potential connections’ (Stewart, 2007, p. 4). Stewart is describing what she calls ‘ordinary affects’, that is ‘the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergencies’. These are simply but powerfully ‘things that happen’ in all manner of ways, sometimes seemingly inconsequential – in ‘impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and in habits of relating, in strategies and their failures’ and they can ‘catch people up in something that feels like *something* (p. 2).

As an adult, looking into the lives of young people, it might all seem extraordinary – the phones, the social media, the clothes, the language – and at the same time, like nothing much at all, as unremarkable. However, in this study I aim to look at the seemingly ordinary as remarkable, as warranting our attention. I take up the idea of attending to ‘ordinary affects’ as a way to look at more than specific or spectacular ‘events’, like an experience of violence or harassment, which is how I initially conceived of designing this research. Rather, I look to the ordinary or ‘everyday’ experiences of the young people who participated in this research and attempt to capture and understand how their ‘reeling present is composed out of heterogenous and noncoherent singularities’ (Stewart, 2007, p. 4). This framing enabled me to follow and examine participant narratives and affects as they emerged in the course of their participation in the research. Thus, I designed a feminist qualitative study, also drawing from participatory techniques (Allen, 2005a; Coll et al., 2018; Holland et al., 2010) and arts-based methods (Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Ollis et al., 2019; Renold, 2018). The interviews and group discussions

conducted over a period of eight months allowed a ‘slowing down’ of the research and allowed me to gain insight into views as they emerged and formed over time and from a number of angles; this also helped to expose some of the iterative and ‘messy’ qualities of research fieldwork. Time was an important component of the design, with my eight months at Waratah College comprised of regular (often weekly) repeat visits and group sessions. This ‘shortitudinal approach’ (Join-Lambert et al., 2020) allowed for forming relationships with my participants and designing activities in response to what they were sharing with me (the research in some respects, always moving). The design of the project also reflected my aim to remain attuned to the changing priorities, experiences, and feelings of the participants, rather than beginning and ending with my own, and adult-conceived notions of ‘youth’.

Background and context

Working with young people and the prevention of gender-based violence

In my professional career, I have worked with young people in a variety of settings on a range of different issues. Most of this work has had a focus on sexual and reproductive health and rights, at both a policy and community level. Directly prior to commencing my PhD studies, I was working for a feminist women’s health organisation on strategies for the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) and it was while doing this work that I encountered the alarming statistics documenting young people’s experiences of GBV. Young people are consistently identified in the statistics as one of the most ‘at-risk’ groups for gender-based violence. For example, in recently released Australian statistics, 38 percent of women aged 18-24 years had experienced sexual harassment in the 12 months prior to the survey, compared to 16 percent of men and 17 percent of women aged 35-44 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). Young women in this age group are also more likely to have experienced sexual assault (with 4.5% of them reporting this), than older women (from 0.4 - 3%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics,

2021a). Further, gender-based violence disproportionately effects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander² women (Our Watch, 2018) and women with disabilities (Krnjacki et al., 2016). While there is a dearth of research exploring lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+)³ young people's experiences with *partner* violence, a recent Australian survey into the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people in Australia found that almost two fifths of respondents reported having been in a relationship where they felt they were abused in some way by their partner (Hill et al., 2020). There are thus gaps in the data available on gender-based violence and evidence of persistent and disturbing patterns.

Although much of this work draws upon the term 'violence against women', I have chosen to use the descriptor GBV – gender-based violence. This encompasses a broad range of issues related to genders and sexualities, including sexual harassment, dating and intimate partner violence, digital abuse and harassment, image-based abuse and harassment, and violence towards queer and gender-diverse communities (Coll et al., 2020; Kearney et al., 2016; Ollis, 2014; Powell & Henry, 2014). I use GBV throughout this thesis in an attempt to be more inclusive of the diversity of experiences encountered by young people (Kearney et al., 2016); particularly LGBTIQ+ young people who are often neglected in GBV curriculum discourses and in the collection of statistics. However, I do this alongside a recognition of the importance of naming specific types of gender-based and/or sexual violence in order to draw attention to the gendered and/or sexuality-based patterns of such behaviours.

Another impetus for this research emerged from my work as a policy researcher and

² I want to acknowledge the ways in which settler colonialism and the ongoing impacts of colonisation have violently shaped and disrupted genders, sexualities, and kinships systems of First Nations peoples (Our Watch, 2018). Additionally, the racist and sexist assumptions embedded through colonisation, and the ongoing role these structures play in the violence perpetrated against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

³ I use LGBTIQ+ as a recognisable acronym to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and other sexuality and gender diverse people. I recognise the limitations of this label and critique the persistent sense that it homogenises experiences and where appropriate, and able, I use more specific terms provided by the participants.

practitioner in the prevention of violence against women, where I encountered various research and national reports which found that while young people were, for example, supportive of gender equality at an institutional or structural level, they were less so at an interpersonal level (Politoff et al., 2019). Despite decades of gender equity and feminist interventions, researchers found that in young people's interpersonal relationships, patterns of gender-based stereotypes and inequities appeared to persist and, moreover, tended to be seen by young people as 'acceptable' (Harris et al., 2015; Politoff et al., 2019). Similarly, Donna Chung's (2007) research with young people in Australia identified disjunctions between commitments to equality in the public sphere and perspectives or acceptance of gender-based inequalities in intimate relationships. Chung connected this asymmetry to processes of individualisation, an adherence to traditional gender roles, and limited opportunity for young people to witness 'equal relations'. She (2005) suggests that 'there is no cultural script as to what it [equality] constitutes in a relationship'; instead for young women in particular, the cultural script provides guidance on how to engage in 'traditional heterosexual gender relations' (p. 450), rather than on how to challenge the hegemony of masculinity (see also: Baker, 2008; 2010). I was curious to understand whether attachment to these gender scripts and disjunctions between public and private expectations for gender equality persisted in the face of what the *The Guardian* newspaper described as the new 'gender fluid generation' (Marsh, 2016) and an emerging and supposedly progressive gender politics (Bragg et al., 2018).

Relationships in the school curriculum

The beginning of this study coincided with the roll-out in the state of Victoria of a newly designed curriculum for the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV). Based on a recommendation from the *Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV)*⁴, the state

⁴ The 2015-2016 Royal Commission into Family Violence was announced following a number of high-profile family violence related deaths in Victoria. The role of the commission was to find ways to: prevent family violence, improve support for

Premier, Daniel Andrews (leader of the Labor government) mandated⁵ the teaching of ‘Respectful Relationships’ as a core component of the Victorian curriculum, from Foundation to Year 12 (i.e., throughout primary and secondary school). Having worked for a feminist organisation in the primary prevention of violence against women sector,⁶ and actively participated in writing submissions to this commission, I was initially curious to see how this new curriculum approach was being enacted in the classroom.

A wealth of educational research has established the potential role schools can play in creating social change (McLeod & Yates, 2006), and public health professionals and primary prevention frameworks have consistently identified whole of school-based programs as one of the most effective strategies in the emerging primary prevention space (Flood et al., 2009; Vic Health, 2007). Commonly referred to in policy and curriculum documents as ‘Respectful Relationships’ (RR) education (Ollis, 2014), these curriculum programs were built upon feminist analyses of gender-based violence that saw gender inequality, adherence to rigid gender and sexuality norms and stereotypes, and violence supportive attitudes, as key drivers of gender-based violence (Our Watch, 2015). It was equally clear that established strategies and interventions addressing GBV had not achieved their desired goals and that new approaches were needed.

Although these curriculums and policies represented major initiatives and formed part of the background to my research, their significance for my approach started to recede as soon as I began the fieldwork. My study aims have not been to understand gender and relationships from

victims, and hold perpetrators to account. The commission made 227 recommendations to reduce the impact of family violence in the Victorian community.

⁵ The mandating of RR curriculum was recommendation 189 and is currently marked as ‘implemented’ <https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-recommendations/mandate-introduction-respectful-relationships-education-every>

⁶ Our Watch (2021) defines primary prevention as ‘an approach [that] works to change the underlying conditions that produce and drive violence against women, and that excuse justify or even promote it. It works across the whole population to address the attitudes, norms, practices, structures and power imbalances that drive violence against women.’ (p. 8)

a policy or curriculum design perspective; rather I have wanted to investigate them from the perspective of young people's understandings, experiences, and feelings. A key justification for this thesis is to better understand and contribute new knowledge about how to include and reflect young people's lives and capacities in relationship and sexualities curriculum more effectively.

To further understand the background rationale for this research, I now give a brief overview of some prominent public debates on these matters that were taking place at time of my fieldwork, as these too formed the larger context in which students were developing their views.

Feeling the backlash

The above curriculum reforms, and the recommendations of the Royal Commission, were positioned in relation to a growing 'backlash' against progressive feminist and queer activism and policies in education, evident in popular debate and the daily press. News articles at the time expressed concern with the curriculum's focus on challenging what they named 'so-called male privilege' (*The Australian*, 2016). For example, an editorial about the introduction of the Respectful Relationships curriculum in the national newspaper *The Australian*, published by the Murdoch owned News Corp, provocatively entitled 'Victoria, a misandrist state of child indoctrination' (October 17, 2016), opined:

But like the so-called Safe Schools program — which also emerged from Victoria and purports to tackle bullying by promoting 'gender fluidity' — the new [curriculum] program is deeply flawed. Guilt-tripping boys for being male or implying that girls are at their mercy is extremist, warped drivel that also overlooks male victims of violence [...] The gender gap school authorities should worry about is why only 40 men are graduating from Australian universities for every 60 women. (*The Australian*, 2016)

Another program that attracted attention from the media and the conservative federal Liberal government during this time was the ‘Safe Schools Coalition’ (SSC – henceforth referred to as Safe Schools), noted in the editorial above as the ‘safe schools program’. With funding from the Department of Education and Training in Victoria, the Safe Schools program was initially founded in 2010 to provide support to LGBTIQ+ students, staff, and families. Framed as an LGBTIQ+ inclusion and anti-bullying program, Safe Schools⁷ was rolled out nationally in 2014, however in 2016 it became the focus of intense public and political scrutiny (Ward, 2020), driven by vocal Christian groups and conservative politicians (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017). During this period, *The Australian* newspaper produced, on average, one negative story about Safe Schools per week (Stark, 2016), where the ‘problem’ was largely framed as posing threats ‘towards childhood innocence, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity’ (Rawlings & Loveday, 2021, p. 1). Writing about the media backlash towards Safe Schools, Lucy Nicholas (2020) suggested it (SS) was frequently positioned ‘as an effort to undermine heterosexuality and “the family” rather than as an anti-bullying program’ (Nicholas, 2020, p. 234). Critics of the program took issue with the curriculum content, in particular its focus on ‘social engineering’ with the aim of ‘infiltrating schools’ and to encourage ““gender fluidity” and “sexual experimentation”” (Ward, 2020).⁸ The concerted effort by the media and lobbyists against Safe Schools was ultimately successful and the Australian Commonwealth government did not renew funding for Safe Schools. However, in Victoria (where my fieldwork was conducted) the program was continued with funding through the state government, albeit with an altered program approach.

These two ‘controversies’ occurred alongside one another, and this had important

⁷ “The SSCA offered a suite of free resources and support to equip school staff with knowledge, skills and practical ideas to create safer and more inclusive school environments for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students, staff and families.” <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/who-we-are>

⁸ The curriculum developed by SSC with their partners Minus 18, was an optional resource

consequences for how the curriculum and Safe Schools were understood by the public. Jessica Ringrose (2012) uses the concept of a ‘moral panic’ as a framework to describe how some educational policies can ‘grip the public imagination and individual psyches and enliven controversy and fear over the state of gender and sexuality’ (Ringrose, 2012, p. 33). This is particularly so in relation to perceived fears that young people are being taught and/or encouraged to stray further from socially accepted, or dominant, gender and sexuality norms (Ollis, 2019; Rasmussen & Leahy, 2018; Rawlings & Loveday, 2021; Ward, 2020), as these examples offered here suggest.

Marriage Equality ‘Debate’

During the fieldwork phase of this research (2017), the Marriage Equality Postal Plebiscite loomed large in public discussion. This was a postal vote, introduced by a conservative Federal government to see whether Australians were in favour of same sex marriage. This was despite polling demonstrating majority support for marriage equality across the country. The postal survey occurred during September-November 2017, with Australians returning a 61.6% vote in favour of marriage equality (ABS, 2017), and with marriage equality legislation passing in the Australian Parliament on December 7th, 2017. These issues flowed into my research sessions, with the Marriage Equality ‘debate’⁹ inevitably becoming a topic of informal conversation in many of our discussions and group sessions. Even before the postal vote was underway the issue had galvanised intense political debate, and I will now briefly offer an overview of this and how it was understood and felt by participants in this study.

Echoing the concerns of LGBTIQ+ activists and supporters of marriage equality (Eades & Vivienne, 2018), participants frequently commented on the absurdity of the vote, noting that

⁹ I use ‘debate’ reluctantly here as this was a word frequently used during reporting and in the popular press. But I do so with an acknowledgement that this word does not adequately capture the abhorrence of the attacks perpetuated against LGBTIQ+ people and their families by the ‘No’ campaign during this time.

there was no need for such a divisive and public debate on the rights of LGBTIQ+ people to get married. Tim Tam suggested that the ‘debate’ ‘forced people to have an opinion.’ Summer explained after the successful Yes vote:

Yes, I'm very happy about it. But, from the start I never thought it should have happened. I just really think it was a waste of money and time and all that, and like, they just should have allowed it, like no one cares. There's a lot of people where they were saying like, "would you have said yes or no?" and I said like, "of course I'd say yes" but I just wouldn't have done it in the first place, like no one needs to pick. It's like the community, or Australia is controlling someone else relationship and like, that's not how it should go. Just be chilled out and let someone do what they want to do.

Further, the vote was only open to people over the age of eighteen, with efforts to allow 16–17-year old's the opportunity to vote rejected by parliament. However, as an indication of young people's desire to participate in such an important moment, the Australian Election Commission (AEC)¹⁰ announced that of the almost 100,000 people who newly enrolled to vote for the first time (for the plebiscite) almost two-thirds were between the ages of 18-24 (Australian Electoral Commission, 2017). Participants in my research also spoke about their frustrations with not being able to vote on something they believed directly impacted their lives; and indeed, were frustrated by the need to have a vote at all: ‘why didn't they just do it?’ Alice asked. A few noted with disapproval their parent's lack of engagement, with one participant telling me ‘I stole their [parents] ballot, ticked yes and posted it back’. The Marriage Equality debate became an important historical moment for participants, one that had a striking impact upon the way they experienced, expressed, and attempted to navigate their genders, sexualities, and their intimacies.

¹⁰ The AEC is the independent body responsible for managing Australia's electoral system, electoral roll management and delivery of polling services.

Using similar tactics deployed by detractors of the Safe Schools program, much of the focus during the vote campaigning was directed towards children or, more specifically, the need to ‘protect’ children (Gerrard, 2020; Thomas et al., 2019). For the ‘No’¹¹ campaign, this centred on young people’s bodies in particular, something participants were acutely aware of:

Alice: Yeah, have you seen the one [the TV advertisement] with like, the, there's one that's this blonde chick, and she's like “you have to vote no, because [...] like it's gonna be compulsory to teach like, um trans sex education”, [...] body like re-construction stuff and how that all works and like, sexual orientation and all that kind of stuff. Which they do anyway, it's like, we have to learn about sex, like it's the rules, um, which is sooo dumb. I just think they're so stupid. I just think that like, if you don't know anyone who is gay and wanting to get married in Australia, then you won't even notice. Like, unless you work in like a wedding catering business, you won't notice. Like, you don't notice. I just think it's so stupid

Alice, who was bisexual, further elaborated on how this made her feel: ‘I've been seeing a lot of “Vote No” ads that are making me really, really angry and make me wanna, kick my TV in’. Writing about the Safe Schools controversy and the postal vote, Rasmussen and Leahy (2018) note that these ‘can be read as intertwined battles to preserve and challenge heteronorms related to gender and sexuality’ (Rasmussen & Leahy, 2018, p. 71). Both campaigns were important contexts for this research and responses to them offer some insight into the feelings that were circulating at the time of my fieldwork. They also served as a reminder of the immediacy of the very real issues we were discussing, and the significant impact the broader political discourse was having on the lives of the participants, their families, and their friends. These

¹¹ Jessica Gerrard (2020) cogently argues that in the wake of the Safe Schools backlash, the ‘Yes’ campaign sought to distance itself from the public contentions around trans and queer children, and instead maintained that marriage equality was *not* about the children.

debates also implicitly and explicitly drew young people's intimate relationships into the picture as their generation would be directly affected by the outcome of the vote.

A further critical issue was how 'intimacy' and intimate relationships were defined and understood by young people. This was fundamental to the framing of the research, where my focus was on being open to young people's views on intimacy, rather than only heeding adult or textbook style constructions.

Defining an 'intimate relationship'

People consent to trust their desire for "a life" to institutions of intimacy; and it is hoped that the relations formed with those frames will turn out beautifully, lasting over the long duration, perhaps across generations (Berlant, 1998, p. 281)

Throughout this thesis, I explore the diverse ways young people experienced intimacy and relationships in their everyday worlds, as told to me in their own words, images and narratives. From the outset, the framing concerns of this project were beset by the challenge of finding appropriate terms to describe the type of relationships that I wanted to invite young people to consider. I deliberately chose not to use 'romantic' as a descriptor, as this has often been stereotypically linked to 'female' desire within regimes and norms of heterosexuality (Chung, 2007). Further, I was hesitant to use the term 'sexual' as I was concerned this would limit the discourse to one simply about 'risk' and 'sex' (Greslé-Favier, 2010), rather than allowing an opening out to broader socio-cultural understandings of relationships held by young people. Consequently, and drawing as well from scholarly literature, I settled on the term 'intimate' to describe the type of relationships I wanted to explore. In short, my initial thinking and subsequent analysis of fieldwork drew from sociological, feminist, and queer understandings of intimacy as developed by scholars such as Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed, that I will further elaborate on in Chapter Two. It is important to note, though, that 'intimacy' itself was not a

word used often by participants in their narrative description of relationships, and nor was it easy for them to define. Instead, they used terms like dating, ‘puppy love’, caring, close, or an affective but hard to name ‘more than’ to characterise a relationship that was special and ‘intimate’.

As my research progressed, it became less important to ‘name’ or define relationships, and more important to understand the work that was being done within and through expectations and experiences of these relationships. The methodological decisions I made in designing this research would – I had hoped – open up space for participants to give their own definitions of intimate relationships, not limited by normative conceptions. Yet in the experience of undertaking the fieldwork, I found it hard to frame my questions in a way that created spaces for participants to describe their relationships in potentially diverse and alternative ways. Even using the simple term ‘relationships’ produced a normative framing, evoked in using terms such ‘dating’ and ‘romantic.’ In our first group session, I asked Group One to tell me about ‘relationships’ what they are and how they describe them:

Alice: Yeah, well, like, friends, which is just like, me and Summer. And then there's like, like you are 'getting in with someone' so like, say if there was a guy, like, in another class at the school or whatever and we were like talking and flirting and stuff, like you're kind of building that up to a relationship and then there's obviously like, dating, like, you're with someone. Yeah.

Here, Alice describes what she sees as different stages of the relationship process – friends (like Summer and her, who are friends outside of the groups formed for the research), and then ‘flirting, which was the stage of the relationship where you let someone know you were interested; and ‘getting in’, which may culminate in ‘dating’. Throughout the course of this research, ‘dating’ was the word most commonly used by the participants to describe a

relationship between two people who were considered ‘more than friends’; but what this meant exactly was also often hard to define. However, it is precisely these types of relationships that I focus on in this research; not neat, well-contained or defined intimacies, but relationships that are evolving or might be hard to pin down, both in terms of young people’s experiences and their sense-making about them. Navigating gender dynamics and gendered differences in relationship expectations was part of this sense making.

Chapter overview

In this chapter, I have explored some of the context for this study, attending to my motivations for wanting to work with young people to better understand their perspectives on their intimate relationships. In mapping the highly charged environment in which this research took place, I have also explained my core research questions and laid the foundations for the rationale and contribution of the study. I will now offer a brief overview of the chapters.

Chapter Two provides a critical review of relevant fields of scholarship that helps to situate my study and identify the gaps it seeks to address. In developing the case or warrant for this study, the chapter further marks out the key scholarly contributions it aims to make.

In designing the research, I wanted to capture and prioritise the ways in which young people make meaning from and navigate their everyday experiences, feelings, and expectations around intimate relationships. **Chapter Three** explains the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the approach I took to doing so. To capture the fluid and nuanced aspects of young people’s intimacies, I looked to methodological approaches that allowed an openness to this potential messiness. I describe the feminist, queer, and youth-centred qualitative approach I have adapted for this thesis and also take a step back and consider some of the ethical considerations I encountered, both within the research process itself and before the fieldwork commenced.

Chapter Four considers intimacy ‘knowledge in the making’ (Ellsworth, 2007) by exploring the ways participants attempt to define and make sense of their intimate relationships. Attending to the ways participants both resist and absorb dominant characterisations of young people’s relationships as ‘all about sex’. Building upon this in **Chapter Five**, I outline key places identified by participants as being where this learning occurs. While I note the ways participants described more formal educational approaches, I also attend to the relational, experiential, and digitally mediated ways participants facilitated and reflected upon their own learnings.

Young people consistently identified social media as a key site for learning about and practicing intimate relationships, sexuality, and gender, and as such, **Chapter Six** is dedicated to an exploration of ‘digital worlds’. I introduce Lauren Berlant’s (2008) concept of ‘intimate publics’ to explore the ways in which young people participate in, observe and experience practices of intimacy through social media. I argue that conceptualisations of intimacy, sexuality and gender are shifting in ‘mundane and less spectacular ways’ (Dobson et al, 2018) through how young people observe and participate in the digital intimate public of social media. To illustrate this, I turn specifically to a set of practices that I am describing as ‘cute’, engaging a term that was used extensively by participants which I suggest, highlights the affective capacities of digital spaces.

In **Chapter Seven** I provide a close reading of the complex and ambivalent negotiations of intimate gender inequalities through considerations of the ‘moral economy’ (Ahmed, 2010b) that arises through participants descriptions of the ubiquitous figure of the ‘fuckboi. This chapter brings forth participants understandings of consent and choice, in the context of a still persistent gendered double-standard. However, it also attends to an emerging ethics of care and solidarity that offers a critique of these same regulatory regimes.

The conclusion to this thesis, **Chapter Eight**, draws together the key findings, arguments, and scholarly contributions of the study. In doing so, it notes the affordances as well as the limitations of the approach I adopted, pointing to future directions for other research as well as potential implications of the thesis findings for curriculum and educational programmes addressing young people and relationships. I now turn to locate the aims of my research in reference to a review of relevant scholarly literature.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEWING THE RESEARCH

Introduction

Having reviewed a vast array of potentially relevant scholarship, I identified four key areas of research that address the intimate relationships of young people, namely, dominant discourses on young people's intimacies; schooling and learning about relationships; socio-cultural constructions of youthful intimacies; and digitally mediated intimacies.

The purposes of this literature review are thus threefold. First, I locate this study in reference to four strands of research that provide key contexts for the thesis; this includes both empirical and more conceptually focussed research. Second, I identify the main themes and concerns in this scholarship, including gaps and silences, and in doing so map out the warrant for the focus, scope, and approach of this thesis. Third, building on this, I indicate the areas to which my study seeks to contribute new perspectives and knowledge. The chapter concludes by exploring the concepts of intimacy that are engaged in this thesis, drawing in particular, on the work of Lauren Berlant (Berlant, 1998, 2008, 2011).

Dominant discourses on young people's intimacies

Youth, risk, and public feelings

'Youth' or 'adolescence' are temporally marked categories whereby, as Wyn and White (1997) suggest, 'youth is a state of "becoming"' while adulthood is positioned as 'the "arrival"' (p. 11). 'Becoming' here is primarily understood in developmental logics based on psychological and physiological milestones (See: Lesko, 2012; Seaton, 2011; Wyn & Dwyer, 1999). Talburt and Lesko (2011) posit that such conceptualisations position youth as being 'trapped in "becoming"' (p.14) where, as 'subjects-in-process, they must acquire knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will enable them to function in society' (p. 2). Within such framings,

preoccupation with ‘risk’ arises, whereby the actions of young people are attributed to biology, or more specifically the onset of puberty and an inability to control their hormones (Lesko, 2012). Here, young people are paradoxically positioned as being irresponsible and in need of protection from themselves and their sexuality, whilst also being considered innocent and in need of protection (Robinson, 2012). Scholarship with a focus on understanding notions of risk, immaturity, and innocence thus attempts to define what is deemed to be ‘age-appropriate’ in terms of sexuality and sexual desires (Renold & Ringrose, 2011), whilst working from the assumption that young people are ‘not in control’ of their desires and therefore need protection and/or education (McClelland & Fine, 2013; see for example: Blakemore et al., 2008).

Scholarship critiquing notions of ‘risk’ elucidates how concerns about practices of risk and safety are frequently attached to particular gendered, classed, raced, and sexuality identities (Cover, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2011; Weekes, 2002). I will unpack this further throughout this chapter, but it is important to note here as this frames the way scholarship has frequently approached issues of young people’s genders, sexualities, and relationships – and who has been the focus of this type of scholarship. In particular, Julie McLeod (2012) notes how the neoliberal positioning of certain groups of young people as ‘vulnerable’, serves to pathologise their experiences and position ‘social-structural marginalisation’ as an ‘individual responsibility’ rather than a function of ‘social exclusion’ (p. 11). Extending McLeod’s idea to a focus on sexuality, Susan Talburt (2018) argues that ‘discourses of responsibility’ have become central to the societal monitoring of ‘youths’ development as “appropriate” sexual subjects’ (p. xix).

I explained in the opening chapter that this study began from the decision to move beyond a focus on adult-conceived definitions, risks, and concerns about young people’s intimate relationships which characterises the debates I have described thus far. Talburt (2018), drawing

upon the work of Ann Cvetkovich (2012), offers a useful way forward for analysing public and scholarly concerns about young people's relationships and sexualities, through the concept of 'public feelings'. Talburt (2018) explains 'public feelings from hope to fear fuel social ideas about who and what youth are, what they need, and how they become "good adults." At once natural and deviant, innocent and dangerous, youth need education, monitoring, and development.' (p. xxi). Importantly to this study and to my aims to centre youth perspectives, Talburt argues that 'youth live in worlds in which they too "feel these ideas" as they create sexual subjectivities, identities, and social practices' (p. xxi). In my discussion in Chapter One of the public narratives focused on young people during the marriage equality 'debate' and the Safe Schools 'controversy', I offered some brief evidence of the ways young people were responding to circulating feelings about their genders and sexualities. I extend this analysis throughout the thesis, attending to these 'public feelings' as they arise in participant narratives and affects as one way to consider, in particular, how the discourses of 'risk' represented by these feelings come to influence young people's own understandings of intimacy.

Intersections between public health and education research

A focus on risk and intervention is echoed in much of the education research and professional literature on young people's intimate relationships, the topic of which has long been regarded as the domain of sexuality and health education curriculum and/or research (Carmody & Ovenden, 2013; Ezer et al., 2020; Ollis, 2019; Shannon, 2016). There is a significant overlap between the scholarship generated from the sexuality education field and that of public health and health promotion. This is relevant to consider because public health scholarship has largely framed young people's relationships in relation to sexual health challenges and risk factors (Leahy, 2014; Shoveller & Johnson, 2006), commonly referring to notions of healthy development and constructs of the 'healthy relationship' (Tharp et al., 2013). 'Healthy' here is

predominantly defined as the absence of disease, including sexually transmitted infections and HIV (Aalsma et al., 2006; Bauman & Berman, 2005; Berglas et al., 2014); and the absence or presence of problematic behaviours, such as physical and sexual violence and/or other abusive behaviours (Foshee et al., 2015; Hertzog & Rowley, 2014).

Scholars argue that sexuality and relationship education, or health promotion ‘prevention’ programs can be characterised as a kind of prophylactic administered to children and young people (often in a school-based environment) to protect against disease and unwanted pregnancy (Rasmussen, 2012). As Barrie Shannon explains:

Sexuality education in Australia, by virtue of its overt health focus, is permeated by neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility, individual choice and homogeneity. Also privileged within a health-based framework are anatomical and biological understandings of sex and sexuality, which can be readily supported by scientific facts. (Shannon, 2016, p. 574)

This approach to curriculum, as Nancy Lesko (2010) argues, is built upon a belief ‘in the power of correct knowledge, rationally implemented, to effect desired outcomes’ (p. 290). That is, if young people have access to the ‘correct knowledge’ they will be able to make the ‘right’ choices. Within neoliberal curriculum discourses, knowledge is presented as ‘stable’ (Lesko, 2010), devoid of social context or politics, while maintaining a focus on risk and excluding young people whose desires, experiences and feelings exist outside of this framework (Fields et al., 2015; Lesko, 2010; Shannon, 2016). Rather than a focus on the broader structural issues impacting upon young people, for example, the curriculum is largely in favour of, as Shannon (2016) describes, helping young people in ‘making healthy choices’ (p. 577). Although Shannon maintains that a focus on such content *should* be included, they also note ‘it is evident that content which is designed to benefit marginalised students struggles to find its place’ (Shannon, 2016, p. 577).

While discourses focussing on ‘risk’ have drawn attention to the importance of engaging in research on young people’s relationships, they have done so, as Louisa Allen suggests, in a way that ‘underplays their positives and pleasures’ (Allen, 2004b, p. 464). Rather than positioning young people as ‘complex sexual subjects’, Renold, Ringrose and Egan (2015) argue that young people’s experiences are ‘often sensationalized, silenced, caricatured, pathologized and routinely undermined’ (p. 1). Young people’s relationships are thus seen as something they need to be protected from, and where teachers and adults are positioned as experts, or ‘protectors’ of students’ sexual morality (Sarigianides, 2014, p. 1062; see also: Quinlivan, 2018; Robinson, 2012; Talburt, 2018). In other words, much of this literature fails to consider young people’s capacities and agencies in navigating genders, sexualities, and relationships. It was the understanding that young people’s sexuality and relationships are complex, rich, and contextual, that spurred my study, and this idea went on to form the foundation of my work.

Schooling and learning about relationships

As noted in Chapter One, schools have been identified as key sites for working with young people around gender-based violence. Additionally, the role of schooling in producing and silencing gender and sexuality identities has been well documented (Bragg et al., 2018; Nayak & Kehily, 2013; Renold, 2004; Robinson, 2005). While exploring the relationships and sexuality curriculum itself became less central to my study, it nevertheless offers an important context to this thesis as it provides insight into the ways young people’s intimacies are conceived of in curriculum scholarship and discourses, including depicting how learning is *supposed* to occur. While the school curriculum is a key context for my study, curriculum focussed research and policy literature can overstate the role and significance of the formal school curriculum. Although this is relevant, I enrich this literature by exploring other avenues

of learning as identified and prioritised by young people.

Non-normative curriculum silences

Quinlivan and colleagues (2014) argue that the Eurocentric framings of sex, sexualities and genders within curriculums and policies, ignores and downgrades Indigenous ways of knowing (Quinlivan et al., 2014). Their argument is commensurate with broader debates about Western education systems which largely fail to acknowledge Indigenous ways of knowing (see: Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016). Further, international, and local research has also documented the ways RSE has ignored or failed to be inclusive of diverse religious and cultural issues, concerns, or needs (Allen et al., 2014; Haggis & Mulholland, 2014; Rasmussen, 2010; Sanjakdar, 2009).

Feminist and queer research on sexuality and relationship education has highlighted the centring of heterosexual relationships and the cisgender binary as the ‘norm’ (Allen, 2008; Ollis, 2014; Quinlivan, 2018; Sanjakdar et al., 2015). The presumption of heterosexuality within both the curriculum and the broader school environment, as well as the intense focus on ‘pregnancy risk’, is seen to ‘subordinate the interests of same-sex attracted youth while denying them information critical to their sexual health.’ (Allen, 2008, p. 581). In Australian research, Jones and Hillier (2012) noted that RSE focussed ‘on the “typical” sexual development of male and female bodies, heterosexual procreation and sexual risks – messages excluding GLBTIQ issues, pleasures and identities’ (2012, p. 441). Similarly, recent research with transgender and gender diverse young people in Australia discovered that almost two-thirds of respondents found their schools RSE ‘mostly inappropriate’ to the needs of gender diverse students (Jones et al., 2016).

Despite positive moves towards greater diversity and inclusion for LGBTIQ+ students across schools in Australia, curriculum ‘silences’ remain (Shannon, 2016; Waling et al., 2020). These

silences exist alongside a documented conservative and political backlash¹² (Shannon & Smith, 2017), and the growing risk averse orientation of schools and education departments (Ferfolja, 2013; Shannon & Smith, 2017; Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). Further, due to being seen as ‘sensitive or too controversial for school communities’(Ferfolja, 2013, p. 162) , a more critical engagement with sexualities and genders, including examination of power relations, is largely absent from RSE in Australia (Ferfolja, 2013; Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017). This body of research has highlighted how education and institutions can reinscribe traditional norms, reinforcing binary heteronormative perspectives and power dynamics, and therefore positioning other identities/sexualities as ‘Other’. In this study, I build on the critical insights of feminist and queer scholars to examine how young people navigate their own learning both in and beyond formal curriculum programs.

Pleasure, desire, and the curriculum

Since Michelle Fine’s (1988) ground-breaking work on the ‘missing discourse of desire’, feminist and queer scholars have brought questions of desire and pleasure to the fore in debates about RSE curriculum (Hirst, 2013; Lamb et al., 2013; Ollis, 2016a; Rasmussen, 2012). A large body of feminist research has since focussed on documenting the absence of pleasure and desire in the curriculum (Allen, 2004a; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Ingham, 2005; Lamb et al., 2013; Rasmussen et al., 2004; Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016; Tolman, 2002), with local feminist researchers calling for an approach to RSE that prioritises considerations of pleasure (Allen & Carmody, 2012; Carmody, 2015; Ollis, 2016a). Research with young people has demonstrated that the inclusion of pleasure and desire within RSE is something they also prioritise and value (Allen, 2005b; Ollis et al., 2019; Waling et al., 2020). Advocates argue that calls to acknowledge issues of sexual pleasure and desire in the curriculum are also linked to feminist

¹² See discussion on Safe Schools and RRRR in Chapter One.

interventions that challenge views of women in heterosexual relationships as sexually passive.

As Louisa Allen (2012b) explains:

These aspirations for pleasure are clearly framed by a desire for gender equity, increased personal (and ethical) pleasures and less restrictive non-heteronormative ways of doing masculinities and femininities. They are offered in the name of social/sexual justice or at least a particular construction of social/sexual justice. (p. 461)

Despite these stated feminist aims, concerns arise about how policy and curriculum ‘put pleasure to work’ (Talburt, 2009), often in ways that obscure complex negotiations of pleasure and power within sexual encounters (Allen, 2012; Lamb, 2010b; Rasmussen, 2010). Allen, for example (2012), questions whether ‘it may also be too simplistic to equate sexual pleasure with an exercise of agency or as proof of empowerment’ (2012b, p. 457).

Researchers have noted that despite this range of work, there has been little real change to the content and focus of RSE (Allen & Carmody, 2012; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Lamb et al., 2013), a concern reflected in recent Australian research which has suggested that engagement with pleasure/desire in the curriculum is haphazard at best (Waling et al., 2020). When present, discussions of pleasure/desire are largely presented in heteronormative ways (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Rasmussen et al., 2004), and/or subsumed into health promotion messaging around sexual safety, uncontrollable urges, and in the context of avoiding negative outcomes (e.g., unplanned pregnancies, STI’s) (Cameron-Lewis, 2016; Koepsel, 2016; Lamb et al., 2013). According to Lamb, Lustig and Graling (2013), a heteronormative understanding of pleasure/desire has resulted in a discourse of desire that is ‘no longer missing but is often situated as part of a discourse of safe practice and thus *still* equates pleasure with danger’ (Lamb, Lustig & Graling, 2013, p.316). In addition, I argue that these debates on pleasure and desire are primarily framed in terms of sexual activity, rather than taking account of broader

definitions of intimacy that might also include a different understanding of safety that goes beyond the danger/safety binary and also considers safety in comfort, care, and trust (Byron, 2017). My study aims to address this gap, by providing further insight into young people's perspectives on intimacy and pleasure, from their own perspectives, and for them to contribute to the discourses that are missing.

Relationships, gender, and sexuality beyond the classroom

Schools are frequently positioned as sites for violence prevention work (Gleeson et al., 2015; Ollis, 2014; Sundaram et al., 2016). However, as I noted in Chapter One, young people are already subjected to and perpetrating violence in schools (Daff et al., 2021; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2018; Senior et al., 2017) and hence schools are thus positioned as sites *of* violence (Flood et al., 2009; Higham, 2018; Scrine, 2018). This violence can be in the form of sexual harassment from other students (Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Meyer, 2008; Rahimi & Liston, 2011; Robinson, 2005); dating violence (de La Rue et al., 2017; Hertzog & Rowley, 2014); and gender-based bullying and harassment (Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Rawlings, 2019; Timmerman, 2003). Students can also experience violence from school staff based upon their sexuality and/or gender (Timmerman, 2003), an experience frequently reported by transgender and gender diverse students (Howell & Allen, 2021; Jones & Hillier, 2013; McBride, 2021).

While these bodies of scholarship have been important in highlighting school-based violence, the focus on individual experiences can obscure the institutional structures that continue to uphold normative cisgender and sexuality privileges (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Martino et al., 2020; Neary, 2018; Payne & Smith, 2012). Sociology of education researchers have long problematized schools as sites of heteronormativity, where for example, hegemonic masculinities are not only reinforced, but rewarded through school-based policies and practices (Keddie & Mills, 2019; Youdell, 2005). Similarly, although to date limited, scholarship is

increasingly exploring the experiences of transgender and gender diverse students (Jones et al., 2016). This research suggests that, even in schools that make efforts to challenge gender inequalities, they are likely to do so in ways that strengthen the cisgender binary (Bragg et al., 2018; Paechter et al., 2021); for example, through insistence on maintaining separate classes and/or sporting activities marked along binary gendered categories (Paechter et al., 2021). Paechter and colleagues (2021) found that schools have an easier time accommodating transgender students whose identities continue to fit within the gender binary, but are less able/knowledgeable/flexible, when it comes to non-binary students. As such, the embrace of liberal notions of equality and inclusion by schools, as Neary, Gray and O'Sullivan (2016) suggests, 'leaves heterosexuality and its privileges largely uninterrupted' (p.251).

Moving beyond narratives of risk and vulnerability, queer and feminist researchers have also documented the transformative potential of schools (Gilbert et al., 2018; Quinlivan, 2018), and highlighted the ways young people themselves are at the fore of change (Coll et al., 2020; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Renold, 2018; Retallack et al., 2016; Ringrose, Mendes, et al., 2021). Coll et al., (2020) argue for a greater recognition of 'the critical and creative capacities of young people' (p. 69) and consider the ways this can engender greater action towards how schools, teachers, and adults can 'support, respond with and learn from young people' (p. 69) to transform school spaces (see also: Renold, 2018).

Other research has focussed on the potentialities of specific spaces within schools to foster a greater sense of inclusion and belonging for LGBTIQ+ students, such as through 'Queer Straight Alliances'¹³ (QSA) (Evans & Rawlings, 2021; Mayo, 2008; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Quinlivan, 2013, 2018). In their ethnographic research exploring how LGBTIQ+

¹³ These groups are given various different names in different schools/research: 'Rainbow Groups', 'Rainbow diversity groups', 'Gay-Straight alliance'- I use the term QSA here for consistency as this is the name given to the similar group described by my participants (see Chapter Five).

students experience schooling, McGlashan and Fitzpatrick (2017) describe the work of the school's student-led 'Rainbow Group' as opening up possibilities 'for students to explore their own uncertainties, to express diversities and to engage in processes of legitimisation and making-intelligible' (p. 494). This echoes findings from research undertaken by Kathleen Quinlivan (2018), who also found that QSA's offer an alternative curriculum, where students lead the way to 'queerly destabilise hetero and gender normativity within schools' (p. 21). However, Quinlivan (2013) also frames the QSA as a paradox within the school environment, one that can simultaneously offer a safe space; but in framing queer young people as in need of support, can also re-inscribe 'wounded' identities (Youdell, 2004), or 're-pathologise them as "abnormal" and "at risk" in relation to the dominant heterosexual norm' (Quinlivan, 2013, p. s64; see also: Elliott, 2016; Grant et al., 2021; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010).

The work that I have described, emphasising the critical capacities of young people to not only make change, but to lead that change, has inspired my approach and understanding of the issues. It has provided me with clarity about the focus of my study and the contribution that I wish to make to this important field of study. Given the school-based context of my research, I wanted to build upon this work by exploring the ways young people experience intimacy in schooling and school spaces, in order to gain insight into how *young people* make sense of these places and practices. As the literature I have reviewed demonstrates, this 'learning' does not only occur in the classroom, but also, as Jen Gilbert (2014) argues, 'our sexuality finds a playground in school where the taunts and raucous laughter and loneliness help us know who and what we want' (p. x).

Socio-cultural constructions of youthful intimacies

Gendered experiences and expectations in heterosexual relationships

A growing body of sociological, feminist, and queer research has examined the socio-cultural dimensions of intimate relationships, explicitly attending to differences in sexuality, gendered expectations, and identity. Of particular note here is pioneering research undertaken by Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thomson (1998), which has been important in shifting discourses from those dominated by concerns about ‘sexual risk’ – particularly for young women – to an exploration of the ‘social construction of femininity and masculinity’ in order to better understand young people’s sexuality (and relationships). Focusing explicitly on heterosexual relationships, Holland et al described unequal cisgender relations in intimate relationships between young people as governed by the persistence of heteronormativity and an adherence to rigid gender roles. They (1998) argued that being a ‘normal man’ necessitates the ‘exercise of power over women, whether or not this is recognised, acknowledged or desired by an individual man’ (Holland et al., 1998, p. 10). Scholarship generated since Holland et al’s., influential work has also reflected these observations, suggesting that girls’ and boys’ expectations and experiences in intimate relationships are significantly influenced by socially constructed gender norms (Abbott et al., 2021; Chung, 2005; Tolman et al., 2016). Within such discourses, young men are positioned as unable to show their emotions, for fear of being associated with ‘femininity’ or ‘homosexuality’ and so prove their ‘manliness’ through ‘accepted’ performances of hegemonic masculinity (Martino, 1999; Tolman et al., 2016; Towns & Scott, 2013). In contrast, young women’s sexuality is seen as only acceptable and/or desirable within the confines of a loving, committed relationship, one where ‘emotional connectedness’ is conditional for sexual pleasure (Maxwell, 2006; Summit et al., 2016; Tolman, 2002). The double standards articulated here remained strikingly evident in my fieldwork and was the source of considerable shame for young women who feared they might

transgress these moral codes. Contemporary feminist and queer research thus continues to problematize the discursive-political positioning and simplification of young women as ‘passive’ in relationships (Allen, 2013; Renold & Ringrose, 2008).

In summary, much of the research on gendered expectations in heterosexual relationships can be categorised as exploring the ‘sexual double-standard’ in largely heterosexual relationships, interrogating an apparent cisgender binary of female passivity and male action (Holland, 1998), or of relationships where girls want romance and boys want sex. There is an important body of work that identifies the role of heterosexual relationships in defining, naming, and experiencing gender, and thus unpacking gendered power and inequalities (for example: Allen, 2004b; Berglas et al., 2014; Chung, 2005, 2007; Senior et al., 2020; Sundaram, 2013, 2016; Tolman et al., 2016). While significant in its own right, and for highlighting the need to better understand young people’s relationship dynamics, there are few sociological studies that identify intimate *relationships* as the primary subject of inquiry, (Gevers et al., 2012), and in ways that also focus on pleasure, desire, and agency (Allen, 2004b). Louisa Allen (Allen, 2004b) suggests that such research is underpinned by the assumption that ‘the idea of “relationships” is transparent’ (p. 464) and is taken to mean they have ‘taken on a generalized meaning of sexual attraction and/or emotional attachment to someone of the opposite gender’ (p. 465). A consequence of this, Allen (2004b) argues, is that ‘their diversity and complexity is concealed’ (p. 465), meaning education or health promotion interventions are not reflective of young people’s intimacy experiences. Similarly, I argue that in order to challenge the idea of young people’s relationships as being, as Allen suggests ‘self-explanatory’ (2004b, p. 464), it is also important to understand how young people *come to* understand and experience their relationships. In addition, this orientation enables closer attention to genders and sexualities, looking beyond privileging heteronormativity and binary categorisations of gender. To further develop this argument, I now examine research literature exploring queer intimacies and

discuss how this literature has shaped my approach.

Queer Intimacies

Much of the scholarship on queer intimacies has emphasised narratives of risk and illness related to gender and sexuality identities and LGBTIQ+ relationships. This focus on risk is important and warranted, given the persistence of homophobia and transphobia that heightens LGBTIQ+ young people's fear of rejection from family and the broader community (Robinson et al., 2014), experiences of violence (Jones et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2014) and frequent positioning of queer sexualities as hypersexual (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017). However, in moving to overcome the position of queer youth as 'wounded' (Youdell, 2004), and offer a more hopeful outlook, queer scholars have critiqued a binary in educational research that tends to position LGBTIQ+ young people as either a victim or a hero (Allen, 2015a; Cover, 2013; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). I align my study with Allen (2015a) when she argues that research that does not trouble this binary, obscures 'knowledge of LGBT youth in terms of the nuances of their subjectivities and complexities' (p. 374).

While I will explore the productive capacity for queer youth intimacies in digital spaces later in this chapter, research exploring the positive and pleasurable aspects of LGBTIQ+ young people's *relationships* remains scarce. Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2017) suggest that a fear of reinforcing wounded narratives may be the reason that research on transgender young people is 'all but silent on the topic of transgender young people and sex' (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017, pp. 376–377). In highlighting narratives of pleasure and happiness emerging from experiences of respect and happiness within transgender intimacies in their own research, Riggs and Bartholomaeus also argue that it 'would constitute a form of cisgenderism by omission to continue to ignore the importance of thinking and talking about intimacy with transgender

young people' (p. 385).

A significant strand of queer research has addressed the role of heteronormativity and homonormativity in shaping and regulating the intimacies of LGBTIQ+ young people (Bragg et al., 2018; Duggan, 2002). For example, Elizabethe Payne's (2010, 2018) US-based research with young lesbian women found that heteronormativity played a similarly powerful and regulatory role on sexuality and desire as it did for heterosexual girls. Similar findings are borne out in my fieldwork, where heteronormative, and homonormative expectations influenced the conduct and views of students, including those identified as LGBTIQ+. In Australian research, Ruby Grant (2018) has found that the sexualised stigma attached to bisexuality, one that is projected through the male gaze, also makes it difficult for bisexual women to 'construct and express authentic bisexualities' (p. 101).

As I previously observed, there is a dearth of research exploring the positive and pleasurable aspects of LGBTIQ+ young people's relationships. More specifically, as is the case with heterosexual young people, there remains a lack of research on intimate relationships. My work seeks to address these gaps, informed by Clarke et al's (2018) suggestion to attend to the 'ambivalences' and 'ambiguities' present in young people's intimacies/sexualities and to do so in ways that challenge wounded/success binaries and instead give proper attention to the complexities, risks, *and* the pleasure of queer intimacies.

Postfeminism and intimacy

A substantial body of work has documented the rise of moral panics related to the 'sexualisation of culture' (Attwood, 2006; see: Gill, 2012; Gonick et al., 2009; Lamb & Peterson, 2012), with much of it demonstrating the increased scrutinization of girls' sexuality, based upon moralising, raced, and class-based discourses (Egan, 2013; Mullholland, 2017; Weekes, 2004). For example, Sharon Lamb (2010a) proposes that in attempting to define a 'healthy sexuality'

for young women, feminist theorists have created an ‘idealized’ version of feminine sexuality, one which may play out differently for young women of colour and/or for those from different class backgrounds. Lamb, drawing on the work of Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill-Collins (1990), argues that ‘pleasure, subjectivity and desire’ are words that also ‘evoke conceptions of a white, middle class, heterosexual femininity that needs to be protected’ (2010a, p. 300). This aligns with Rosalind Gill’s analysis of how ‘different people are “sexualized” in different ways and with different meanings’ (Gill, 2009a, p. 138). Ultimately, as this range of work shows, the ‘girl’ who needs protection or saving from such categorisations is typically cast as white, heterosexual, and middle class (Attwood, 2007; Renold & Ringrose, 2013).

Jessica Ringrose (2016) conceives of these debates over sexualisation as a form of ‘postfeminist panic’ in which the media have utilised ‘repeated discursive gender patterns in their reporting’ to activate public ‘anxiety around girlhood sexuality and femininity’ (p. 31). Angela McRobbie (2009) describes postfeminism as a set of discourses that ‘actively draws on and invokes feminism’ in order to ‘suggest that equality is achieved.’ (p. 10). For Ros Gill (2007; 2017) the ‘postfeminist sensibility’ is one that draws upon neoliberal notions of individualisation, choice, and empowerment to absolve responsibility for persistent gender inequalities.

This intertwining of postfeminism with the sexualisation of culture has resulted in what Ringrose and Renold (2012a) have termed a ‘paradox of empowerment versus protection’ (p. 342). On the one hand, instead of subjects capable of pleasure and active desire, girls are positioned as innocent and pure (Egan, 2013; Jackson & Cram, 2003) and in need of protection from ‘aggressive’ male sexuality (Holland et al., 1998) and the broader sexualisation of culture. On the other, they are required to carefully perform the ‘knowing and savvy slut’ (Ringrose &

Renold, 2012b, p. 338); one who is empowered to make choices about their own relationships and sexuality. What it means exactly for girls to be and/or feel ‘empowered’ or to make ‘choices’ within a neoliberal and postfeminist context that disguises structural inequalities for individual responsibility, remains at the fore of scholarly debate (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gonick et al., 2009; Harris & Dobson, 2015). As Anita Harris and Amy Dobson (2015) explain:

Understanding girls’ agency in a post-girl power cultural landscape cannot involve uncritically positioning girls as inherently powerful subjects, but instead must unpack how girls are overdetermined as such, and how they feel, enact, and make sense of their experiences in such conditions. (p. 154)

In this study I take up Harris and Dobson’s call to remain vigilant of the way girls are overdetermined as ‘powerful’, and in particular, I build upon their provocation for scholars to attend to the ‘many forms of unheroic struggle and creativity, and/or non-resistant actions, relations and practices that can also be understood as ‘agentic’ (Harris & Dobson, 2015, p. 153). For Jennifer C. Nash (2017) this means moving ‘beyond structure/agency debates’ and instead, attending to the ‘*ambivalent* pleasures’ (Nash, 2017, p. 263) that may illuminate the complex ways girls negotiate their intimate decision-making in the postfeminist context.

These accounts of postfeminism (Gill, 2007; 2016; Harris & Dobson, 2015; Nash, 2017; Ringrose & Renold, 2012a) and sexuality have shaped my approach to this thesis, where one starting point has been the need to know more about how young women navigate these tensions within their intimate relationships. Additionally, while most of the research I have described here focuses on how postfeminism impacts upon girls, other research has highlighted the need to better understand the way boys/men (O’Neil, 2015) and LGBTIQ+ young people (Grant, 2020) may also be taking up postfeminist and neoliberal discourses.

I now consider the research literature addressing what I am calling ‘digitally mediated

intimacy'. Attwood et al (2017) describe two distinct uses of the term 'mediated intimacy'. The first, and what I refer to as digitally mediated intimacy, builds upon the work of Deborah Chambers (2013) and Nancy Baym (2010) and relates to the intimate connections formed through different digital platforms (Attwood et al, 2017). The second is associated with the work of Rosalind Gill (2009b; see also: Barker et al., 2018) and relates to the ways 'discourses of intimacy [...] are mediated through women's magazines' (Attwood et al, 2017 p. 249) and media more broadly.

Digitally mediated intimacies

The ubiquity of smart phones and technological access, as well as growing participation in social networking sites has led to a rapidly growing body of research concerned with the ways in which intimacy is increasingly experienced through and between digital spaces (Attwood et al., 2017; Chambers, 2017; Dobson et al., 2018; McGlotten, 2013). Hobbs, Owen, and Gerber (2017) suggest that 'dating, courtship and modern romance' is in the midst of a 'digital revolution' (p.272). And as Sonia Livingstone (2008) has argued, the 'very language of social relationships is being reframed' (2008, p. 394) around the ways in which we use and consume digital social media in our everyday lives. There has been heightened contestation (and experiencing) of these phenomena throughout the period of physical isolation enforced through the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholarship on digitally mediated intimacy following the 'unprecedented times' rhetoric of the pandemic is still evolving, but mandatory physical distancing has meant that many have explored the boundaries of intimacy in digital spaces: online schooling, zoom funerals, weddings and social games nights. These practices have challenged traditional conceptions of intimacy as embodied physical closeness while also extending and perhaps serving to legitimate and popularise digital practices of intimacy and care. In this section, I bring the theoretical literature into dialogue with the empirical

scholarship that frames and explores young people's digitally mediated intimacies and indicate how my work aims to bring a distinctive contribution to this growing field.

Digital Affordances

A range of research has shown how digital and social media is increasingly used for flirting (Meenagh, 2015), 'hooking-up' (Albury & Byron, 2016; Carlson, 2019), breaking up (Gershon, 2010; Meenagh, 2015) and maintaining relationships (de Ridder & van Bauwel, 2015; Meenagh, 2015; Pascoe, 2009). Within scholarly and popular discourse, the proliferation of intimacy practices has led to questions as to whether a 'crisis of intimacy exists' (Chambers, 2013, p. 26). While acknowledging that communications conducted online have a role in 'shaping and framing' personal relationships, Jamieson (2013) questions whether this is able to 'trump the embodied real-time interaction with intimate others' (p. 28). Debates centre on whether 'real' intimacy is achievable online, whether such attempts are shallow (Turkle, 2012), or as Shaka McGlotten asks, if they are seen to represent a 'dangerous corruption of the real thing' (p. 7). Nancy Baym (2010) critiques the 'persistent sense' that relationships and intimacies mediated through different digital platforms are not real or dismissed as simply 'virtual' (p. 30), while those conducted offline, are said to occur 'in real life' (IRL). Social media scholars continue to trouble this binary, and instead focus on the affordances of digital mediation (boyd, 2014; van Doorn, 2011) and the increasingly blurred boundaries between the entanglements of online and offline worlds (Baym, 2010).

Increasingly, media scholars are considering the affordances of different technologies and/or devices as themselves offering 'infrastructures of intimacy', whereby intimacy is not only 'connections between people', but also connections formed through 'devices, apps and platforms' (Paasonen, 2018, pp. 103–104). Cefai and Couldry (2019) claim that feminist and queer theory has shown us that 'intimacy is always already mediated – by constructions of

‘privacy’, ‘heteronormativity’, ‘home’ (p. 294). Thus, queer and feminist interventions into digitally mediated intimacy have explored the potential of such spaces to extend the ways we experience, understand, and feel about intimacy (Attwood et al., 2017; boyd, 2014; Cefai & Couldry, 2019; Dobson et al., 2018; McGlotten, 2013). Queer and feminist accounts draw our attention to the potentialities of digital spaces, as Attwood et al (2017) describe:

These studies have shown how groups of people whose desires for intimacy have fallen outside heteronormative acceptability, have been able to use these technologies to self-represent and instantly connect with networks of similarly desiring subjects from around the world. (Attwood et al., 2017, p. 25)

Further research has suggested that broadening zones of intimacy are particularly relevant to young people. For example, media scholars have also explored the opportunity for digital spaces to shape and inform sexuality and gender identities beyond the cisgender-gender heterosexual norms (Byron, 2020; de Ridder, 2017; Dobson et al., 2018; Hanckel et al., 2019; Robards et al., 2020). Rob Clover attributes the vast proliferation of categories, descriptors and labels used to describe gender and sexual identity in part to:

the contemporary affordances of digital communication and social networking which empowered non-institutional discourses to be utilised as one aspect in the search for more nuanced ways to describe the affective sense of gender identity and the lived experience of sexual and romantic attraction. (Cover, 2020, p. 3)

Research with LGBTIQ+ youth has further supported Cover’s propositions, with a focus on the opportunity for digital spaces to provide connection, safety, and anonymity, in ways that promote learning about gender and sexuality, that may not be always supported offline (Byron et al., 2019; Robards et al., 2020).

Much of the literature I have explored thus far has addressed the affordances of digital spaces

for greater intimacies for marginalised identities. However, other research has documented the ways in which digital technology has not been a purely democratising space for intimacy, with studies exploring the ways social inequalities, such as those related to gender, sexuality, and race, can be magnified, and extended in these spaces (Dobson, 2015; Duguay, 2016; Pascoe, 2011). For example, in her important work examining First Nations peoples use of hook-up apps¹⁴ in Australia, Bronwyn Carlson (2019), examined the ways ‘these spaces of potential love, intimacy and joy are often circumscribed by broader structural processes of homophobia, racism and misogyny’ (p.146). While pointing to the lack of research addressing the more positive experiences of First Nations hook-up app users, Carlson described the ways users were required to ‘fracture their identities in order to keep safe’ (p.146) on the apps and in potential offline meetups. Such research highlights the importance of remaining attuned to the nuanced ways young people experience digital intimacies and underlines the need for research to move away from simple good/bad and real/unreal binaries in how digital intimacies are characterised; and as this thesis aims to do, to give more critical attention to how these binaries are actually navigated by young people in their everyday experiences. As de Ridder explains:

While many of these studies have observed how young people are (re)producing sexual cultures online, research is scarce on how young people themselves give meaning to their sexual cultures and social media, specifically related to how they negotiate social media logic and the shaping of sexuality within the context of social and cultural dynamics such as risk and resistance, individualization, and mediatization. (de Ridder, 2017, p. 4).

Learning about relationships and identities online

A growing body of literature has further examined the ways young people are turning to the internet and social media for advice and knowledge about their genders, sexualities, and

¹⁴ Hook-up apps refer to photo-based dating apps such as Tinder, Grindr, Bumble and Hinge.

relationships (Albury, 2013; Attwood et al., 2015; Bragg & Buckingham, 2019; Byron et al., 2013; Robards et al., 2020). In the particular context of inadequate school-based RSE, there is a focus on the ways young people may seek out sexual health information online (Byron et al., 2013; Farrugia et al., 2021; Jones & Biddlecom, 2011), with many youth health promotion programs targeting online and social media spaces (Evers et al., 2013; Nguyen et al., 2013; Pedrana et al., 2013; Wadham et al., 2019). However, there is less agreement within the literature on how valuable or trustworthy young people find this information (Byron, 2015; Dehaan et al., 2013; Fraser et al., 2021; Grant & Nash, 2019; Jones & Biddlecom, 2011). For example, in their recent Australian research with young people, Farrugia and colleagues (2021) found that young people were sceptical of online sexual health information, particularly when it came to information about relationships which they preferred ‘experientially’ rather than presented as ‘fact’.

Digitally mediated learning is also framed along notions of risk. For example, the immediacy and accessibility of online pornography has led to anxieties that ‘its consumption results in undesirable social ‘effects’ (Attwood, 2006, p. 1) and this is particularly so when it comes to its use as a source of sex education. There is disagreement within the literature as to whether young people are actively seeking out pornography to learn and if so, what it is they are learning (Litsou et al., 2020; Rothman et al., 2014). Concerns are particularly directed towards young men, with fears that *violent* pornography reinforces gendered and heterosexual practices that normalise violence against women (Crabbe & Corlett, 2010; Lim et al., 2017). Others have argued for the potential for porn to provide a space for the exploration of desire (Attwood et al., 2018; Scarcelli, 2015) and be a valuable resource of sex education and knowledge for LGBTIQ+ young people who are largely ignored by mainstream RSE (Kubicek et al., 2010; Litsou et al., 2020). Whatever the perspective (critical or supportive), there has been increasing recognition among RSE scholars of the need for curriculum to attend to pornography in some

capacity (Albury, 2014; Goldstein, 2020; Ollis, 2016b).

Sexting – concerns and anxieties

Finally, a further dichotomy persists within digital scholarship in relation to digitally mediated intimacy, one largely buttressed by traditional public/private dualisms, where anxieties emerge about the ways in which intimate practices are increasingly publicised, performed and/or experienced through social media platforms (Chambers, 2013). These concerns are frequently directed towards young people (Livingstone, 2008; Livingstone & Mason, 2015; Naezer, 2018), and young women/girls in particular (Dobson, 2015; Hasinoff, 2015b; Ringrose, 2011; Ringrose et al., 2013). The considerations put forth through debates about sexualisation are amplified in the digital space and the abundant panics directed towards questions of risk and risk mitigation (Dobson, 2015, 2019; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021; Ravn et al., 2021; Ringrose, 2011; van Royen et al., 2018).

The extensiveness of the debates around sexualisation are particularly evident in relation to sexting. Earlier research focussed on attempting to quantify the prevalence of sexting among young people (Klettke et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; Yeung et al., 2014), albeit with poorly defined understandings of what ‘sexting’ entailed (Döring, 2014). Media and education discourses at the time were thus largely focussed on risk, where sexting was framed ‘almost exclusively as a dangerous activity and a serious social problem’ (Angelides, 2013, p. 667), and frequently considered within legal frameworks as ‘child pornography’ (Crofts & Lee, 2013; Hasinoff, 2015b). Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry (2014) argued that such considerations tended to frame the problem as one of ‘youth naiveté’ while ‘leaving unproblematised gender-based violence’ (p. 119). Similarly, Amy Hasinoff (Hasinoff, 2015b) describes a ‘sexting panic’, which, while raising ‘key questions about privacy and consent’ also buried ‘vital issues...beneath the widespread anxiety about girls’ sexuality’ (p. 1).

Interventions at this time thus failed to engage with the nuanced differences between the consensual and non-consensual sharing of images (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Powell & Henry, 2014; Salter & Crofts, 2015), instead focusing on the ‘risky’ behaviours of girls/women, thus transferring the blame for the non-consensual sharing of images from the perpetrator to the victim (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Dobson & Ringrose, 2016).

Research since this early wave of work has focussed on prioritising young people’s experiences and definitions of sexting (Burkett, 2015; Roberts & Ravn, 2020), unpacking the gendered power dynamics and sexual double-standards evident within largely heterosexual relations (Dobson, 2018; Ringrose et al., 2021a; Setty, 2019), and negotiating ethical approaches to sexting in the context of increasing recognition of image-based abuse (Albury et al., 2013; Albury & Crawford, 2012; Hasinoff, 2015a).

Since designing and undertaking the fieldwork for this study, there has been a proliferation of research exploring young people’s experiences of sexting. To date, it has been mostly UK/European based (see: Harvey & Ringrose, 2016; Hunehall Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021; Ringrose et al., 2021a, 2021b; Setty, 2019, 2020, 2021), and most often with young people who are older than my school-aged participants (Amundsen, 2020a, 2020b; Burkett, 2015; Ravn et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021). Given the focus on girls and risk within heterosexual relations, there has also been less work exploring LGBTIQ+ young people’s practices of sexting (Albury & Byron, 2014) My work thus contributes to this burgeoning scholarship, bringing to it new foci and angles of analysis.

The bodies of literature I have reviewed in this section are largely framed around how young people seek out advice or sexual health information as a way of learning about intimacies, and often with a specific focus on sex, or sex advice. There is less attention to the ways young people identify this learning as occurring incidentally, or how they reflect upon experiences

where they have learned something through their digital engagements. This is important, as Amy Dobson and colleagues (2018) have argued, because: ‘Social media are now centrally involved in processes whereby pedagogies of intimate life as life itself are learnt, reproduced, given value, contested, and exploited’ (Dobson et al., 2018, p. 4). My study seeks to intervene in this research by prioritising young people’s accounts of how they witness and negotiate their relationships through mobile and social media and how this impacts upon how they make sense of their intimacies.

This thesis seeks to bring these various debates about intimacy and digitally mediated intimacy into dialogue with empirical research on the perspectives of young people and in doing so bring fresh insights to the lived experiences of contemporary forms of intimacy. My research questions are less focussed on whether the way young people experience intimacy (be it digitally mediated or ‘in real life’) is ‘real’ or authentic, and more attuned to grasping the forms of contemporary intimacy as expressed by young people. The study thus contributes to the ‘small, but growing, number of critical, empirical studies’ (Naezer & Ringrose, 2019, p. 414) that prioritise young people’s own experiences and understandings of these matters. It questions accounts that position digitally mediated intimacy as a matter only of ‘risk’ or a problem to be solved but aims to do so without denying the existence of such risks. Chapter Five offers a detailed analysis of the role of mobile and social media and learning through engaging Lauren Berlant’s (2008) concept of the ‘intimate public’.

Locating an understanding of intimacy

For Lynn Jamieson (2011) while intimacy is culturally and historically constituted, it generally ‘refers to the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality’ (Jamieson, 2011, para. 1.1). The idea of closeness is also felt in Lauren Berlant’s (1998) conceptualisations of intimacy, whereby ‘to intimate is to communicate with the sparest

of signs and gestures’ (p. 281) or Shakka McGlotten (2013) who describes intimacy as ‘the affective encounters with others that matter most’ (p. 1). My study is informed by these conceptualisations of intimacy. Throughout this thesis, I examine intimacy and closeness, with a focus on ‘dating’ or dating-adjacent types of relationships and position this in reference to a broader social, cultural concern about changing forms of intimacy. In this final section I review some key socio-cultural debates about the forms and capacities for intimacy, drawing on the work of feminist and queer theorists to examine intimacy as something that is closely felt, but also socially and culturally constituted.

The last twenty-five years have seen a proliferation of sociological research concerned with diverse conceptualisations of ‘intimacy’ (Barker et al., 2018; Crowhurst et al., 2013). The influential work of sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) on the ‘radicalising possibilities of the transformation of intimacy’ (p. 3) situated intimate relationships as a potential site for personal empowerment, emancipation, and democratisation. These arguments arose in relation to broader accounts of late modernity, whereby individuals were seen to be becoming increasingly responsible for the design of their own lives (see also: Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). The ‘pure relationship’ of late modernity, Giddens suggested, is mutually beneficial and promotes ‘sexual and emotional equality’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 2), whereby gendered and idealised versions of ‘romantic love’ have been superseded by a ‘confluent love’ based on autonomy, individual choice and the detraditionalisation of gender roles. Giddens drew from ‘therapeutic works and self-help manuals’ (p. 64) to suggest that women’s increasing ability to engage with and negotiate mutual care and pleasure within heterosexual relationships was indicative not only of increasing equality within the intimate sphere, but also of shifts in broader gender politics. Giddens (1992) observes that intimacy itself suggests ‘a wholesale democratising of the interpersonal domain’, mirroring the possibilities of ‘democracy in the public sphere’ (p. 3).

Feminist and queer theorists and activists have both drawn on, and critically engaged with the democratisation thesis to explore whether and if so, how detraditionalisation has created greater possibilities for intimacy (Weeks, 1998). Sasha Roseneil (2000) extended Giddens' work to consider the ways in which 'changes in the organisation of intimacy are impacting upon the wider organization of sexuality' (para. 3.7). While cognisant of the critiques of Giddens' thesis (see below), Roseneil engages with queer theory to consider the nature of the social changes Giddens documents and argues that 'processes of individualization and detraditionalization are releasing individuals from traditional hetero scripts and from the patterns of heterorelationality that accompany them' (para. 3.10). Such critiques have 'decentre[d] the "family" and the heterosexual couple in our intellectual imaginaries' (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004, p. 135), creating space for the emergence (and acceptance) of different types of kinship, care and intimacy practices.

However, Giddens' detraditionalisation thesis has also been criticised for its failure to adequately engage with feminist scholarship (McLeod, 2002; Mulinari & Sandell, 2009), all the while prioritising a white/Eurocentric (Povinelli, 2006), heterosexual subject – as well as emphasising change, over continued inequalities (Jamieson, 1999). For Julie McLeod (2002), overarching claims about the 'detraditionalisation of gender are utopian and overstated' (p. 223) and, according to Lyn Jamieson (1999), 'individualises personal problems and downgrades sociological explanations' (p.474). Similarly, Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) critiques progress narratives such as the one put forth by Giddens, arguing that these fail to account for the effects of colonialism, racism and the resulting uneven distribution of goods and resources on practices of intimacy. Emphasising the *I* in intimacy, Povinelli (2002) argues that modern western notions of intimacy have largely ignored the role of place, spirituality, and relationality that are central to Indigenous ways of intimacy.

The French sociologist Eva Illouz (2007) is critical of what she describes as Giddens' and his peers focus on the 'psychological credo' of equality in intimate relationships, suggesting that this elevation of therapeutic cultures has ultimately 'failed to interrogate the very transformation of intimacy it purports to describe' (p.30). Illouz asserts that in order to 'evaluate social transformations' we must first observe the ways in which 'new norms of equality or freedom have transformed the "emotional texture" of intimate relationships' (2007, p. 30). Illouz further argues that the convergence of neoliberalism with feminist ideals and therapeutic cultures has come to embody 'emotional capitalism', a concept she has developed to characterise how 'market-based cultural repertoires shape and inform interpersonal and emotional relationships, while interpersonal relationships are at the epicentre of economic relationships' (2007, p. 5).

Whatever the 'transformation of intimacy' has entailed, 'the balance between what has traditionally been conceived of as a neat division between private life and public life is being constantly rethought' (Weeks, 1998, p. 41). Lauren Berlant (1998) has influentially argued for a 'rethinking of intimacy' that recognises the mobile, collective and vulnerable forms of intimacy that transcend public/private dualisms, calling for greater recognition of how 'the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness' (p. 281). Berlant explains:

Rethinking intimacy calls out not only for redescription but for transformative analyses of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects, while, at the same time, attachments are developing that might redirect the different routes taken by history and biography. To rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones many are living. (Berlant, 1998, p. 286)

Emphasising the capacity of intimacy beyond the 'private' of traditional sociological accounts,

Berlant asserts that ‘intimacy builds worlds’ and ‘it creates spaces’ (p. 282) and thus plays a role in who we are/become. In attending to the mobile and ephemeral processes of attachment, Berlant discerns that the ‘kinds of connections that impact on people, and on which they depend for a living (if not ‘a life’), do not always respect the predictable forms’ (Berlant, 1998, p. 284). Following this line of argument gives visibility to intimacy in public, in politics, in digital spaces; and, I propose, it can also give visibility to forms of intimacy considered ‘temporary’ in the time of ‘youth’. Importantly for this research, Berlant’s conception of intimacy has also underlined the ways in which attachment to hegemonic (gendered) norms shape, define and confine our understandings and experiences of intimacy.

Building on these arguments, Cefai and Couldry (2019) assert that ‘what queer theory has taught us is that heteronormativity shapes what can appear to us as ‘intimate’’ (Cefai & Couldry, 2019, p. 292). Heteronormativity is a useful concept here, and for my research, as it provides a theoretical and ethical position to ‘problematize the presumption of heterosexuality’ (Allen, 2015, p. 369). Drawing from the work of Berlant and Warner (1998), heteronormativity can be defined as a process or system whereby:

A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness-embedded in things and not just in sex-is what we call heteronormativity. (p.554).

This definition is relevant not only to understanding what we see, feel, or experience as intimate, but also to how we feel *about* these experiences, how we legitimise or disguise, or compare to the norm – that is, to the ‘coherent’ and ‘privileged’ (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548) version of intimacy. Sara Ahmed (2014) suggests that one ‘does not “do” heterosexuality simply through who one does and does not have sex with’, but rather heterosexuality becomes

a ‘script for an ideal life’ (p. 147). Berlant’s (1998, 2008, 2011) work attempts to untangle the normative and utopian practices that, they argue, sustain the hegemonic ‘fantasy’ that equates ‘having a life with having an intimate life’ (1998, p. 282), and moreover, which is the heteronormative version of the ‘good life’.

In the following fieldwork chapters, I draw upon Berlant and others conceptualisations of intimacy to interrogate the ways young people come to understand and experience their personal relationships, and in particular, the gendered and sexuality norms that are integral to this process of meaning. In other words, I move from discussions of these forms of intimacy in the abstract, to showing how they are enacted and produced among young people in their everyday interactions.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed key research literature that has been important in both informing and defining the parameters of my research. In doing so, I have identified findings and approaches that my work builds upon and also marked some gaps which my work seeks to address. Overall, this thesis aims to make distinctive contribution to knowledge about youthful intimacy and the perspectives and capacities young people engage to navigate these relationships.

A number of scholars have called for a greater investment in listening to and more actively engaging with young people’s perspectives on relationships and sexuality education (Bay-Cheng, 2017; Coll et al., 2018; Helmer et al., 2015), including encouraging their involvement in the development of curriculum (Coll et al., 2018; Renold, 2019). In the debates I have canvassed above, we see little evidence of a formal curriculum that engages with the diverse realities of young people’s intimate, sexual, and gendered lives. Yet, as I have suggested and show throughout the thesis, broader recognition is needed of the ways young people are *already*

learning in the absence of a curriculum that addresses their diverse needs and desires. While there is a range of scholarship exploring learning outside classrooms, much of this is focussed on understanding specific learning sites as identified by researchers: schools and friends, for example. I build upon this work by prioritising the places young people *themselves* identify as being key to this learning, rather than starting from a pre-determined specific space.

Finally, taking ‘intimacy’ as a key focus has allowed me to remain open to the ambivalences, uncertainties, and ambiguities inherent in the way young people make sense of and experience intimate relationships. That is, I did not begin from a set view to find and study, for example, gender-based violence or heteronormativity; rather I was guided by the frameworks and issues that young people themselves identified. The research is thus underpinned by a desire to centre the experiences, feelings, and relations prioritised by young people. In the following chapter, I explain the theoretical and methodological approaches I adopted to support these intentions.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Introduction

This chapter provides an account of the theoretical resources and methodological approaches that have guided my research design and fieldwork analysis. It begins with an overview of key concepts and orientations that framed the initial study aims and that have been engaged inductively throughout the analysis. It then explains the methodological underpinnings of the study and the rationale for decisions regarding research approach and design. This section includes an account of ethical issues in participatory and youth-centred research, especially when investigating matters to do with sexuality and relationships, as well as the process to obtain ethical approval. I then document the study design and methods used, including a description of the group sessions and individual interviews. The chapter concludes with a summary of my approach to analysis, which is further demonstrated in subsequent chapters.

My critical reflections on different stages of the research process are woven throughout this chapter, highlighting how methodological reflexivity was built into the approach as well as showing how ongoing ethical decisions were made. I begin by situating the research in reference to longstanding traditions of qualitative and feminist research.

Qualitative and feminist approaches

Qualitative research is characterised by a ‘a set of complex interpretive practices’ that resists both a singular definition and a singular method of enquiry. Rather, it ‘embraces tensions and contradictions’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 12) found in the social world. More precisely, this study is informed by qualitative research that embraces feminist and queer methodologies to explore understandings of genders and sexualities with young people; in this case, through

school-based research (Allen, 2005b; Bragg et al., 2018; Renold, 2005). For Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002), feminist methodologies encompass a diversity of approaches but they suggest that ‘what is distinctive is the particular positioning of theory, epistemology, and ethics that enables feminist researchers to question “truthfulness” and explore relations between knowledge and power’ (p. 16). One of the central tenets of feminist methodologies is ‘reflexivity’ (Pillow, 2003). Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002) understand reflexivity as an attempt to bring forth the ‘power relations’ as well as the ‘exercise of power’ that exists within the research relationship (p. 118). It represents an ‘attempt to unpack what knowledge is contingent upon, how the researcher is socially situated, and how the research agenda/process has been constituted’ (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 118). To do this, Pillow (2003) calls for the researcher to remain vigilant ‘over practices and their effects’ throughout the research process while also ‘seeking out uncomfortable and unfamiliar tellings and data’ (Pillow, 2003, p. 192). Consequently, feminist research resists a ‘one-size fits all approach’ in order to to ‘pay due respect to differences and to carve out diversity’ (Buikema et al., 2012, p. 2) within the research process. Frequently giving priority to under-represented groups or marginalised voices, feminist research critically focuses on how gender can be analysed together or in interaction with other markers of identity, such as race, class, sexuality, ability (Collins, 1990). Key to these approaches are attempts to attend to power within the research process and, more broadly, for the research itself to have a positive impact in redressing and transforming power imbalances in society (Ahmed et al., 2000). These are important foundational considerations for this study. As noted in Chapter Two, a large body of feminist work has focused on girlhood and feminine subjectivities (Holland et al., 1998; McClelland & Fine, 2008; Renold & Ringrose, 2013), often as part of a broader feminist project to interrogate ongoing gendered inequalities. I position my research as having similar goals; however, like Allen (2005a), I also suggest that understanding ‘gendered power, requires an investigation of both points of

reference of this power/in relation’ (p. 20). Allen further explains that, because of the relational nature of power, an ‘appropriate way to make sense of gendered power and (hetero)sexual subjectivities’ is to carry out research with both young women and men (Allen, 2005a, p. 20). Additionally, in designing my study, I wanted to avoid a binary gender analysis that potentially erased or silenced LGBTIQ+ young people or those ‘who identify as both/and or neither’ (Driver, 2007, p. 305). Critics from within and outside feminist research have raised concerns about the ways in which the ‘object’ of feminist research may inadvertently serve to reinforce the very social inequalities and asymmetries the research has, generally, sought to address (Francis & Paechter, 2015; Lamb, 2010a; Phipps et al., 2018). This is because such framings can potentially reify heterosexual binaries that position (cis)gender(s) as only existing in opposition and may shut down possibilities for exploration beyond such thinking.

In attending to what kind of feminist approach this thesis embraces, part of the methodological decision-making was to be clear on what kind of feminism I *do not* embrace throughout (Hines, 2019, 2020; Phipps, 2020). There is a diverse breadth of views held beneath the broad umbrella of ‘feminism’ and, at present, we are witnessing the emergence of what Sally Hines (2019) has described as a ‘sustained antagonism’ from parts of the feminist movement towards trans and gender-diverse people, and trans women in particular (p. 145). Taking up what some call a ‘gender critical’ approach (named by others as ‘Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism’ (TERF)), these feminists have ‘criticised social developments such as LGBTIQ-inclusive school education and positive media representation of trans people’ (Pearce et al., 2020, p. 682). In an overview of the so-called ‘TERF wars’, Rachel Pearce and colleagues suggest that such opposition ‘can be understood as an emotionally loaded, reactionary response to reassert [gender] essentialism’ (2020, p. 682; see also: Barker, 2017). Such feminists have thus acted in ways that have excluded consideration of gendered violence experienced by trans people while also perpetuating forms of this violence. Throughout the analysis of my fieldwork, and

in engaging with my participant narratives, I take up Sally Hines' (2019) important call for feminist research to 'reject trans-exclusionary feminism' because it constitutes a 'breach with the goals of equality and dignity [...] that runs counter to the ability to fulfil a liveable life' (p. 155). As, in the study design and analysis, I have sought to bring together feminist and queer theoretical understandings of genders, sexualities, and intimacies, I now turn my discussion to queer theory.

Queer orientations

In the introduction to their book *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, Catherine Nash and Kath Browne resist a single definition of 'queer research' and, instead, offer the following as a starting point and provocation:

'Queer research' can be any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations. Queer inflected perspectives, approaches and conceptualisations have been taken up, disputed and reworked in different disciplinary contexts, reflecting the traditions of knowledge production in those disciplines. (C. Nash & Browne, 2010, p. 4)

They propose that this relatively open definition generates space for creative and diverse utilisations of queer approaches; ones that recognise queer objects of research as 'fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming' (C. Nash & Browne, 2010, p. 1). This understanding of queer research informs the approach adopted in my study which strives to avoid pathologising the experiences of LGBTIQ+ young people, while simultaneously remaining attentive to the non-normative 'silences' often pervasive in schools, and in school-based sexuality research (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015).

Building upon this and related work (e.g., Coll et al., 2018; Francis & Paechter, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2012), the approach outlined below, while recognising the limits of my own and broader socio-cultural preconceptions, endeavoured to resist foreclosing on diverse, shifting, and messy identifications, experiences and affects. In particular, I borrowed the idea of ‘queer orientations’ from Hannah McCann (2016), who suggests that queer theory provides a ‘theoretical lens’ to orient method(s) in order to challenge ‘subject boundaries and dominant paradigms’ (2016, p. 238). This represents a queer orientation to methods rather than a description of queer methods ‘per se’ (p. 238). Queer theory, McCann argues, ‘yields a commitment to challenging discrete categorizations of the subject’ (p. 239). Relatedly, Mary Lou Rasmussen argues that a queer approach underlines the instability of gender and sexuality performances that are ‘constantly mediated by relations of power and open to possibility of change’ (2005, p. 4). Researchers are thus able to explore how subject positions marked by gender and sexuality are ‘constituted and regulated’ through everyday practices (Youdell, 2010b, p. 135). Further, while I do not ignore some of the ‘injuries’ described to me by LGBTIQ+ participants, adopting a queer orientation has also enabled me to bring forth everyday stories of queer intimacy that spoke to moments of happiness and connection, and highlighted some of the ambivalences Nash and Browne alluded to above. At the same time as acknowledging the injuries that are particularly salient for participants who identify as queer, this thesis also aims to recognise the *range* of relationship experiences of *all* participants in my study that exist beyond an exclusive focus on limiting discourses of risk and ‘wounded selves’.

Defining key terms and concepts

Understanding genders and sexualities

In the last chapter, I introduced the concept of ‘heteronormativity’ through the scholarship of Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) as central to the work of this thesis. I argued that

‘heteronormativity’ shapes the ways we experience, understand, and *feel* about intimacy and intimate relationships and thus, has come to form the ‘script’ for expectations on how to live a ‘good life’ (Ahmed, 2010b; Berlant, 2011; Berlant & Warner, 1998). I also noted empirical research that has located young people’s understandings and experiences of genders and sexuality as governed by such heteronormative logics (Bragg et al., 2018; Grant & Nash, 2019; Holland et al., 1998; Payne, 2010; Renold & Ringrose, 2008; Tolman et al., 2016). To unpack this further, I draw from feminist, queer, and intersectional scholarship to outline the ways the concepts of gender and sexualities are understood and deployed in this thesis.

Since second-wave feminism of the 1960s/70s, feminist scholars and activists have troubled the relationship between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, problematising the idea that supposed ‘natural’ differences in behaviours were a result of body/biology. There has, consequently, been a significant shift away from essentialised notions of ‘sex’ (Lorber, 1994) towards an understanding of gender as social, multiple, relational, and not fixed. Judith Butler’s work has been enormously influential in these discussions; her analysis of the performative nature of gender, and argument that gender is something that you ‘do’, rather than simply *are*, has been widely taken up by feminist, queer, and poststructural theorists. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler writes ‘if gender is instituted through acts...then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief’ (Butler, 1990, pp. 140–141).

For Butler, these performances are located within a Foucauldian understanding of discourse and relations of power/knowledge (see: Foucault, 1978, 1980). Butler describes the performative as a ‘discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names’ (Butler, 1993, p. 13). Here then, categories of ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ are performative and ‘gender’ comes into being

through the ‘creation’ of the gendered subject that is named. Gender identity, therefore, is understood to be an *effect* of the ongoing and repetitive performances of ‘girl’ and ‘boy’, producing the ‘illusion of genders prior existence’ (Youdell, 2010b, p. 135). Useful here is Kerry Robinson’s (2005) suggestion that ‘the poststructuralist notion that individuals are shifting subjects, who are volatile, contradictory and changing, rather than rational, unified and static beings’ highlights the ongoing complexities of ‘taking up gendered identities’ (Robinson, 2005, p. 23). Conceiving gender in this way allows researchers to engage at the micro-level and explore how subject positions marked by gender are ‘constituted and regulated’ through everyday practices (Youdell, 2010b, p. 135).

Theoretical debates regarding the ‘order’ of the positioning of gender and sexuality continue. Taylor et al. (2011) argue that a ‘binary framework’ persists, some theorists centre sexuality as the precursor to gender construction (Rubin, 1984), whereas others position gender as the category through which sexual subjectivities are produced (Jackson, 1999). Butler (1999) has cogently argued that, although ‘the effort to separate the study of sexuality from the study of gender has been an important move to make’ (p. 13), it also ‘keeps us from asking certain crucial questions about the formation of sexuality across genders’ (p. 17). For Renold (2005), this thinking has produced a disruption of the ‘linear story that there is first a sexed subject which expresses itself through gender and then through sexuality’ (p. 8). Butler’s analysis points to the instability of heterosexuality and gender and highlights how the maintenance of each relies on a contrasting Other through the heterosexual matrix and subsequent policing of Other sexual/gendered identities (Butler, 1993). This concept provided a useful frame for Emma Renold to understand her participants’ behaviour. She suggests the ‘power *and* fragility of normative gender/sexual identities and the costs and consequences of transgressing gender/sexual boundaries are central themes in children’s own accounts, where “doing gender” is simultaneously “doing sexuality”’ (Renold, 2005, p. 8, emphasis in original).

Another important consideration for my feminist and queer approach has been the sustained debate on the concept of ‘intersectionality’. Intersectionality arose from Black feminist and critical race theorist critiques of what was seen as a silencing around race and ethnicity by the women’s movement in the 1970/80’s (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2014). For bell hooks (2014), a defining feature of the early feminist movement was its acceptance of ‘the reality that gender, race, and class combined determined female destiny’ but understanding ‘how this should concretely shape and inform feminist practice’ (hooks, 2014, p. xiii) has been an ongoing challenge. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) is often credited with the formulation of the term ‘intersectionality’ (Nash, 2019), deploying it as an analytic framework that attempts to address feminism’s tendency to ‘treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis’ (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139).

Instead, intersectionality draws attention to the ways power and inequalities operate through the intersection of systems and structures that simultaneously oppress and privilege people. Since its inception, the utility of an intersectionality framework has been widely debated across different academic disciplines (Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). While some point to the potential strengths of its ‘ambiguity and open-endedness’ (Davis, 2008, p. 67), there is also a risk, as Jennifer Nash (2019) describes, of becoming preoccupied with ‘intersectionality’s imagined end goal of capturing an impossible “etc.”’ (p.15) that ultimately fails to comprehend the complexity of shifting power in the social world. Cognisant of such debates, I take up Ahmed’s (2017) proposition that intersectionality is the ‘starting point, the point from which we must proceed if we are to offer an account of how power works’ (p. 5).

I have documented the genesis of intersectional approaches as linked to Black feminist and First Nations scholars, work that continues to inform my personal feminism, and that I have critically engaged with and embedded in my fieldwork design and analysis. Bringing together

an intersectional feminism with my queer orientation provides a framework for critiquing the intersection of genders and sexualities through participants experiences, affects, and relations. This serves as a reminder, that just like gender and sexuality, power is not static. And that young people, based upon the different identity categories they occupy, or the different spaces they are in, have access to this power in different ways. So, while this study explores themes related specifically to gender and sexuality, and often centres gender and/or sexuality in the identification of issues and everyday practices related to intimacy, the aim has been to investigate this in such a way that also takes account of the intersection of these identities.

With such considerations in mind and building upon the scholarship I reviewed in Chapter Two, my approach is, therefore, grounded in a feminist, intersectional account of identity that brings to the fore the lived experiences of gender, sexuality and power through participant narratives, feelings, and experiences. As such, it recognises ‘the fluidity, complexity, and diversity of changing and transforming gender identities and expressions’ (Bragg et al., 2018). Documenting their approach to researching gender with young people, Bragg et al. (2018) describe how ‘the research team was also keenly aware of how our practices and conceptualisations of “gender” (and other identity markers) create rather than simply “find” gender formations (e.g., by reinforcing gender binaries or categories like girl and boy)’ (Bragg et al., 2018, p. 422). Accordingly, Bragg et al.’s ‘exploratory approach’ prioritised ‘young people’s meaning making practices’ and ‘capture[d] how young people move in and out of gender categories, concepts and cultures’ (p. 422). In broad terms, my approach followed a similar focus on young people’s everyday ‘meaning-making practices’.

The affective dimensions of intimacy and relationships

Lauren Berlant's argument that '[t]he present is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else' (2011, p. 4) is persuasive. Their privileging of affect in this way helped open up for me, new 'ways of seeing' how young people came to understand and navigate intimate relationships in their everyday worlds. Intimate relationships are, in some ways, intrinsically 'affective' yet, as I have argued, young people's intimate relationships are more likely to be judged as risky, potentially dangerous or immature. Further, attending to intimate relations in the present offers insight into not only social relations and ongoing attachments to such gendered norms but also to the profoundly political, public, and collective dimension of the intimate.

These experiences and feelings underline the importance of addressing the affective dimensions of relationships for young people. To provide further context for this study, I now offer a brief overview of the concept of 'affect' and how it is put to work throughout this thesis. I am aware of the various theorisations of affect and contemporary life, a set of diverse theoretical positions often referred to collectively as the 'affective turn' (Clough, 2007). In attempting to characterise this work as such, I am drawn to Ann Cvetkovich's reflections in the introduction to *'Depression: A Public Feeling'* where she states, 'I have to confess, I am somewhat reluctant to use the term *affective turn* because it implies that there is something new about the study of affect when in fact ... this work has been going on for some time' (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 4).

Instead, for Cvetkovich, the 'new' in the affective turn has come to symbolise a growing body of scholarship engaging with Deleuzian concepts of 'affect' (Colebrook, 2005; Coleman & Ringrose, 2013; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2010). In the field of gender and education research, the work of Giles Deleuze has been highly influential (Ringrose & Renold, 2014; Youdell,

2010a), and particularly for proponents of new materialist notions of affect as ‘force, intensity, or the capacity to move or be moved’ (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 4). A clear distinction is often made between ‘affect’ and ‘emotion’ whereby ‘affect’ denotes ‘noncognitive processes’, while ‘emotion’ refers to ‘socially constructed behavior’ (Cvetkovich, 2014, p. 15). For some, the new materialist turn to affect has provided the space to resist, what they see as, the tendency of poststructural accounts to position the subject as ‘simply captured and/or fixed within the structural/discursive order’ (Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012, p. 8). Instead, it offers ontological accounts that attempt to move beyond such dualisms to ‘decentre politics from human agency, question the primacy of rational forces and tend to the material’ (Barnwell, 2020, p. 3).

Through critical engagement with the work of Eve Sedgwick (2003) and Brian Massumi (2002), Clare Hemmings (2005) critiques what she describes as these scholars positioning of affect as ‘autonomous’ or being outside social structures which, she argues, fails to account for the ways affect manifests as ‘a central mechanism of social reproduction’ (Hemmings, 2005, p. 551). Instead, Hemmings argues, there ‘are affective responses that strengthen rather than challenge a dominant social order’ (Hemmings, 2005, p. 551) and she suggests that the analytic value of affect exists precisely in the ‘extent that it is not autonomous’ (p.565) from social meaning/production. I find Hemming’s assessment of Sedgwick and Massumi persuasive; consequently, it informs my approach to affect.

Similarly, for Sara Ahmed, affect is not something that ‘stands apart or has autonomy’ from social structures, rather its analytic value lies in the insight it offers into the ‘messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds’ (Ahmed, 2010a, p. 30). To be affected by something, according to Ahmed (2010a), is to ‘evaluate that thing’ (p. 29). For example, we cannot experience ‘good affects’ if we do not already associate that *object*, such as an intimate relationship, with *already being* good. As she so lucidly argues, ‘attention to emotions allows

us to address the question of how subjects become *invested* in particular structures’ (Ahmed, 2014, p. 12). For Ahmed then, affect is ‘what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects’ (p. 29). This framing is particularly fruitful for the aims of this thesis. It provides a way to explore the ongoing attachment (and resistance) to gender norms and persistent inequalities as elaborated in Chapters One and Two.

Examining the experiential, relational and affective learning of young people is one way to gain insight into how they come to be attached to such norms and ideas while also allowing attention to any ambivalences and minor shifts in these attachments. Indeed, in an attempt to remedy what she describes as the ‘whiteness’ of affect, Nash (2019) notes that ‘one of the tremendous insights of affect theory has been its invitation to consider how structures of domination feel, and to suggest that simply naming structures fails to do justice to how they move against (and inside of) our bodies (Nash, 2019, p. 30). Here, Ahmed’s provocation to ask, ‘what do emotions do?’ rather than asking, ‘what are emotions?’ (2014, p. 4) is illuminating. The task then becomes less about naming the emotions (although this is part of it) and more a matter of exploring what they propel participants to do or consider, along with the aspects of the emotions that are shared. In framing the thesis fieldwork, I have thus been guided by queer scholarship on affect (Ahmed, 2014; Berlant, 2011; Muñoz, 2009) as a way to ‘document and revalue non-normative ways of living’ (Cvetkovich, 2007, p. 461).

Having explained the conceptual resources that drove the fieldwork analysis and, so, framed the thesis, I next explicate the ‘youth-centred approach’ that informed the study design.

A youth-centred approach

Julie McLeod (2010) has observed that youth studies is an interdisciplinary field that ‘somewhat paradoxically produces, critiques, and deconstructs’ (2010, p. 249) the identities and categories upon which it is established. For me, this paradox coalesces around notions of ‘becoming’. As a concept, ‘becoming’ is understood in diverse ways, across various disciplinary traditions, from developmental psychology to continental philosophy. Deleuzian notions of ‘becoming’ have gained considerable currency in feminist and youth studies and, according to Claire Colebrook, not only shift focus from questions of being to becoming but also seek to transcend such dualisms (2002, p. 125). Here, ‘becoming as transformation’ is not a matter of ‘forms transforming into another or different form[s]’ rather, it is seen as ‘constantly processual, constantly transforming relations’ (Coleman, 2008, p. 168). For Rosi Braidotti (1993, 2002), the abundance and constant flux of these possible transformations offer subjects a ‘multiplicity of possible differences’ (p.71) for becoming, whereby identity is always in process (Braidotti, 1993).

In this research, however, I have been more influenced by a cultural studies notion of ‘becoming’ which, McLeod and Yates (2006) argue, offers an ‘alternative to essentialist discourses of “being” and ideas of identity as fixed, and emphasizes identity as productive, fluid, dynamic yet also historically and socially located’ (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 77). For Stuart Hall (1996), the process of becoming is not ““who we are” or “where we came from”, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves’ (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Such conceptualisations have been useful for approaching my primary research question about how young people *come to* understand and experience intimacy (and genders and sexualities), a process I argue is connected to processes of identity making and learning and cannot be understood as separate from notions of what has

come before, the present and ideas of the future.

Writing about the frequent positioning in youth research of ‘queer youths’ as risky or deviant, Susan Talburt (2004) asks:

Rather than containing youth in adult narratives, how might we avoid repeating identities?

How can we encourage practices that do not depend on the intelligibility that dominant adult narratives presume to be necessary? How might adults come to see the identities we and youth adopt as creative rather than as evolving copies? (Talburt, 2004, p. 35).

This is an important provocation for this thesis and one that has shaped my methodological approach. Informed by poststructural conceptualisations of young people as social agents (Allen, 2008; Davies, 1991; Lesko, 2012) who have the ‘capacity and agency to analyze their social context, to engage critical research collectively, and to challenge and resist the forces impeding their possibilities for liberation’ (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 4), the study developed a ‘youth-centred’ approach. A vast range of methodological scholarship has documented the dynamics of power relationships between researcher and researched in research settings which can often shut down discussion, rather than create space for dialogue (Fine, 1994; Lather, 1992; Phoenix, 1994; Vera-Gray, 2017). In response, the ‘youth-centred’ approach I describe below employs participatory and arts-based/visual methodologies to develop a deliberately eclectic mix of research strategies that aimed to create research spaces which allowed young people to narrate their understandings and experiences of intimacy from different angles. This approach sought to yield understandings of the everyday lives of my participants and prioritised the performative, situated and fluid experiences and identities they shared with me at different times and in different ways. A further consideration was the need to develop particular research methods that were also appropriate to and possible within the school environment where I was conducting my research.

Participatory methodologies align with the feminist, intersectional and queer underpinnings of this project (Fine & Torre, 2019), as well as its youth-centred approach (Camarota & Fine, 2008). Participatory methods are frequently used in public health research (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Mitchell & Sommer, 2016; Vaughan, 2014) and have also been influential in educational research (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Coll et al., 2018; Renold, 2016, 2018). A large body of participatory research draws on the work of radical community educator Paulo Freire which has, at its basis, a recognition of the intrinsic value of people's own knowledge and the importance of beginning research from the vantage point of participants (Freire, 1970). This approach involves explicit acknowledgement, at all points of the research, of people's capacity to participate in research as 'agents rather than objects', thus often orientating research towards 'empowerment' goals (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1670). The role of the researcher typically changes from one of 'director' to that of 'facilitator and catalyst' and participants are engaged in the research with the understanding that they are 'owners of their own knowledge and empowered to take action'. Priorities for change and action are usually established jointly by the participants and their community (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1670). According to Cornwall and Jewkes, a Freirean approach is 'directly concerned with the relations of power which permeate relations between the researcher and those whom it involves and concerns' (p.1670). Due to the time constraints of doctoral research as well as the realities of engaging in school-based research (which I explain further below), this research was not wholly 'participatory'. For example, while I have attempted to privilege the perspectives of my participants, it is important to note that *I* set the agenda for the research, *I* wrote the research questions and *I* alone have analysed the data. So, while some aspects of empowerment may have been realised by participants by virtue of the discussions, this was not a key, intended outcome of this research.

While participatory research often calls on traditional qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and, increasingly, visual methods, for Cornwall and Jewkes, ‘what is distinctive about participatory research is not the methods, but the methodological contexts of their application’ (1995, p. 1667). Vaughan (2014) proposes this involves generating a space for participants to ‘co-construct a new understanding of the world and use this understanding to act upon this context.’ (p. 185). My own thinking was particularly influenced by Louisa Allen’s (2009b) research into school-based sexualities, in which she utilised participant-generated images and a visual photo diary approach. The initial design of my study built upon this work and intended to use similar methods. Providing young people with the opportunity to control the camera, according to Allen, supports a ‘youth-centred methodology that values young people’s perspectives and attempts to centre them in understanding social phenomena’ (Allen, 2009, p. 550). This is especially relevant, Allen argues, for sensitive discussions around sexuality and relationships as it provides a non-verbal opportunity to engage with ‘embarrassing’ topics and to help ‘illuminate an esoteric object like “sexual cultures”’ (2009b, p. 549). Ultimately, as I explain below, my original plan, with its fully participatory and action-oriented approach, was not approved by the Victorian Department of Education (DET). Thus, while the approved research design did not reflect what some might consider to be a truly ‘participatory’ approach, in that I designed the research and undertook analysis myself, I was able to retain and adapt some of the essential qualities of participatory and visual/arts-based research in my final design and to do so in ways that were possible and permitted within the school setting. In this adaptive process, I was guided by the work of others who have navigated similar challenges.

In the section below, I describe and reflect on the process of gaining approval to conduct my school-based research and the methodological adaptations I made.

School-based feminist research with young people; challenges and resistances

The research was initially approved by the *Education, Fine Arts, Music & Business Human Ethics Sub-Committee* at the University of Melbourne, in the standard time frame without substantive queries. However, the next step in the review process was to submit the project application to the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) for approval; a requirement for all school-based research in the state of Victoria. While I started this process anticipating minor delays – knowing this is often the case with ‘sensitive research’ – I assumed that my application would be met with similar outcomes to that of the University process. Fast forward an agonising six months and, while the project eventually gained clearance from the DET, this was only possible after a protracted series of discussions and a rather significant modification to the project design, scope, and rationale: namely, the removal of participant-generated images as part of the research design. I was informed that the participant-generated photography task posed too great a risk to participants.

Many scholars have written on the challenges of undertaking school-based research, noting researching matters related to gender and sexuality in school spaces is particularly fraught (Allen et al., 2014; Carboni & Bhana, 2017; Ollis et al., 2019). Given the ‘public feelings’ connected to moral panics around young people, gender and sexuality (Talbert, 2018), and the discourses of risk and protection that simultaneously circulate, this type of research is often labelled as inherently controversial and/or risky (Allen et al., 2014). As noted in Chapter One, further context for the timing of my research was that, concurrently, a marriage equality debate was underway on the national political stage and there was also intense public scrutiny during the Safe Schools debate. At the time, there was also heightened public and media attention to the ‘dangers’ of sexting for young people in schooling following some high profile ‘revenge porn’ incidents among secondary school students. The DET was thus concerned with the risk

of inappropriate images circulating. My approval application to DET was, therefore, read and reviewed in a context of moral panics related to young people and to sexuality more broadly, and a cultural narrative that positioned young people as intrinsically ‘at risk’ and in need of protection. As I have been arguing, schools have consistently been identified as key sites for meaning-making related to gender, sexuality, and intimacy (Allen, 2005b; Renold, 2005), and this is a critical context for understanding the response from DET to my study design.

My experience of the process of securing approval to conduct this research in schools illustrated some of the ‘sticky’ (Ahmed, 2014) qualities of the topic, the approach I had designed and the challenges of school-based research. For me, having to negotiate approval throughout this protracted time served to re-frame the temporal boundaries of my research: that is, the beginning and the end time of my ‘data collection’ and what I was originally conceptualising as ‘data’. While exposing significant frustrations – some of which I was unable to overcome – this experience has perhaps resulted in a richer and more diverse range of ‘research data’ than I had originally anticipated, even before my ‘fieldwork’ had technically begun. For example, these challenges also provided a glimpse into what it must be like for the young people in schools caught, as they were, between more open and proliferating talk about sex and relationships, particularly in an online space, and a ‘shut-it-down’ protectionist discourse arising from moral panics and a desire to create particular types of citizens of the future. It also exposed a tension around the type of research I wanted to do, a type of research that has been successfully undertaken in school settings in the past (Allen, 2005a, 2012a; Johnson et al., 2016), and what was ultimately approved. This process, and the historical moment in which I was doing my research, raised questions for me; not just about the ways in which certain types of empirical work in specific spaces are foreclosed, but also what is required to make them even possible. I now document the methods that were eventually approved by the DET.

Engaging participatory and arts-based tools

Research exploring the methodological possibilities of researching *with* young people has identified the powerful role repeated research encounters play in challenging power relations between researcher/participants while also enhancing feelings of trust and rapport with participants (Holland et al., 2010). Trust and rapport are of particular importance when discussing ‘sensitive’ issues related to intimacy and sexuality with young people (Pascoe, 2007; Retallack et al., 2016; Ringrose et al., 2013). In their research exploring the everyday lives of young people living in care, Join-Lambert, Boddy and Thomson (2020) undertook repeated (two or three) interviews with young people over a period of six to twelve weeks. Labelling this a ‘shortitudinal approach’, they found this to be particularly generative for their participants, who traditionally had very little power in research processes, to exert a level of control over the research. In particular, in the weeks between interviews, they were able to ‘anticipate’ the topics and also determine what they might like to share with the researchers (Join-Lambert et al., 2020). Although unaware of the term at the time of designing this research, thinking with Join-Lambert et al., I can now retrospectively characterise the approach I adopted as a form of ‘shortitudinal research’, given I had regular contact with the participants over an eight-month period.

To encourage participant-led practices with young people, Renold (2006) employed unstructured, informal, and participant-led exploratory group interviews, or what she referred to as ‘ethnographic conversations’ (p. 491). While I am not positioning my research within ethnography specifically, Renold’s account of her approach has been useful in conceptualising my own desire to engage in group work with young people. In Renold’s research, these ‘ethnographic conversations’ often went in unexpected directions, allowing her participants to ‘freely discuss what they felt to be important and significant to them’ (Renold, 2002, p. 418).

Renold argues that this provides ‘close’ insight into young people’s ‘social worlds’ (Renold, 2006, p. 491) through intimate access to participants’ ‘more private thoughts, experiences, and relationships’ (Renold, 2002, p. 418). A similar approach was employed by Sally Holland (2010) and colleagues to enable ‘young people to lead in choosing which aspects of daily life they wished to share’ (p. 364) which they regard as a particularly useful way of avoiding the ‘fixed categorisation’ that is often placed upon young people in research contexts. In addition, working with LGBTIQ+ young people through an approach that promotes collaboration and participant-led discussions has been identified as encouraging research that moves beyond generating ‘wounded’ discourses from young people (Coll et al., 2018). Holland et al. (2010), noted that, within such spaces, the informal conversations *between* students also produced insightful, productive, and rich data that may not have been accessible through standard one-to-one interviews or focus group methods (Mannay, 2016). This was a particularly salient consideration for my project, given the interpersonal and often private nature of what I was hoping to explore with participants.

Within my planned research group sessions, I was also interested in engaging with creative and arts-based methods to give participants some control over the direction of the research, promote discussions among participants and offer an alternative and more informal way of engaging with the research. Patricia Leavy (2015) suggests that arts-based methods ‘address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways’ (p. 4), noting the diversity of approaches this includes, such as engaging with (but not limited to) literary, music, and visual arts methods. For Leavy, the flexibility and creativity of this approach enables an attention to affect, promotes active participation with participants, and thus accesses ‘multiple meanings, opening up multiplicity in meaning-making instead of pushing authoritative claims’ (Leavy, 2015, p. 26); all of which were vital considerations for my approach.

Arts-based approaches have been frequently used in school research exploring genders and sexualities (Cahill et al., 2015; Renold, 2019). Elly Scrine (2017, 2019) in their work exploring gender-based violence in schools, reveals the opportunities for creative approaches to broaden the exploration of gender and sexuality with young people beyond institutionally imposed and ‘policed’ notions of gender as ‘fixed’ and/or ‘binary’. Instead, using song lyrics and song writing workshops, Scrine notes, provided insight into the ‘new practices and terminologies’ that young people were developing ‘to understand themselves and contemporary gender cultures’ (Scrine, 2019, p. 13). This approach elucidated critical and, at times, confronting analysis from the participants, and it both reflected and grappled with the multiplicity of young people’s experiences and identities (Scrine, 2017). Sarah Bragg and David Buckingham (2008) used ‘scrapbooks’ or ‘found-image collages’ to explore the ways in which young people engaged with sexual media. This research was conducted in schools and, they argue, enabled responses from students beyond what might be considered academically appropriate. Participants were able to write about themselves in the scrapbooks in ways they were often unable to speak about in the interviews, particularly around ‘sensitive issues’ such as sex and sexualities. However, Bragg and Buckingham also caution that such artefacts are ‘not a neutral tool’ and are instead produced as part of a research process that may also reflect the participants’ awareness of the ‘institutional context of the research or the audience for which they were writing’ (2008, p. 127). That is, participants may feel the need to provide responses that are appropriate to the school environment.

Importantly, Sally Holland (2010) and colleagues caution against the assumption that *all* participatory research produces better, richer data, arguing that ‘researchers must anticipate ethical and practical implications and maintain a reflexive awareness of how power differences interplay in sometimes surprising ways.’ (p. 373). Participants may also anticipate desired responses or not feel as agentic as the researcher assumes/desires. These approaches, despite

aiming to be participatory and respectful of participants' agency, can also face similar risks and limitations as other forms of research (Mannay, 2013). That is, they are not inherently exempt from the power dynamics and restrictions arising from institutional contexts (Allen, 2009a), even when they self-consciously seek to minimise the impact of such factors and create avenues for diverse and participant-led contributions. For example, this may be a particular issue in school-based research where institutional barriers may make it difficult for the researcher to fully challenge power imbalances where the subject positions of adult/young person remain and are difficult to dislodge (Fox, 2013). I attend below to some of the specific challenges I experienced in the school.

Methods

Having explained some of the ethical and practical contexts that defined what was possible for me to do in my study, I now elaborate the details of the project design. I capture some of the methodological compromises that were necessary throughout this project – from design and original intent to working at the school. This provides a practical illustration of the messiness of research as well as a reflection on the challenges of actually doing the research.

To reiterate, the key research questions this study sought to address, and which underpinned the project design were:

1. How do young people, aged 14-16 and attending school in metropolitan Melbourne, come to understand, negotiate and experience intimate relationships?
 - a. What is the combination of factors that influence their everyday understandings, narratives and sense-making about these relationships?
 - b. What is the role of genders and sexualities in these processes?
2. What are useful methodological and conceptual approaches for investigating this?
 - a. How to build understandings of this outside predominant discourses of risk, harm and immaturity?

The school setting: Waratah College

The community of Waratah is a popular tourist destination, located on the outer reaches of Melbourne and known for its nearby vineyards, local food produce and rugged coastline. The school itself is one of two large, co-educational, public, secondary schools in the area, with over 1,600 students. The students pride themselves on being at the better of the two institutions, with one student telling me: *'No one really wants to go to Evandale. It's just got a bad reputation. Really bad one.'* There is no train service in Waratah, so most students take the bus to get to school or, in fact, to travel anywhere around the area. For some, the bus ride to school is forty minutes or longer if they come from further away in order to avoid going to Evandale. Most of the parents at Waratah are employed in the local tourism industry, trades or healthcare and social services – careers many of my participants also saw themselves entering. According to the 2016 Australian census, almost eighty percent of Waratah residents were born in Australia¹⁵, with English, Australian, and Irish the most commonly identified ancestries (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).¹⁶.

As a white-settler researcher living and working on the stolen lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation,¹⁷ it is important I acknowledge how race is 'present' and not 'present' in my work. Throughout my research, I did not ask questions directly or exclusively about race, nor did participants raise these matters in an explicit way. While this does not mean race was not an issue for participants, this superficial silence nevertheless points to the lived reality of embodying an unquestioned whiteness as the norm (Moreton-Robinson, 2000a, 2000b). For example, during his individual interview, Jeremiah

¹⁵ Compared to Greater Melbourne where just under 60 percent of residents were born in Australia (followed by India, China and England).

¹⁶ I have used the broader ABS website as this reference so as not to identify the location of Waratah College.

¹⁷ The Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation are the Traditional Custodians of the land on which I live and work.

noted that, when it comes to gender equality, it is ‘evident from looking back in time how much has changed’. He explained that while there is still ‘work’ to be done, ‘even with [...] racial equality’ he is ‘looking forward to what is coming’. When I ask if ‘racial equality’ is something that is considered much at Waratah College, he tells me ‘nah, not really’ and goes on to say that ‘you haven’t really got like, you’ve got like Maoris and then that’s pretty much it’. While he was aware of racial inequalities and injustices more broadly, for Jeremiah, the only ‘raced’ people at Waratah College were the visibly not-white, Maori students.

This is reflective of what Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson has described as an ‘invisible racialised subject position’, one that fails to conceive of whiteness as a ‘category of difference’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2000a, p. xxii). Reviewing the work of white Australian feminists, Moreton-Robinson (2000a) argues that whiteness is ‘the subject position from which most feminists speak, write, and theorise about “difference”’ (p.181). Sara Ahmed depicts whiteness ‘as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space, and what they “can do”’ (Ahmed, 2007). While my participants may face multiple axes of oppression – whether based on their genders, sexualities, and/or class – they simultaneously possess power as afforded through histories of white supremacy and associated privileges.

In the context of delays introduced by the protracted ethics approval process I have described above, it was important to find a school contact who was willing to support the research. After discussions with a number of schools that did not eventuate for a variety of reasons, I was contacted by Sally, the Year 9 co-ordinator at Waratah College. Sally had just completed a day of training on teaching Respectful Relationships, where a colleague of mine mentioned my work and handed over my contact details. I initially had a preference for undertaking the research in a school without an explicit or developed curriculum programme in this area. This

was because I had hoped that my project might create fresh opportunities for students to express their views at school, in a context where these matters had not been a formal part of the school curriculum. Additionally, I thought that this would also minimise any sense that activities undertaken during the group sessions were connected to schoolwork. Students told me that Waratah College was a member of the Safe Schools Coalition and a designated ‘safe space’ for LGBTIQ+ students and I saw evidence of the ‘Queer Straight Alliance’ around the school, with flyers for ‘Wear it Purple Day’¹⁸ and the like. My understanding from Alex – a student participant – however, was that the extent of Waratah College’s role in the Safe School programme was displaying the rainbow flag in the main office and acquiring the formal designation of ‘safe space’, rather than adopting the broader curriculum additions which were also part of the programme. However, the students also proudly told me of how, on the day of the marriage equality results being announced, the school flew the rainbow flag in celebration.

Participants and recruitment

In total, there were 14 students who participated regularly and over a period of eight months. While slightly fewer participants than I had initially expected, the size of the participant cohort is consistent with qualitative research approaches that adopt intensive research over time and allows for close up study of participant narratives and responses. Given the number and range of repeat research sessions with each participant (individually and in small groups), I generated a large and rich corpus of qualitative data.

I commenced my time in the school at the end of Term 3 in 2017 (the latter part of the school year) while participants were in year 9 (aged 14-16) and I returned to the school in the following

¹⁸ ‘Wear it Purple Day’ was developed in response to global stories of bullying and harassment young people experienced based on the lack of acceptance of their sexualities and gender identities. Schools, workplaces, universities, and community organisations wear purple on a chosen day in a show of support and recognition for LGBTIQ+ young people (<https://www.wearitpurple.org/>).

year as they moved into year 10. Initially, I had wanted to hold an information/recruitment session with the students, as a way to introduce myself, my background and outline the project and the participation requirements. Unfortunately, the two teachers I initially met with did not think this was necessary or, indeed, a good idea so it was decided that each of the four year-level co-ordinators would recruit participants on my behalf. This meant that I was unable to explain the project to potential participants and had to rely on the teachers' rendering of the research. This is just one of the challenges I encountered in doing school-based research. When I asked the students how they were chosen by the co-ordinators, most just said '*oh, Miss Evans gave me the form in pastoral care*'; however, Alice mentioned that she was recruited from a detention session. I had initially hoped for 20 participants, and the teachers told me they gave out more of the forms but, for whatever reason, only a few students chose to participate.

When we first met, Sally, my main teacher contact at the school and one of the year 9 (students aged usually 15) co-ordinators, told me she was really keen to introduce the Respectful Relationships curriculum into the school but had difficulty finding the time – both in terms of her own labour, and within the already overburdened curriculum, a common concern of teachers (Ollis, 2014). Sally had managed to run a couple of sessions about gender norms within the pastoral care sessions – which are split into 'boys' and 'girls' classes – but, in our initial phone call, she noted that she would like to do much more. Another year level co-ordinator, Tom, a Maths and Science specialist teacher, was concerned with how I would ensure a 'representative' sample. It is argued that gatekeepers 'can help or hinder research depending upon their personal thoughts on the validity of the research and its value, as well as their approach to the welfare of the people in their charge' (Reeves, 2010, p. 317). Although none of the participants were recruited through Tom, I cannot be certain of how he (or Sally) explained my research to the other year level co-ordinators. Similarly, while both Sally and Tom were incredibly supportive of my research, I have no way of knowing how they promoted

the research to potential participants, why they chose potential participants, or how they explained the research to potential participants¹⁹. It is likely this had an impact on participant numbers. Despite there being fewer students than I had hoped for, all those who joined stayed involved in the project across the two periods of extended fieldwork.

At the first whole group session (and subsequent sessions with new participants), I explained the purpose of the research, what we would be doing, how we would be doing it, as well as the completely voluntary and opt-in nature of the project. As all participants were under 18 (aged 14-16), it was a formal requirement specified by the ethics review process for consent to be first gained through forms sent home to their parents/guardians, with a plain language (information) statement and letter from the principal. Given the number of participants and the nature of the discussions and planned activities, I divided the participants into two small groups. At the first group session for each group, I further explained the research, the activities I proposed, and the overall research aims. In addition to seeking parent/guardian consent – a formal requirement – I also sought verbal and written consent from each participant; while this was not a formal requirement in terms of institutional ethical protocols, it was consistent with my approach to ensure participants' agency was properly recognised and they felt genuinely engaged (Coyne, 2010; Whittington, 2019). Participants in Group Two chose their own pseudonyms but, at the request of Group One participants, I chose their pseudonyms. I will introduce some participants in further detail below and a summary of participants' details is provided (see appendix 1 for list).

¹⁹ Each participant was given a set of Plain Language Statements and Consent Forms. One version was written for students and one version for parents (see appendix 3).

Group Sessions

I was at the school for eight months. During this time, I undertook six sessions with Group One and five with Group Two, plus individual interviews with participants. The group sessions ran consecutively. I began working with Group One first, between September-November 2017; and Group Two from November 2017-March 2018. Not all participants attended each group session – some were suspended, on camp, had extra-curricular activities or just simply forgot. Stacey²⁰, for instance, participated in the first session with Group Two then I never saw her again. As participation was entirely voluntary and I did not want to create a situation which made the students feel pressured to participate, I chose not to chase Stacey up. The other students brought it up in one session, so I reiterated the voluntary nature of the project and we left it at that.

Researchers exploring gender, sexuality, and schooling (Holland et al., 2010; Retallack et al., 2016; Renold, 2006) have long utilised semi-structured group sessions as an interactive data collection method to privilege the experiences of young people. Through drawing on participatory and arts-based methodologies (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Holland et al., 2010), my aim with the group sessions was to provide a space that facilitated participant-led exploration of the research topics, while also attempting to encourage participant perspectives over adult-conceived notions, including my own.

While the group sessions remained focused on ‘intimate relationships’, participants pushed me into spaces I had not considered or had not considered as being a specific element of my project. In part, this was about defining the terms that were important to them and/or forcing me to

²⁰ I have chosen this pseudonym for Stacey as she wasn’t present at the session where the rest of the group chose their pseudonyms.

think differently about the constructs I had theorised, such as intimacy.

For each group session, I was prepared with an ice-breaker activity. This was followed by a more substantial activity designed to address the topic chosen to be the focus for that day. My choice of topic for each session was based on issues identified in the scholarly literature and from emerging issues in the wider public arena as well as responding to participants' priorities and interests as expressed in the sessions. I constantly renegotiated the research activities based upon my intended aims of creating meaningful participation for the young people, as well as a research practice that remained open to participants' needs and views (see also: Ollis et al., 2019).

Table 1*Group One activity overview*

Group One	Participants Present	Theme	Activities
Session One	Alex, Alice, Summer, Dylan	Relationship Goals – what does a good relationship look like?	Introduction to research and researcher; create #relationshipgoals collages; facilitate discussion of collages
Session Two	Alex, Alice, Summer, Dylan	Healthy relationships	Participants use post-it notes to write down healthy/unhealthy traits
Session Three	Alex, Alice, Summer, Dylan	Social Media	Collage of ‘how I use social media in my relationships’
Session Four	Alex, Dylan	Media representations of relationships	Watch various clips from different TV shows
Session Five	Alex, Summer, Dylan	Gender and power in relationships	Continuum: what is most important to me in relationships? What are my most important relationships?
Session Six	Alex, Summer, Dylan	Young people’s priorities	Word association Collage/drawing/letter-writing on the ‘key’ message for adults

Table 2*Group Two activity overview*

Group Two	Participants	Theme	Activities
Session One	Tim Tam, Patrisha, Bob, Starburst, Stacey, Arnott, Keith McIntosh, Arnott	Relationship Goals – what does a good relationship look like?	Introduction to research and researcher; create #relationshipgoals collages; facilitate discussion of collages
Session Two	Starburst, Arnott, Keith McIntosh, Arnott, Dan	Healthy relationships	Participants use post-it notes to write down healthy/unhealthy traits
Session Three	Tim Tam, Patrisha, Bob, Starburst, Stacey, Arnott, Keith McIntosh, Arnott, Jeremiah	Defining relationships; gender norms	Media discussion prompts: video of Drake stopping a concert;
Session Four	Tim Tam, Patrisha, Bob, Starburst, Stacey, Arnott, Keith McIntosh, Arnott, Jeremiah	Social Media	‘Wannabe activity’ Collage of ‘how I use social media in my relationships’ ²¹
Session Five	Tim Tam, Patrisha, Bob, Starburst, Stacey, Arnott, Keith McIntosh, Arnott, Jeremiah	Young people’s priorities, gender, and power in relationships	Write/draw a response to newspaper headlines

²¹ Participants decided they wanted to talk about this instead of doing the activity.

In the following chapters, I describe the session activities in relation to specific analyses of the fieldwork. Some of the activities involved the production of what I have named ‘visual artefacts’ and, where appropriate, I have included photographs of the visual artefacts in the chapters to show how they connect to analysis. The activities varied and did not always involve *producing* something visual; for example, I used video clips as a prompt to facilitate discussion about relationship dynamics, or a whiteboard where we broke down what defined good/bad relationships and the things that fit in between. While the student participants let me know if they were not interested in an activity, it was often because they just wanted to discuss topics without me getting in their way or they had steered the discussion away from topics I had considered ‘important’. Such flexibility was, of course, a goal of this research.

Over time, it became clear that Group Two participants were more likely to abandon the set activities to pursue their own discussions or answer my general prompts rather than the activities. In contrast, Group One felt, at times, collectively more eager to please so were more likely to stick to the activities. After each group session, I sat in my car or at a local café where I wrote my field notes and reflections on each session. I noted the ways the group had interacted, how they had responded to the activities (or not) and what they had wanted to discuss further. There were activities that I attempted with Group One that I did not introduce for Group Two after deciding that they had not worked very well or were based on adult-conceived ideas about intimacy, rather than students’ own experiences and interests. Regardless of the activities, the overall themes discussed with each group remained similar.

Doing the fieldwork

My knowledge of the scholarship on researching with young people on ‘sensitive’ topics meant I was initially concerned with how they would respond to me. I was anxious to please and be liked, thinking that if I managed both of these things, this would be a way to gain both their respect and their co-operation. I was also prepared to be confronted by a group of young people who did not want to be there or who responded with silence to my questions and activities or prompting. Although this turned out to be far from the case, I was often preoccupied with balancing the fun or creative side of the ‘activities’ with being accessible to as many participants as possible. I made sure to dress in clothes I felt would distinguish me from the teachers. I wore something casual, that I knew would be ‘popular’, and the girls often commented on what I was wearing - ‘*nice earrings Miss*’ - and told me it was something they discussed together after I left. I would often arrive at the school to see some of the young people waiting for me at the co-ordinator’s office.

There were also more informal encounters around the designated research times. For example, Alice found me in the corridor months after our last interview to show me her newly peroxided hair and tell me that she had finally dumped her former boyfriend, Dylan; Amy happily ran up to me to tell me about her new boyfriend as I was waiting to interview Jeremiah; and Alex walked me to my car after every group session. Although I did not consider these encounters to be formal data, I did take notes of these interactions and they did inform my analysis and provide further context to participants’ identities, experiences, and feelings.

Of course, the methods I used for this research morphed, along with the research itself, responsive to the institutional context and participants’ input. I thought often about what the original project might have evolved into had the ethics approval journey progressed in the way I had initially envisaged. Some participants would have loved the chance to go away and take

photos, while others would have been scared of the need to produce *something*; a *something* that was profound and insightful, simultaneously capturing their *entire* experience and directly responding to my research aims: a truly impossible task. Similar pressures may also exist in other methods, but it would perhaps have been felt more acutely in this type of research with the need to be simultaneously creative and then public in the group sessions.

My final session with Group One provided some insight into this matter. I wanted to create a space that allowed participants to end our time together on a topic that was important to each of them. Three of the participants (Summer, Alex, and Dylan) were with me in the room and I opened the session by posing a few questions to them – *what is the key message you want me to take away? What do you wish adults knew about what it's like to be a young person?* I gave them total flexibility with how they responded. I offered examples of poems, drawings, songs, and letters but left it completely up to them, and placed the paper, pencils, glue, and magazines on the table. Summer put on some music and they each grabbed a piece of A4 paper and sat contemplating their approach. Summer knew immediately what she wanted to do, asked me if she could speak about ‘dick pics’ and got busy sketching the outlines of her drawing; she flourished with the space to be creative²². Dylan found it hard but decided to focus on gender norms – his go-to topic; he drew stick figures and had them talking to one another, largely repeating the themes of ‘The Mask You Live In’ movie²³ he had seen as part of a pastoral care class earlier in the year. This was a movie that very much shaped his own understanding of gender and, more specifically, gender norms. Despite being an avid illustrator, who had shared some of their work with me in the past, Alex found this an almost impossible task. The focus

²² I will discuss this image further in Chapter Six and Seven.

²³ This movie was shown to the ‘boys’ pastoral care group as part of one of their sessions. Described on the website <http://therepresentationproject.org/film/the-mask-you-live-in-film/> as: ‘*The Mask You Live In*’ follows boys and young men as they struggle to stay true to themselves while negotiating America’s narrow definition of masculinity.’ Dylan spoke of this film frequently and it was often his reference point for discussions of gender and masculinity.

on producing something that they felt I ‘wanted’ was too much, so I posed several different options to them to try and help them along. But instead, they just became frustrated and somewhat defeated by the task. While what Alex produced was incredibly insightful, it felt like a distressing experience for them and was in stark contrast to the relaxed conversations we shared *after* the sessions, or in the sessions where there was less pressure to produce something individually.

walking to my car: fieldnotes

As our first group session ended, the other students left quickly with the bell. But Alex remained, helping me pack up the mess left by the others in their haste to get to lunch. We chatted absentmindedly as we picked up scraps of paper and Alex shyly accepted the leftover lollies I offered. “Can I walk with you to your car?” they asked, and thus began our post-session weekly ritual. We walked through the playground, past the couples making out, the boys from year 7 chasing each other around the trees, the teachers screaming at them to stop from the steps of the demountable building. We laughed at them, and Alex turned to me and asked “sorry, I don’t mean to be rude, but how old are you?” I laughed, “I’m 32” and Alex continued: “I don’t want to call you old, but as an old person, what do you think of gender norms?” The generational jab didn’t go unnoticed, and the question wasn’t completely unrelated to what we had discussed in the session mere moments earlier, and yet it threw me, perhaps as a result of me underestimating the depth of knowledge young people like Alex possessed. “To be honest, I think they’re rubbish” was the response that I provided, not a particularly scholarly answer, but it was part shock, and part intuition that this was the kind of response that Alex was seeking. “Oh good, I’m so happy to hear you say that”, they said, “because everything I do is to smash gender norms”. Alex continued, explaining to me that they were non-binary, and as a result, were very interested in gender norms and excited about

the opportunity to talk and think about things like relationships. I got the sense they felt freer without not only the other students, but also without the recording device and the expectation of the 'research'. Or more importantly, what they thought I wanted from the research. I did too – I was a bundle of nerves for the first session, the build up after all of the delays – and it was reassuring that Alex was able to have chats like this with me. The second week after the session, I apologised to them for not asking which pronouns they used. This question seemed to shock Alex who replied 'no adult has ever asked me this before' which simultaneously broke my heart and reinforced the responsibility of this project.

I share this aspect of my fieldnotes to highlight the benefits of the shortitudinal approach to establish and maintain rapport with participants (Join-Lambert et al., 2020) and to bring to the fore some of my own ongoing ethical considerations. After my work finished with this group, Alex would always approach me in the school, asking how everything was going, and what I was doing there. It was nice to keep the relationship going - once I was with the new group, they never walked me to my car again, but continued to touch base with me most weeks. These interactions shaped not only the way that I attempted to understand Alex's narratives but also how I engaged with them throughout the research process. Our weekly ritual gave me a chance to connect with Alex and hear some of their frustrations in a space that was not obscured by a recording device, research guidelines or the presence of other students. I felt like they really responded to my presence, more so in those few minutes after class and walking to my car than in our sessions. I felt a sense of responsibility to them, knowing that there were very few adults to whom they had spoken about gender and sexuality, or about their own gender identity as indicated above in the fieldnotes by Alex's response to my question about what their pronouns

were: ‘Wow, no adult has ever asked me that before’. Simultaneously, the marriage equality plebiscite was happening and the focus of much of the ‘debate’ was on the legitimacy of people with identities and desires similar to Alex. This context served as an additional and important ethical reminder throughout the course of this research as I was cautious to not contribute any further distress. This also impacted upon the way I approached our individual research interview, the types of questions I asked, and how I asked them. I often think about how this may have been different had I come into the school just the once and sat down with Alex for a standalone individual interview. Would I have asked more difficult questions? What kind of responses would I have got? Would the candour have been there? Or was I just in the right place at the right time, an adult asking questions they wanted to answer, willing to listen and so it would have made no difference? However, what this does demonstrate is the benefits of the repeat contact that the ‘shortitudinal’ design allowed for, promoting my rapport with participants but also allowing *them* to consider the research and how they would like to engage with it.

Interviews

Group One’s individual interviews were conducted *after* we had completed all their group sessions. For Group Two, interviews commenced some time between the third and final group session. This difference was based on time constraints: all group sessions occurred during the timetabled pastoral care sessions, which alternated between Monday and Friday every other week. This meant I ran out of time to complete the group sessions before the end of the second term of work with Group Two, so I started conducting their interviews before finishing the group sessions.

The individual interviews with participants allowed for an extension of the issues raised in the ‘ethnographic encounters’ (Renold, 2006) we had created in the group sessions. The interviews

provided the opportunity to dig deeper with participants and discuss more personal stories of intimacy. They also gave a chance for those who may have been reticent to speak-up in group sessions to open up more (Holland et al., 2010). Thus, drawing from feminist approaches to interviewing that problematise the construction of researchers as ‘expert’ and participants as ‘passive’ (Hesse-Biber, 2006; Oakley, 1981), I prioritised notions of rapport, respect, and empathy (Ezzy, 2010). Rapport, in particular, was built upon previous research encounters which I have described as a benefit of the shortitudinal approach. Of course, rapport is not a given in the research process and rapport alone does not completely disrupt hierarchical power relations (Thwaites, 2017). Further, this was not a matter of ‘faking’ friendship with participants (Dunscombe & Jessop, 2002) in order to gain access to the ‘data’. Rather, rapport was developed in my open and exploratory approach to the group sessions that allowed participants to recognise I was interested in *their* perspectives, rather than cross-checking my own (see also: Ezzy, 2010).

Consistent with Susan Driver’s (2007) work with ‘queer youth’, my intention in holding group sessions and individual interviews was also to explore how young people are ‘continually theorizing identity and power as they struggle to recognise and speak themselves through personal and collective discourses’ (Driver, 2007, p. 315). This provided participants with the opportunity to reflect upon our group discussions and come to the individual interviews with something to share (although, possibly, many participants only thought about the research while we were together). Further to my understanding of young people and their intimacies and identities as being fluid, complex and often moving in and out of categories, I utilised a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. My approach was consistent with the description of qualitative interviews offered by Rubin and Rubin as ‘keeping on target while hanging loose’ (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 42). The diverse range of experiences and identities of the participants often meant that, while we remained on ‘target’, the interviews took different

routes to the questions I had written. Tim Tam, for example, would often trail off in long monologues that would worry me at the time as I watched the clock and worried about the questions *I* thought were important to cover. However, I rarely interrupted him and, on later analysis, his extended responses offered important insight into the ways he was making sense both of my questions and his own experience in ‘real’ time. The rapport I built with the participants meant we were able to bypass the awkwardness often characteristic of initial individual interviews. And the ‘shortitudinal approach’ meant that some participants came to the interviews with something they specifically wanted to tell me, as I elaborate in my fieldwork chapters.

In total, I conducted twelve individual interviews. Only one participant – Dylan – declined to be interviewed. Dylan worked in the canteen at lunchtime and did not want to miss any classes to meet with me (unlike others, who were *very* happy with this chance). I was a little concerned that Dylan’s refusal meant he did not really want to participate in the project at all. However, despite declining an interview early in the project, Dylan, with Alex, was always waiting for me to arrive on the days we had our group sessions, never needing a reminder to participate and never missing a session.

The timeframe I had for each interview was determined by what had been allocated to us by the year level co-ordinator. Whether we met at lunchtime or during class, most interviews ranged between 45 and 60 minutes. When I held the interviews at lunchtime, I offered to buy each participant lunch from the canteen as I did not want them to go hungry, but only one accepted. We often did not have an allocated space in which to conduct the interviews: Jeremiah and I sat outside at a picnic table; Patrisha and I met on the edge of the football oval under a tree; and Alice and I searched the school for a quiet place to sit during our lunchtime interview. We ended up in the corner of a large hall, with students walking in, opening doors,

and with students just outside. While no one would have heard our conversation, I was constantly checking in with her that she was comfortable with being in such an open space ‘I don’t care, I don’t care about these people’, she told me. Summer and I sat in a classroom while a vicious hailstorm erupted outside, which ultimately cut short our interview so she could get to her next class safely.

Issues of concern for participants, especially when they are young and at school, and when raising matters that could cause personal upset, is an important if not always fully acknowledged aspect of the ethics of doing research and in building relationships with participants. While formal approval from ethics committees is essential, there are other ethical dimensions to consider in the type of research I was doing. I now offer some reflections on the ‘ethics in practice’ I encountered during my fieldwork (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 261; see also: Renold et al., 2008).

Ethics in practice

Throughout this chapter, I have identified ‘ethically important moments’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 265) and attempted to explore the relational and reflexive components of navigating and prioritising ethical research. One of the most challenging aspects of this project was my relationship with the school and, more specifically, with the teachers. As I described above, the school leadership and teachers were incredibly supportive and excited for the work to be taking place, however they were frequently busy and communication with them was often patchy. I found it hard to know when to press them for a response and when to hold off. This made it difficult for me to make plans with the students but, also, as indicated above, to undertake the research in safe and secure locations. In one of my first group sessions (Group One), one of the teachers (not my main contact at the school) came in and sat down with us. I had met her, briefly, earlier in the day and she was one of the year level co-ordinators who had handed out

the forms to students. I did not want to offend her, as I was wary of the precarity of my place in the school, so I just shut down the discussion and asked her some questions instead. We resumed the session after she left. This never happened again. Nonetheless, I asked my main contact at the school for a more private location for the group sessions although this was not always provided.

As I noted above, I was reliant upon the teachers to communicate with the students. In my conversations with teachers, I was sometimes shocked by some of the comments they made to me about the students. Thus, having to recruit through adult ‘gatekeepers’, generated an ethical challenge to the participatory aims of my research. Skelton (2008) suggests that adult gatekeepers who hold powerful positions within institutions, such as teachers, trouble notions of informed consent. Similarly, it was these same adults who made decisions about who was informed about my research. This means that some young people may have been deliberately excluded from my project (Skelton, 2008). As an additional risk in this approach, young people may have felt coerced to participate by their teachers’ insistence. In an attempt to address this, I approached consent as ‘relational, dynamic, and always in negotiation’ (Renold et al., 2008, p. 432). For me, this involved, as well as the ‘formal’ consent obtained from participants (see above), checking in with participants before each session/interview and re-stating the aims of the research and how the data would be disseminated. I never assumed their ongoing consent and I also never chased participants up if they were missing from a session. As stated elsewhere, participants were often waiting for me when I arrived for the sessions or interviews. As I waited for the time sessions were due to start, I would stand aside so they did not feel pressured to speak with me.

Some of the challenges of group-based research include managing difficult conversations, power imbalances between participants and disclosures of violence. Although the goal of this

research was not to uncover discourses of violence or personalised experiences of violence, I was acutely aware of the possibility of a disclosure of sexual and/or gender-based violence (Ollis, 2014). I have chosen not to write more specifically about the one disclosure that did occur, or to identify the participant, because it was not recorded as part of the research, it does not add to my findings, and I do not want to spectacularise this trauma. The disclosure happened *during* a group session, but *outside* the research space, away from other participants. I note this here only because of my own ethical concerns with the way things progressed afterwards and the institutional response; or lack thereof. After listening to the participant and offering support and further resources, they told me the school and their parents had already been informed. However, it was clear that the participant was incredibly distressed and feeling unsupported. I explained a number of options and we decided to go together to find out from a teacher what further support the school could offer. The teacher's response was incredibly dismissive, if not disbelieving, which seemed to compound the participants' distress. They were told to get to lunch, and the school counsellor would be in touch when they had time. I had to follow the institutional procedures of the school and hope that they would do the best for this student, but I wrote in my notes at the time that I felt like 'I failed'. While I was able to check in with the participant on subsequent visits and ensure they were receiving the support they needed, albeit not from the school, this was a harsh reminder of the limitations of being an outsider in school-based research. Further, and more importantly, it also brings into question the capacity of schools to sensitively and appropriately handle these kinds of disclosures which, as I have suggested, are likely to occur when delivering Respectful Relationships curriculum (Ollis, 2014; Scrine, 2018).

Building an analysis

Informed by the intersectional feminism and queer orientation outlined earlier in the chapter and the key conceptual resources discussed throughout, I build an inductive analysis in my thesis that moves critically between the fieldwork and relevant scholarship. The analysis is necessarily attuned to the specifics of the research site context, the insights and observations generated by my fieldwork, and framed by a focus on questions of youth as becoming, knowledge in the making, intimacy narratives and affects. This resonates with Jennifer Mason's (2011) formulation of 'facet methodology' as a way of remaining 'sensitive to the different forms of data' (p.83) generated through this project. Mason employs the metaphor of a cut gemstone to represent the overall research question or object of research, with the different methodological interventions producing facets 'capable of casting and refracting light in a variety of ways that help to define the overall object of concern by creating flashes of insight' (p.75). In this project, the 'facets' are data drawn from interviews, group sessions and visual artefacts generated through group sessions. Attending to the 'flashes of insight' rather than seeking the 'production of "maximum data" of a descriptive kind' (Mason, 2011, p. 75) allowed me to move between analysis of the data collected from the different methods without privileging one over the other. For Mason, this is achieved through 'processes of interpretation, analysis and writing' and, rather than adopting a pre-determined formula, it 'involves researchers thinking, imagining, and writing their way across and through different facets' (2011, p. 81).

I began transcribing my group sessions while I was still in the field. Thinking of this as the initial stage of data analysis (Ezzy, 2003), I began making brief notes or comments about the themes/experiences/ideas I was noticing in our discussions. Alongside these notes, I also started to compile my observations about individual participants and the dynamics of group

sessions. I noted particular things that were said after the sessions that helped provide further context to what the participants were sharing; things like ‘I broke up with my boyfriend last week’ or ‘I live with my grandma’ or ‘If my parents voted No, I would have stolen their ballot’. This was a more ‘literal’ (Mason, 2017) approach to analysis where I attempted to describe key insights or ‘flashes’ as they first became apparent to me.

Eventually, I personally transcribed all interview and group sessions verbatim. I then began an initial process of coding, which was conducted manually, with printed transcripts, colour coded highlighters and more notetaking. This process became more ‘interpretive’ (Mason, 2017), beginning the evolving identification of key themes as I became more immersed in the data. My analysis was an iterative process and I moved between the data, dialogue with scholarship and my research questions and aims to document key themes and patterns. I tried to remain attuned to the rich meaning-making of participants while also cognisant of the research process itself as being a key social site that is not immune to the gendered power relations, and broader social, cultural, and affective context of the research. Guided by these steps, I also produced conceptual schemas (hand-drawn) to bring together the data and the broader literature. Key to my sense-making was also the process of writing: ‘writing is part of the interpretive process through which the theoretical implications of data collection and data analysis are worked out more fully, though never completely’ (Ezzy, 2003, p. 138). For Ezzy, the key here is to engage with data to tell a story while retaining a ‘sense of the complexity and nuance’ (p. 139) or as Patti Lather (2010) suggests, retaining a sense of the ‘messy’.

Reflexivity was a secondary, but no less important, aspect of my meaning-making. I positioned reflexivity as an important component of feminist research at the beginning of this chapter. An example of how this is put to work in the analysis of data is Kathleen Quinlivan’s (2013) description of ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’ as an analytic resource that can help a researcher

question their own normative analysis. Using an example from her own school-based ethnographic research, Quinlivan re-analyses a research incident that occurred in the classroom. Suggesting her intentions at the time of initial analysis were to position the research as a queer ‘emancipatory success story’ (p. 64), Quinlivan argues that, upon review and in response to her own discomfort, she was able to yield alternative conceptual and theoretical resources to confound her ‘own problematic normative assumptions’ (p. 63). This is not merely a matter of following a ‘gut feeling’ but ‘involves a continual revisioning of the potential of theory in making sense of the everyday lives of research participants’ (p. 67).

The way I present my data and analysis in the following chapters reflects the processes I have described here, where I move between and within narratives drawn from individual interviews to a focus on specific participants, group discussions, an in-depth focus on visual artefacts and back again. I use a closer reading of participant narratives where necessary to help describe the context of my interpretations, to provide a rich account of research encounters and/or participant narratives, or as a way to illuminate particular ‘flashes of insight’ (Mason, 2011, p.75). Attending to these flashes was also a way to attend to some of the quiet, or slower stories of intimacies, genders, or sexualities. It promoted a close reading of specific interactions, discussions, or feelings that drew out the ambivalences or nuances that I might otherwise have overlooked. I draw from my fieldwork notes to illuminate my own affective renderings as they occurred at the time as well as my initial descriptions of participants and our in-between conversations and/or observations.

These approaches to analysis and the conceptual tools I have described supported my aims to resist pathologising young people’s practices and to move beyond adult-conceived narratives. They also facilitated my attempts to remain open to, what Lauren Berlant describes as, ‘the messy dynamics of attachment, self-continuity, and the reproduction of life that are the material

scenes of living on in the present’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 15). However, it is important to note that, although I have sought to privilege the perspectives of young people related to their understandings and experiences of intimacy, this does not mean that I do so with an ‘uncritical acceptance’ of what they share with me (Frosh et al., 2001). This is not to say that I approached my participants with scepticism. Rather, my aim was to draw from the data and my conceptual resources to, as McLeod suggests, ‘bring together different angles and perspectives, of interpreting one comment against another, or of comparing individual experiences with broader social patterns and cultural practices and with debates in the relevant research literature, and so on’ (McLeod, 2000, p. 49).

Conclusion

This chapter has documented the rationale for the theoretical and methodological choices I made in the framing, design, and analysis of my study and, in particular, detailed the parameters and purposes of my fieldwork. I have explicated the ethical dimensions of the study; from the protracted formal institutional approval processes to the complicated and messy reality of conducting research on ‘sensitive topics’ in schools and to the ongoing ethical decisions made in the course of doing the fieldwork. I explained how, guided by feminist, queer, and intersectional approaches, I engaged with concepts of affect to inform the design of a youth-centred, arts-based and participatory approach. Having mapped out how my research questions were translated into a study design, I now turn to the first of my fieldwork chapters and examine how young people attempt to make sense of and define their intimate relationships.

CHAPTER FOUR: LOCATING UNDERSTANDINGS OF INTIMACY

Introduction

Although I undertook this research within a school setting, much of the learning described in the following chapters occurred outside formal teaching or school-based curriculum. Some of the narratives, feelings, and experiences I explore in this thesis might not immediately or traditionally be identified as constituting school-based student learning. In the literature review, I examined research that showed how schools, as sites for positive and effective relationship and sexuality education, had consistently failed to engage with and respond to the diverse needs of young people. Young people were often forced to take matters into their own hands and to take on responsibility for their own education: this was a view held by participants in my research. Throughout this thesis I develop an analysis of how young people negotiated their own forms of learning, and in this chapter, I attend specifically to the ways young people attempted to define and make sense of their own intimacy experiences and those of their peers. In public discourse, policy, and curriculum young people's intimacies and sexualities have been predominantly framed along heteronormative notions of adolescent risk and immaturity, such that these discourses and feelings have come to represent the 'facts' of youth experience (Fields, 2008; Lamb, 2013).

In the following discussion, I explore the way participants attempt to make sense of their intimate relationships, including their desires, expectations, and experiences and attend to some of the resources they draw upon for this sense-making. To do this, I have drawn from Elizabeth Ellsworth's (2005) work in *Places of Learning* and her considerations of pedagogy as moving beyond 'already-known ideas, curriculums, or knowledges' (p. 27). In particular, she asks 'what it might mean to think of pedagogy not in relation to a thing made but to knowledge in

the making' (p. 1). She further argues that 'focusing on the means and conditions, the environments and events of knowledge in the making ... opens an exploration into the experience of the learning self' (p. 1). The affective and embodied experiences of the 'learning self,' or what Ellsworth (2005) labels the '*thinking-feeling*' sensation of '*making sense*,' are what come to make up 'the thing we call knowledge' (p. 1). As I show, this has been a useful framework to help unpack participants' sense-making alongside the influence of dominant narratives of youth experience that have come to reflect knowledge as a 'thing made' – that is, of knowledge as established facts which can be found in school curriculum programs. I identified four distinct yet overlapping narratives that participants drew upon in their attempts to understand 'youth relationships': relationships and the good life; 'puppy love'; sex and intimacy; and an affective and hard to name sense of 'more than.' I look at the various ways participants attempted to define intimate relationships, including how they see their future, and whether and how they see intimacy playing a role in their imagination of the 'good life.' In considering notions of 'puppy love,' I argue that young people drew upon 'public feelings' (Talburt, 2018) about youth sexuality that position 'adolescent' desires as temporary and uncontrollable, and in doing so typically cast youth relationships as 'not real' or as sites of danger. This serves to strengthen the way that sex (and attendant one-sided connotations of sex as risk and danger) 'sticks' to (Ahmed, 2014) and regulates understandings of youthful intimacy. Yet participants' narratives reveal other dimensions of intimacy that the dominant, simplistic accounts overlook, including relations of care and closeness and the diversity of experiences and desires.

I opened this thesis with analysis of the way young people *also* position youth relationships as based upon hormones and as 'not real' for two main reasons. Firstly, in order to challenge such dismissive characterisations, I explore the ways young people take up, advance and/or resist such ideas themselves. Secondly, I argue that such a framing has repercussions for the way

participants make sense of *and* experience intimacy in the everyday, and thus, it provides an important context for this thesis. However, in reframing intimacy knowledge as *in the making* (Ellsworth, 2005) the focus shifts to understanding the tensions, ambivalences and even contradictions in the way participants describe their own understandings, experiences, and expectations and thus to how constructions of youthful intimacy are open to remaking.

I now turn to how my participants imagined the future ‘good life’ and the place of intimate relationships.

Intimacy and the future ‘good life’

‘I want to be a YouTuber,’ Keith McIntosh quickly and excitedly responded when I asked her where she sees herself in 20 years: this is ‘because the YouTubers I watch make me feel happy and they make me laugh and I want to do the same thing.’ I opened most of my individual interviews with this same question about where the students saw themselves in 20 years. Some, like Keith, were excited by the chance to tell me about their goals, while others struggled with the question, like Tim Tam who put his hands to his face and exclaimed through laughter: ‘Oh my god, oh my god, actually that’s terrifying.’ Or Arnott who said ‘20 years? Gee, how old will I be? 35? I’m going to be ancient’; we both laughed and then she composed her answer: ‘I don’t know what I want to do. Maybe a parent. I don’t know. A good career, I want a good career. Not just working part time or something. A steady career.’

Similarly, Dan told me, ‘I’d have a steady job. I’d be out of home, probably renting because who can afford a house these days. That’s about as good as I can do.’ While for Amy, ‘I have no idea [...] hopefully I have a good job, that’s about it.’ These concerns about precarious employment and home ownership are well founded; social data highlights the high rates of unemployment and underemployment of young Australians (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2017) and decreasing rates of home ownership (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare,

2020). They also evoke Berlant's (2011) arguments about the 'fading' fantasy of the good life found in late modern societies and economies in the wake of neo-liberal reforms. While continuing to hope for a 'good job' sometime in the future, many of my young participants had a sobering assessment of the difficulties of attaining that, but at the same time they also saw their future beyond only options for work and careers, with travel and relationships key themes.

As we sat under a tree by the football oval, Patrisha, in her typical no-nonsense way, told me how she'd always imagined herself living somewhere else, 'not Australia.' School was one of those 'important things, that are gonna get you places,' and her favourite subjects were biology and law, which she planned on studying at university in a few years' time. I asked her when she imagines her future, whether being in a relationship is something she prioritises:

Patrisha: Like, when I'm older I wanna be married and have a kid, or whatever, but yeah.

Sam: You've got a few things to do first?

Patrisha: Yeah, like go travelling, definitely.

Travelling was also important for Bob, who shared a similar sense of a kind of reproductive inevitability that Patrisha alluded to. Although Bob was not as concerned about her career, 'I'll probably have a little job,' she also told me that in 20 years' time she will:

...probably [be] traveling and experiencing life before times up. If you get what I mean? Just making the most out of what time you've got until you have to become a parent, or you have to get a job or something like that. [...] Just experiencing everything I can in the time possible.

For Bob, 'making the most' and 'experiencing everything' in the time before you 'have to' become a parent indicates some ambivalence towards that imagined end goal. For both Patrisha

and Bob, motherhood is presented as an inevitability, although they both wanted to experience the world and/or establish a career before becoming parents. Diane Negra (2009) argues that these sort of desires are reflective of a postfeminist landscape that presents individualised choices (such as travel and a career) to young women but accords legitimacy to them only once motherhood and heterosexual partnership is attained. Similarly, for Amanda Rossie (2020) postfeminism encourages women to ‘pursue individual passions’ but fails to ‘remove these gendered imperatives from women’s lives altogether’ (p. 27). Such dilemmas continue to be navigated by young women today, as illustrated by Patrisha and Bob. Even as they were aware of the different forces and influences acting upon them, despite an evident ambivalence towards presumed destinies, there was an equally clear desire to experience a life of independence, albeit one framed within heteronormative temporal boundaries.

Bob further elaborated, telling me, ‘I’ve always wanted kids. Probably after 30, I’d say, but I want two kids and a good family kind of thing.’ I asked her what she meant by a ‘good family’ and she reflected:

A good husband and I’d want to be in a solid relationship before I start anything. I won’t want to have kids with someone that I don’t know if I want to be with them forever. I’d want someone to be there, so I’d raise the kids with someone. Like have a father or have someone there for them.

Such thinking recalls Sara Ahmed’s (2010b) arguments about ‘heterosexual love’ and its relationship to the ‘happy ending,’ something Ahmed describes as ‘what life is aimed toward, about what gives life direction or purpose, or as what drives a story’ (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 90). In some ways, Jeremiah echoed this thinking, although he was less certain about his eventual desire to become a parent:

Oh, 20 years, so what's that, I'll be like, 35... I dunno, cos like, I'm not sure if I want kids or whatever, but like, it's one of those things. Like, at the moment, I don't want kids or anything, but it's more like, time will tell.

In his response, Jeremiah recognised that having children is a marker of the good life, and thus assumed that his ambivalence about having children was something he would grow out of, as if his own ambivalence was a sign of his immaturity. Tim Tam's longer response also brings forth some of these dilemmas. He told me:

...um, see I don't really know because like, with my boyfriend right now, I cannot see us like, being together forever, like...realistically, not gonna happen [laughs]. Like, he's awesome and I love him, but, you know, um...yeah, I don't, cos I don't think like, I want to get married, even though it's like, legalised now, I don't think I wanna get married. just because it's like...like, that probably will change, BUT, at the moment, it's like, I don't really know, I don't really think about any of that stuff, like, I know that I wanna, like, have a family. But I don't know if that necessarily means like, husband and kids? Like, like my sister will have kids probably, and, I, I dunno, I'll just be like the gay uncle [laughs] I guess, and like, I have um, cos I'm really close with my cousins and everything, so I think I'll probably always have like a family and I'll probably have friends that count as family.

Tim Tam demonstrated a broad understanding of 'family,' drawing on ideas of 'queer kin' in ways that might 'challenge the heterorelational social order' (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004, p. 154). Like Jeremiah, Tim Tam considered that his desire to abstain from marriage is something he would probably reassess as he grew older, and especially given that, as he observed, gay marriage '*it's legalised now.*' As Heather Love (2007) notes, extending the norms of heterosexual marriage to include LGBTIQ+ peoples makes it an institution that 'also promises to make us happy' (p. 53). For Love (2007), the promise is tied to a 'fantasy about being normal' (p. 53) and suggests that an acceptance into this institution and its proximity to

happiness is something that queer people are *supposed* to want (see also: Ahmed, 2010b; Berlant & Warner, 1998). Such recognition is evident in Tim Tam's response, where he acknowledged this possibility or perhaps responsibility, even though he stopped short of wholeheartedly embracing it.

Similarly, Keith McIntosh and Alex recognised that a romantic/dating relationship was something they were supposed to desire but was not something either of them identified as a strong goal for their futures. After she made a number of remarks about not being interested in a relationship, I asked Keith McIntosh if she thought this might be something that could change as she gets older: 'I don't really know, it depends if I find someone. But I like being by myself.' I nodded in agreement, and she added 'surrounded by cats of course.'

At this point of the interview, I worried about my own focus on dating and/or romantic relationships and what this might feel like for Keith and her professed lack of interest. I put this question to her, and she told me, 'I think your questions are quite well informed.' While reassuring, this was not really what I meant by the question. But I let it go, not wanting to put pressure on Keith McIntosh to explain her sexuality, while her words from earlier in our interview reminded me that you, 'don't want to ask' that of young people. Similarly, I asked Alex – who was in a relationship they described to me as 'queer' – whether the heteronormative focus of many of the research sessions and discussions was an issue for them: 'it doesn't bother me that much, I don't really want to use this word, but it sort of is the norm.' Alex thought that 'it's changing' but I also worry that Alex – who was always on guard to give me, in their words, the 'right' answer – was attempting to spare my feelings. While Alex was in a relationship then, it was not something they envisaged for their future and they were cognisant that this is not, in their own words, the 'norm.' When I asked if there were any relationships they aspired to, they responded:

Alex: The single people! [laughs] honestly, I'd just rather be by myself.

Sam: So what you want, you haven't seen it anywhere else?

Alex: Yeah, no, I haven't seen it.

These examples indicated the ways in which young people were well aware of dominant good life narratives and normative aspirations for the future. For some young people, the idea of future relationships, or more specifically *the* future relationship, played a central role in who they saw themselves becoming, or how they saw themselves in their becoming adult or their eventual arrival to adulthood. For others, it was not their primary consideration, but remained what they saw as an inevitable outcome, and they tended to imagine approaching it via a relatively linear, heteronormative pathway. Imagining this particular form of a good life, as I elaborate throughout, also played a role in how young people experienced their intimate relationships in the present – who they chose, why they chose to have a relationship, how they chose to relate to others, and for some, why they may abstain from intimate relationships.

Many of these responses also suggested some ambivalence about the shape that participants' choices and desires took. This was most starkly evident in Tim Tam, Alex, and Keith's responses, but there appeared to be an affective ambivalence throughout many participant narratives here. I note these ambivalences because they highlight the pervasive heteronormative narrative associated with dominant fantasies of the 'good life' while also providing insight into how the script or fantasy may be changing, or at the very least, hint at some resistance to its dominance. As Berlant (2008, 2012) has argued, it is the ambivalence of attachment to ideas of the 'good life' that creates space for social transformation; it is the promise of this space – both for young people's future expectations as well as their experiences in the present – that I interrogate in this thesis.

‘Puppy love’: hormones, popularity, and time?

I now turn from participants’ contemplations of the future good life and the role of intimate relationships to consider the ways they understood, defined, and experienced relationships in the present. Although interconnected, attending to these narratives separately brings forth the temporal nuance and diversity of their understandings and experiences and also allows me to highlight the ways young people come to such understandings. I asked Group Two:

Sam: What is a relationship now when you're 14 or 15?

Dan: It kinda depends, there's a lot, a lot of those they say they're in a relationship kinda thing and then they don't hang out or they don't talk and they don't even [inaudible]

Starburst: Yeah, definitely.

Sam: And what do you call it?

Dan: Well, they'll call it a relationship cos that's what they want to think it is.

Continuing this theme, for Dan, it was not the case that dating was a complete waste of time, but that most of the relationships of his peers were ‘pretty childish, immature.’ These were, according to him, ‘just young high school relationships that don’t really mean much.’ While he did acknowledge that ‘there’s a bit of a range’ between ‘the kids that don’t really know how to have a relationship’ with ‘no real meaning or connection behind it’ and those that ‘do have like a proper connection,’ he was largely dismissive of his peers’ relationships. For Dan, his peers’ age and youthfulness dictated their desires to be in a relationship and inherently limited their capacity to conduct a ‘proper’ one. He reflected on his first (and only) relationship:

...but if we had been a bit older when we got into a relationship would have gone better because we are still both a bit young to be in a relationship. So now I'm not looking, but just waiting.

In particular, he saw the 'immaturity' of his peers exhibited through desires which he related directly to puberty. This was presented by Dan as something over which young people had limited influence, yet it acted as a driver behind many (if not all) of their relationships.

Sam: Why do you think you would want to be in a relationship?

Dan: Are we talking like specific age group? Are we talking about me? Because most of my age group to younger, my year level to younger is kind of just cause they are teenagers going through puberty and they just want a girlfriend.

Keith McIntosh also noted the role 'hormones' played in the relationships of her peers:

Keith: But I think having it being in a relationship, you feel special because someone actually likes you for who you are on a romantic level.

Sam: What makes it romantic?

Keith: Um, hormones!

Keith: I think my friends' kind of asked me like, "Oh, you just still not in a relationship?" I'm like, yeah, because I'm fine by myself and I guess I am not as hormonal as you guys. And they're like, "mmmm"

Like Dan, Keith saw 'hormones' as a motivating force for being in a relationship. Despite her own lack of desire for a relationship, Keith McIntosh was more enthusiastic about the affective capacity of relationships to make you 'feel special.' In contrast, Dan dismissed such desires as temporally marked, out of young people's control, and something they would grow out of once they reach maturity or adulthood. While part of my focus is to unpack and trouble such claims,

Dan's assessment is reflective of constructions of risk and caution that permeate wider social discourses on young people's relationships and sexuality (Allen, 2007). In such accounts, young people are unable to be trusted because of their inability to control their hormones and therefore require interventions or the imposition of external control (Bay-Cheng, 2003).

The positioning of youth relationships by some young people as 'not real' was also related by them specifically to the length of time of these relationships, with most of them considered to be too brief to be taken seriously or to be seen as authentic, as this discussion between Stacey and Bob suggests:

Stacey: Especially if like, you're relationship goals if you've been together for, longer than 2 years

Bob: Yeah, it's like 'relationship goals' but if you've been together for a month, it's like 'nup'

In our discussions, Patrisha used her hardworking focus on schooling as a way to distinguish herself from the 'popular kids,' who she believed were more interested in parties and status than any actual learning, whereas she 'can do both – I see my friends and focus on school.' Patrisha had not been in a relationship herself, and was sceptical about the authenticity of some of her peers' relationships, telling me: 'It's not really "real love," well I don't know what it is, cos I've never experienced "love," but it looks like puppy love.'

Patrisha identified 'puppy love' as relationships that were based on 'physical attraction' alone, and which, according to her, therefore 'don't really mean anything.' She told me, 'if I was gonna be in a relationship, I would want it to be like, both, emotional and physical.' She expressed some doubt as to whether this would be achievable for a young person who she characterised as being preoccupied with popularity and looking good. While Patrisha conceded

that some of the ‘popular kids’ did have ‘really tight relationships,’ for the most part she remained unconvinced of their capacity for ‘real love’:

Sam: So, to be popular, you need to be in a relationship? It's like, good to be in a relationship or?

Patrisha: Yeah, it adds to the status, like the whole stereotype

The idea of relationships providing ‘status’ was also something that Jeremiah and Summer alluded to in their individual interviews:

Summer: That's probably the most, the key thing to a healthy relationship for me, is not brag about it and to not make it that you need to be in a relationship to be popular. Or you don't need to have the hottest person to be popular, kind of thing. So, I think that's probably the most healthy thing in a relationship, is to not brag and...

Jeremiah: A lot of people will also be, like, in relationships for the social status.

This notion of relationships’ connection to popularity hinted at the currency placed on being in a relationship, and further underlined the connection between intimate relationships and fantasies of the good life. Such thinking positioned intimacy or dating relationships as a form of what I am calling ‘popularity capital,’ borrowing from the Bourdieusian concept of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; see also: Asquith, 2019; Warin, 2015). Popularity capital can be accumulated through public recognition of dating relationships and converted into social and emotional value – as in the ‘stereotype’ that Patrisha described, young people acquired popularity capital through their relationships. I extend this argument in subsequent chapters, but my point here is that young people appeared to question the legitimacy/authenticity of youthful relationships because gaining access to popularity capital was suspected to be the

‘real’ motivation for entering into a relationship rather than a more authentic love or care for someone. ‘Puppy love’ was thus represented as a diminished relationship, presented or dismissed as something entered into because of physical attraction or for aesthetic purposes related to securing popularity and social capital. It therefore, in their eyes, could not be considered ‘real love.’

Borrowing from Patrisha, throughout this thesis I refer to such accounts of youthful relationships as not real, as collectively ‘puppy love.’ Notions of ‘puppy love’ reveal that participants saw some motivations for entering into a relationship (puberty, physical attraction, and popularity) as insufficient to sustain a ‘real’ relationship on their own. ‘Puppy love’ was further characterised by a perceived ephemerality, based on the experience of short-term relationships and an expectation that these relationships would not last beyond youth. Their ephemeral nature enhanced the sense of youth relationships as ‘not real,’ and therefore easily dismissed by some participants as not really mattering. The perceived temporary character of youthful relationships was powerfully linked as well to a view of ‘youth’ itself as a transition, a brief stopover on the way to ‘becoming’ who they really are (or who they are meant to be or bound to become) (Talburt & Lesko, 2011). ‘Puppy love’ then, is firmly situated in an historically influential notion of ‘adolescence,’ an identity that is temporally and spatially bound, as ‘young high school relationships that don’t really mean much’ (Dan). Here, youthful relationships are simultaneously conceived of as oppositional to adulthood, while also being measured against the cultural norms for a successful (heterosexual) adulthood and fantasised good life.

In particular, I suggest that these accounts of ‘puppy love’ are illustrative of the ‘public feelings’ (Talburt, 2018) that circulate around young people and their sexualities. The narratives described above highlight the ways such ideas are felt by young people in their

reflections of ‘youth relationships’ and while it is not my intention to further entrench such feelings, it is nevertheless important to consider the ways they impact upon young people’s sense making and attempts to navigate and understand their intimacies and identities. In particular, there are consequences of this dismissive framing of youth relationships as ‘not real,’ as I elaborate in relation to pedagogy and/as experience in Chapter Five.

Youth intimacy is/as sex?

For participants in research Group One, the above accounts of relationships based on bodily and hormonal responses and immature teenage sexuality were reminiscent of the way they saw adults imagining young people’s relationships. In the second group session, I explained to Group One that this research would give them an opportunity to tell adults ‘this is how it is to be a young person’:

Alex: I like that!

Alice: I have one [...] but like, we’re not always, it’s not all about sex and you know-

Dylan: [interrupting] I know, god!

Alice: ...and all that kind of stuff.

Some participants voiced a sense of frustration at the ways the physical act of ‘sex,’ and in particular sex as ‘risk,’ tended to overshadow a lot of discussions about relationships in ways that were at odds with their own experiences and expectations. Summer recalled a conversation with her father:

Oh, that’s like, cos like, parents they’ll be like, very strict. My dad is like “you’re not gonna have a boyfriend until you’re 18” kind of thing and then [...] I think cos older people think it’s all about sex and it’s like, it’s not, like it doesn’t mean as soon as I’m gonna date this

person, I'm gonna have sex with them, every. Single. Day! It's like, it's not about that, but yeah.

The rest of the group shared similar stories of their parents being concerned about their relationships and the potential for them to engage in sexual activity. For Alex, this parental concern was based upon heteronormative assumptions:

[...] which is funny because I'm dating a girl at the moment and um, it's like, my parents know that I'm queer, that um, but, it's a bit weird cos they still think it's about the opposite sex. Like um, like with my friends when I was in primary school, um, I, I always slept in my friend's bed cos we were little kids, and my mum didn't have a problem with that but as soon as it was with the opposite sex, then it would be a no, which is something that I don't really understand.

Alice shared a similar experience with the group, telling us it was 'stupid' as she wasn't allowed to have sleepovers with her boyfriend, but was with her girlfriend: 'really like stupid because, like, yeah I can't get pregnant, but like still, stuff can happen. It's not like it's, it's just impossible to do things with a girl, like, I just thought it was really dumb.' Here we see concerns about sexuality directed towards the behaviours of 'girls,' and more specifically, the need to protect them from the dangers of hetero-sex. I use the term 'girls' in quotation marks because Alex is non-binary, however they shared with me that their parents continue to gender them as a 'girl.' It was only the cisgender girls and non-binary participants who shared similar concerns from their parents throughout the research. This is in line with research that positions young, white girls, and in this case misgendered non-binary young people, as most in need of protection (Attwood, 2007; Renold & Ringrose, 2013; Weekes, 2002) from an aggressive male sexuality (Holland et al., 1998).

Participants' discussions of the school curriculum suggest that ideas around heterosexual sex and intimacy are further solidified in the classroom. In his individual interview, Tim Tam noted:

With like, sex ed and everything. Um, which, like they don't really teach us about, I think they should, but they don't, teach us about relationships. They just teach us about the physical stuff, which, um, doesn't need explaining [laughs].

Like Tim Tam, other participants reflected on the curriculum content; as Bob told me, 'you learn about sex ed and all, but you never learn about relationships and how to actually treat a girl or how to treat a guy.' Tim Tam's observation echoed critiques put forth by research into relationship and sexuality education that fail to account for emotional aspects of relationships, despite this being something young people have consistently requested (Allen, 2008; Johnson et al., 2016; Waling et al., 2020). Bob wasn't the only one to make such a clear distinction between 'sex ed' and 'relationships.' When I asked Jeremiah if he had learned about relationships in the classroom, he told me 'the closest thing is sex ed I guess,' where they covered 'the basics' like 'wear a condom.' Dan said they 'learned about the body and all the parts of the body and everything' but 'not really' anything about relationships. Instead, in their experience, formal curriculum programs tended to frame intimate relationships based on the 'puppy love' narrative: as young, hormonal, hypersexual, and lacking any self-control (and therefore in need of external control). Intimacy was only considered in terms of risk and if pleasure or desire were talked about, it was only in relation to risky sexual behaviour, echoing the relationship and sexuality literature (Allen, 2013; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Lamb et al., 2013; Rasmussen, 2012).

Returning to the discussion with Group One, Alice attempted to elaborate on what she meant about relationships not being 'all about sex' and in the process, endeavoured to blur an apparent

distinction between embodied sexual practices and emotional attachment that was reminiscent of discussions about ‘puppy love’:

- Alice: Like the physical part of like sleeping together and stuff it’s more like, just like...
- Summer: Closeness?
- Alice: Yeah, and just like being near each other and like cuddling.
- Summer: Together?
- Alice: Together yeah.

For Alice, the physical closeness was an important aspect of the relationship but defining this only in terms of ‘sex’ was limiting and denied the affective capacity of the ‘closeness’ she shared with her boyfriend. Participants in Group Two also attempted to differentiate between sex and intimacy:

- Sam: Sex and intimacy are different? How? Can you explain that to me?
- Tim Tam: Sex is *physical* intimacy. [emphasis Tim Tam’s]
- Dan: There should be intimacy in sex, but there isn’t always.
- Sam: So, what does intimacy in sex look like?
- Dan: I wouldn’t say it *looks* any different.
- Patrisha: Intimacy is more emotional, than – like, you’ve still got the physical, but you’re adding like the emotional and like-
- Jeremiah: Like, a one-night stand isn’t intimate. A booty call isn’t intimate.

This analysis from participants further attempted to challenge the conflation of intimacy with sex, describing intimacy here as being about ‘something more.’ This referred to a deeply felt connection that extends beyond sex, or a ‘booty call’ – even if this does include sex, the

experience of intimacy is seen to be more than only that.

These accounts draw our attention to the ways sex ‘sticks’ (Ahmed, 2014) to intimacy when it comes to the educational and broader discourses about young people’s intimate relationships. They also highlight how young people attempt to move beyond this particular form of ‘stickiness.’ In the examples I have presented, participants were attempting to rupture and resist this association by dismissing it as an adult-conceived concern, yet I suggest that it continues to be felt in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Ideas like the ones expressed by Summer’s father and furthered through the curriculum – that sex and intimacy are synonymous – are so frequently engaged (Bay-Cheng, 2003) and bolstered by broader discourses about risky youth (McLeod, 2012), that they become *the* story about what ‘intimacy’ looks like for young people. Engaging in sex is framed as an expected and ‘normal’ part of youth ‘development,’ even when intimacy isn’t *only* experienced in this way by young people. Although participants attempted to resist this characterisation, I suggest that the effects are not evenly felt or experienced by all young people (Attwood, 2007; Grant, 2020; Renold & Ringrose, 2013).

Through this socio-cultural expectation, as I will argue below, ‘sex’ sticks and becomes seen as a *thing* that makes intimacy, and therefore relationships, intelligible to young people, despite their feelings, experiences, and understandings suggesting otherwise. Attached to these conceptualisations of intimacy as sex are ideas of sexuality as fixed (Clarke et al., 2018), or at the very least, as fixed to heterosexuality and so any variations of experiences or desires continue to be measured against this ‘norm’ (Berlant and Warner, 1998). Here we see not only an awareness among young people of the ‘public feelings’ about sex and intimacy but also, as Susan Talburt (2018) argues, the ways young people ‘live in worlds in which they too “feel these ideas” as they create sexual subjectivities, identities, and social practices’ (Talburt, 2018, p. xii). To deepen understanding of this complex process, I examine in detail Alice and Alex’s

attempts to describe their intimacy and sexuality experiences and desires.

Sexuality as a 'phase'

Alice 'came out to everyone, and everyone's parents' as bisexual at the end of year 7, during a class presentation of which she was really proud: 'I didn't even write flash cards, I just [did] it off the top of my head [...] That's probably the best thing I've done in my three years! [...] But I just gave my experience.'

Many of the parents and 'kids as well,' questioned the authenticity of Alice's coming out. And she recounted what they said to her: "Oh, that's not real, you're just doing it for like..." and "ohhh, no, it's probably just, you know, you don't really know..."

Alice was struck by the insinuation that her coming out as bisexual was performative, something that she was doing for attention rather than as a genuine expression of what she desired (Fahs, 2009). For Alice, who was dating a girl at the time, it was shocking to be told that maybe her desires were something that would just 'go away.' According to Susan Driver (2007), the desires and identities of queer girls are seen as 'temporary departures from a normative course toward feminine heterosexual adulthood' (p. 7). We see this temporalising of the 'queer girl' in Alice's relations with parents and students following her coming-out, where she is told that her desires are 'not real,' and her identity is one that she 'doesn't really know' – yet. While Alice's becoming may be a work in progress, these comments suggest that despite her own identification as 'bisexual,' Alice is positioned by others as 'not-yet-straight' and her desires as an aberration on her way towards becoming a heterosexual adult. For Whitney Monaghan (2016), the 'queer girl,' 'who must eventually "grow-up" and become a heterosexual woman' (p. 20), is the embodiment of the heteronormative temporal logic that is also 'bound up with heteronormative ideas about adolescent development' (p. 5). These narratives materialised in Alice questioning her sexuality identity, being reluctant to share her

desires because of a shame/fear that these people were right. She told me: 'I thought about it a lot I was like, I dunno I don't want to tell anyone, if it's gonna just go away.'

Alice internalised this logic when she also assumed that her desires were a passing phase. This was intensified when Alice found herself back on what Munoz describes as 'straight time'²⁴ and she 'kind of forgot about it' because she was 'dating a guy' and then 'another guy' and 'it was all just like, guys.' In an attempt to explain her coming to better understand her sexuality, she tells me how her first relationship with a girl in year seven was one where they would 'hardly even kiss, like it was just purely like, feelings'; a characterisation used by most young people to describe their first relationships. It wasn't until she eventually dated another girl, whom she 'would like, hook up with, and that was kind of like, the sexual side of it, so I got like both sides,' that she fully realised that she 'liked it' and was able to more confidently articulate her bisexuality. The way Alice recounts this experience suggests that her bisexuality is made intelligible (to her) only after her engagement in sex with another girl, despite the real feelings she shared for her first girlfriend. Alice reflected that when people ask her now: 'like a lot of people have been asking "are you still bi, cos you're dating a guy" I'm like "yeah" like, I still like girls, I'm just not dating one at the moment.'

For Alice, the absence of sex reinforced the way others had constructed her sexuality as being a 'phase,' and she wondered if she had indeed grown out of it. But it also points to how broader discourses that position young people's relationships as only being about sex actually reinforce this false connection and deny the very real breadth and effect/affect of intimacies that young people experience and desire beyond this association.

²⁴ For Muñoz (2009) the term 'straight time' refers to the 'autonaturalizing temporality' that positions queer subjects as without a future. Within such temporal logics, Muñoz argues, 'the only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality' (p. 22). For Alice, being back on 'straight time' means a return to the linearity of heterosexuality desire and expectation.

Alex told me that it was their girlfriend who wanted to take the relationship from ‘friends’ to something more, although Alex was not too sure what that entailed, or how their relationship was defined. When I asked how long they had been dating, Alex responded ‘I wasn’t counting, but she says it’s two months.’ Alex, who is non-binary and queer, spoke in earlier group sessions about the boundaries of intimacy, questioning how one negotiates or even recognises the difference between friend and lover, sharing that they felt ‘closer to my platonic friends than I do my partner.’ Many participants, as I show below, also had difficulty finding the language to differentiate between a platonic friend and a partner. For Alex, this was somewhat more deliberate because their attempts to make sense of their own emerging sexuality extended beyond what they identified to me as the ‘norm.’ In our individual interview, Alex recounted the night spent at their girlfriend’s house:

...it was fun, um, I know that she wants to go to the next level and everything, but I don’t want to, cos I’m more of a platonic partner. I’m just not really comfortable with the whole sexual aspect, or even romantic aspect of having a relationship. But I know it frustrates her, but I just don’t want to.

I asked Alex how they negotiate this with their girlfriend and, sensing their discomfort, reminded Alex they didn’t have to answer: ‘Yeah, ah, how do we negotiate it? She keeps just saying, “oh I’ll wait, I’ll be patient” but, I, I’m just not comfortable to do that, and she’s ok with that. It’s all good.’

Alex’s narratives are imbued with what Przybylo and Cooper (2014) describe as ‘asexual “resonances” – or traces, touches, instances’ (p. 298; see also: Clarke et al., 2018). I am not attempting to label Alex in order to make their desires intelligible; rather, attending to the ‘resonances’ in Alex’s narratives enables a recognition of the diversity of sexual perspectives. These narratives also offer an insight into the silences – or rather, the ways the focus on ‘sex’

silences, or makes ‘weird’ (in Alex’s terms) other versions of intimacy and/or desire. In particular, as Przybylo and Cooper (2014) note, this focus ‘encourages scepticism of any approach to sexuality that does not question the sociocultural centrality of sex’ (p. 299). This analysis applies to what Alex seeks to describe, where they often expressed confusion about intimacy with friends and yet were very clear in the articulation of their desire to remain a ‘platonic’ partner and not have sex. Later in the discussion, I asked if Alex felt pressure to be in the relationship:

Ah, by her yeah, a little bit. But I think we also worked really well as friends, as better friends, but ah, she keeps saying that she loves me and that she wants to be in a relationship with me, but I say to her, “isn't it frustrating that I won't do anything with you?” and she's like “no I'm patient” and it's, not about being patient, I just don't want to do it, you know. Ah, so yeah, it can be a bit hard. Yeah, but. She's happy then I'm happy, I guess. Hmmm, um, sorry, I think I strayed from the question then...

Throughout our discussions, Alex draws on language reflective of the ‘traces’ (Przybylo and Cooper, 2014) to articulate their position to me: ‘not romantic,’ ‘platonic,’ not the ‘sexual aspect.’ There is no evidence of ambivalence here (only in the ways they are perceived by others), instead, Alex is very clear in their desire to not have sex and assured in the knowledge that this is not going to change. However, it is their attempts to position and understand their intimacies (both those shared with their girlfriend and with their friends), that Alex seems to find confusing. Alex refers to their relationship as ‘a bit weird’ twice in our discussions; not because of their gender or who their partner is, but because the frameworks they have available to make sense of their desires (or lack thereof) continue to attach sex to sexuality, to intimacy, and to relationships. Although admitting to feeling ‘a little bit’ pressured to be in the relationship, Alex reassured me that ‘there’s a lot of communication, which is good,’ however the assumption from Alex’s girlfriend that their lack of desire to have sex is just a phase is also

evident in these narratives. There are very few cultural alternatives for dating relationships that do not include sex (Cover, 2010), and sex continues to be seen as the expected next step when you have been dating for a certain period of time.

My intention is not to paint Alice and Alex as ‘wounded’ (Youdell, 2004) in their attempts to navigate the socio-cultural impacts of sticky sex simply because of their queerness. This narrative is harmful to all young people and not reflective of their diverse experiences and expectations. However, as Jen Gilbert notes, ‘queer youth come to recognize themselves through their proximity to these stories and construct, for themselves, a narrative that is made always in relation to those norms’ (2014, p. xxi). In Alex and Alice’s observations we see the pedagogical and affective force (Ellsworth, 2005) of such narratives and the difficulty of generating meaningful ways of talking about intimacy that are not defined in terms of the intimacy/sexuality equals sex frameworks. For LGBTIQ+ students, this is particularly intensified through the imposition of a heteronormative framework for intimacy (Berlant and Warner, 1998), one that is tied to a linear trajectory of development as highlighted by Alice and Alex’s experiences here.

The stickiness of sex renders silent other aspects of intimacy, including those described above, but also the care, closeness, and an intensely affective yet hard to name ‘more.’ To unpack this further, I now turn to experiences and expectations that extended the simple definitions of intimacy and relationships that prioritise sex and notions of ‘puppy love.’

Intimacy as something ‘more than’

Towards the end of the second last session with Group Two, and as we sat on the floor of the schools’ large performing arts hall, I asked the group if they knew of the Spice Girls: ‘of course we do, Miss,’ someone replied, while Tim Tam and Starburst started singing. I explained the next activity to them, which involved me asking them to finish the lyrics for ‘Wannabe’ –

specifically: *If you wanna be my lover, you gotta*²⁵ – on the pieces of paper I had just handed them.²⁶ The bell rang soon after, and they left their papers scattered where they were sitting and ran off for lunch. The responses varied – with some suggesting you need to have ‘a sense of humour’ (Starburst, Figure 3). Others emphasised young people’s critical and complex considerations of what being a ‘lover’ involved – for example: Bob suggested that she needs ‘time’ before she can be ‘close’ with her ‘lover’; for Tim Tam (Figure 2), it was a sense of humour and respect for other human beings; while for Amy (Figure 4), it was loyalty; and for Arnott (Figure 1), respect and trustworthiness. These short yet sophisticated descriptions disrupt pervasive narratives of young people as naïve about relationships, or as having immature understandings of youth relationships as powered by hormones alone. Instead, we see a slow and deliberate consideration of what is involved in entering into a relationship, where priorities for a potential partner are strongly shaped by expectations for respect, loyalty, and humour. These qualities were consistently identified by young people as ‘goals,’ which, as I explore in Chapter Six, is used as shorthand for an aspirational relationship.

²⁵ The original lyrics to this Spice Girls song are: *If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends. Make it last forever, friendship never ends* (Spice Girls, 1996).

²⁶ I refer to this as ‘Wannabe’ activity also in Chapter 7.

Image 1: Arnott Wannabe Activity

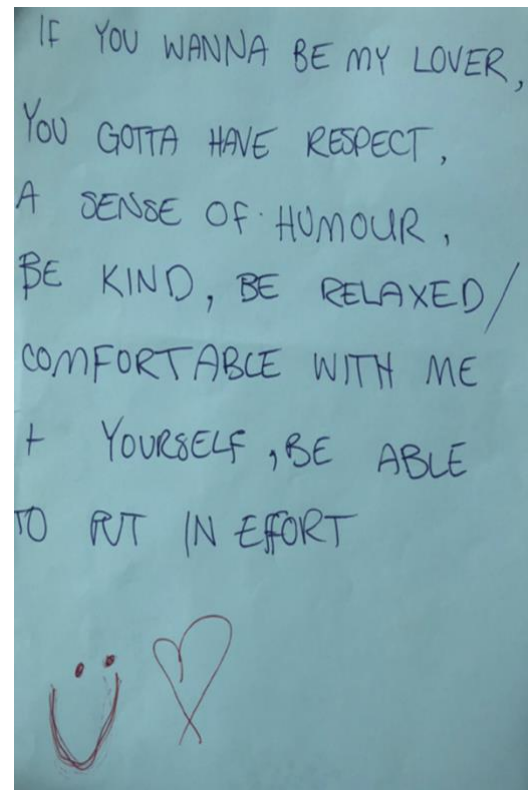


Image 3: Starburst Wannabe Activity

Image 4: Amy Wannabe Activity

Image 2: Tim Tam Wannabe Activity

Notably, the priority for many participants in their intimate relationships was first ‘friendship,’ with ‘having a best friend’ a key motif arising throughout many of our discussions. As Dan explained, ‘I feel like with a relationship I wouldn’t get into a relationship with someone unless you can be friends with them first.’ Contrary to ideas of ‘puppy love,’ young people frequently described their current or ideal partner as their ‘best friend’:

Sam: Why do you think people would want to be in a relationship?

Arnott: Just to have someone there, especially if they’re your best friend and all that stuff, you know?

Sam: Yeah.

Arnott: To just feel the love.

What this meant varied for different participants, with central themes of trust, respect, and comfort emerging across all responses. Jeremiah explained what it is about his ‘best friend’ that makes his relationship with his girlfriend work:

I don’t know, I’m really open with her and like, I can be. And like, I can really just be myself around her, like, yeah, that shows that, like I’m just not scared around her. Like, I just feel really comfortable, feels like I’ve known her my whole life, I guess. And I can, I just talk to her about anything, which I can’t do with some people, I guess.

Here we see a sense of comfort emerge as both a benefit and priority of being in a relationship, something Jeremiah identifies as related to the intimacy and closeness he shares with his girlfriend. In a discussion with Group Two, when I asked, ‘what does a good relationship look like?’ this comfort also translated to an important ability to be yourself:

Starburst: Comfortable.

Dan: Friends. Yeah, like you're friends.

Patrishia: They don't have to act all...

Arnott: It's just easy

Starburst: It's not like a show and they don't have to prove to people that they're going out.

Dan: Yeah, you just be yourself around them.

Bob offers further insight into the connection between best friend and relationship:

I guess it's just someone who can be there for you that's more than a friend. You can have friends that can be there for you and all that but it's a little bit extra. It's someone you can always count on, someone you can hang out with when you are feeling down. It's just not a friend, I don't know. It's just more.

It may be that Bob was simply reluctant to explore sex with me here, and that is what she was inferring by the 'it's just more'; but it was also the case that she was suggesting a feeling that was hard to pin down, what can be described as a surplus affect. I ask:

Sam: What makes them different to a friend?

Bob: Little things. With a friend, you do lots of fun stuff and all, but a friend wouldn't really make you feel really special and feel like they really want you. With a relationship, it's more like you feel really special and you feel good because someone actually really wants you or something.

These accounts draw our attention to the 'feeling' that young people attempt to describe, one that incorporates the care, comfort, trust, fun and friendship that occurs within their relationships. Bob's deliberations offer further insight into the ways sex sticks to and regulates

understandings of intimacy more rigidly for those, such as Alex and Alice, who do not necessarily see their desires as reflected in the norm. Or, as Dan explained, your partner ‘should just be like a best friend. If there is that sexual side of it then that’s okay because you’re partners, but it should just be like a best friend.’ Bob and Dan know and see their heterosexual desires reflected back to them – socially at school and in the broader cultural and media environment – and therefore, I suggest, they don’t feel the need or pressure to justify them based on the presence or absence of sex.

In our individual interviews, Amy also picked up on this hard to explain ‘feeling’:

Sam: How do you feel? [when you are in a relationship?]

Amy: Well! [laughs]

Sam: Just note for the recording that there is a really big smile on Amy’s face right now!

Amy: Um, really good [laughs]. [...] I don’t know, it just, really good. When you’re, you just know that like, that person will just be there for you and stuff, like it’s just good to think that and feel that.

Jeremiah: I don’t know, it feels good to love someone, you know. And like, that’s good for yourself, like, yeah, good for mental health.

Jeremiah offers an alternative to the ‘relationships as risk to health’ discourse, noting the mental health benefits of this ‘something more,’ as opposed to its dangers. Jeremiah’s relationship with his ‘best friend’ also contrasts with the idea of ‘puppy love’ as something fleeting – they had been together for over a year at the time of this research, as have Arnott and her boyfriend.

Participants’ attempts to define, to make meaning of, the ‘more than’ (the surplus affect) can also be interpreted as an attempt by them to define their intimate relationships as something

‘more than’ *only* sex and in a way that attends to or better reflects their experiences and expectations. It is important to note that sex and/or pleasure were still a part of their considerations, but such experiences alone did not capture the breadth of their desires or experiences. Of course, sex might have come up more in our discussions had I prompted it. But I also realised that sex was not *the* narrative that was singularly important to the way participants experienced and made sense of their relationships. Rather, it was often one that was seemingly imposed upon them through the curriculum (Sarigianides, 2014) or through the uptake of circulating feelings and panics about youth sexuality.

Conclusion

Threaded through the narratives of the young participants is a clear knowingness and self-consciousness about the place and role of intimate relationships in who they are becoming in the present and who they see themselves becoming in the future. Their understandings of intimacy are bound up in their sense of what counts as a ‘good life’ in the future. This is so even when young people’s intimate relationships are socially and culturally constructed as merely ‘temporary,’ or mistakenly seen by themselves and others as not serious or significant. In this chapter, I have attempted to reframe the experience and meaning of youth relationships as *more than* simply the delusions of youth, or a childish endeavour associated with growing bodies and changing hormones. Narratives of ‘puppy love’ that reify discourses of youth and sex and further solidify the positioning of youth relationships as ‘not real,’ not only fail to capture the diversity of relationship experiences, but also regulate the ways young people make sense of these practices.

It has not been my aim to offer a singular definition of youth ‘intimacy,’ but to explore the various narratives, affects, and diverse experiences that circulate around these considerations or definitions. Thinking of intimacy knowledge as *in the making*, means that these definitions

are not positioned as fixed and set in stone: rather it allows for attention to the tensions, ambivalences, and even contradictions in the way participants describe their own understandings and experiences. Similarly, my aim here is not to deny the validity/legitimacy of relationships that exist purely based on sexual desire or ‘hormones’ or what Patrisha has called ‘puppy love,’ or that sex and pleasure involved in these spaces is not also important. Rather I have drawn out an aspect of youthful intimate relationships that is often ignored or underplayed in public, policy, and pedagogical discourses (Allen, 2004; Byron, 2017). Participants drew upon their embodied and affective experiences to ‘make something new and different of something we think we already know’ (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 15) and in doing so challenged and fractured the strength of this association.

This process of sense making is important, I argue, because it demonstrates the way young people are seeking out space to ponder their desires and imagine something else – sometimes this occurs within forms of traditional, private intimacy such as the relationships described here. Other times, it occurs in more purposeful ways – such as seeking out information or community online for example. Echoing other research findings (Fields et al., 2015; Gilbert, 2014; Ollis et al., 2019), this chapter also points to the need to address participants’ intimate relationships as they narrate, experience, and feel them in relation to the structure and content of formal school curriculum.

In research exploring sexual health promotion materials, Paul Byron (2017) has noted the ‘missing discourse of intimacy’ (p. 332). He argues that materials thus frequently fail to account for young people’s complex and agentic negotiations of pleasure, sex, safety, *and* intimacy. Such an approach, he argues, furthers the risk of ‘abstracting young people’s sexual cultures and failing to notice how young people understand intimacy as alleviating risk’ (Byron, 2017, p. 344). As well as alleviating risk, the participant narratives here draw attention

to the ways intimacy creates spaces of care, happiness, and comfort. To ignore these affects and relations, as the following chapter elaborates, is also to deny their potential as powerful places of thinking-feeling, as sites for learning selves in the making (Ellsworth, 2005).

CHAPTER FIVE: INTIMACY KNOWLEDGE IN THE MAKING

Introduction

In this chapter, I build upon the ‘definitions’ of intimacy explored in Chapter Four and, remaining with Ellsworth’s (2005) conceptualisation of knowledge as ‘in the making’ (p. 1), I attend to the specific sites of this process of *thinking-feeling* as identified by the participants. According to Ellsworth, the relational experience of learning is one that ‘never takes place in the absence of bodies, emotions, place, time, sound, image, self-experience, history’ (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 55). I first examine what I saw as critical moments, relations, and experiences that emerged throughout the fieldwork and repeat visits with participants. I analyse these moments, feelings, and/or experiences through the key sites participants identified, seeking to capture the fluidity, messiness, and diversity of the ways young people came to learn about intimate relationships. Although these narratives are interconnected, I present them separately to draw out their nuances and to bring into sharp view how they intersect with genders and sexualities in ways that both facilitate and inhibit processes of learning and of becoming.

I briefly consider the role of the formal school curriculum, where participants’ critical observations largely echo the feminist and queer interventions into Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) scholarship that were documented in the literature review. I then consider alternative school spaces as identified through participant narratives. I explore these spaces not because they were identified *specifically* by students as spaces for learning, but because GBV and RSE curricula are often conceptualised as operating within a ‘whole-school-approach.’ It is therefore crucial to consider how the conditions of this learning and becoming are potentially supported, uplifted, and/or restricted beyond the four-walls of the classroom (Bragg et al.,

2020; Fields & Payne, 2016; Gilbert, 2014).

I therefore turn to examine key sites identified by participants as spaces for their informal learning about intimacies, sexualities, and genders; these included their friends, families, and communities, as well as traditional and social media. I attend to the relational, affective, and experiential modes of learning/becoming as the participants themselves have narrated them. I bring forth the notion of ‘trial and error,’ or learning by doing, as a powerful example of the way participants reflect upon *thinking-feeling* as occurring in relational and affective ways.

Overall, this chapter shows the diverse ways young people learn about intimacy and intimate relationships and examines the relational resources they draw upon to navigate and make sense of their feelings, experiences, and/or their aspirations. In simple terms, I argue that greater recognition and understanding is needed of the relationship knowledge that young people bring to more formal and informal educational initiatives (see also: Allen, 2005a; Coll et al., 2018) and the ways this knowledge is actively *in the making*. Reframing relationship and sexuality education in this way helps to move beyond deficit views of young peoples learning and fosters greater recognition of their agency and relational capacities.

Schools and schooling

Limits of the formal school curriculum

As previously noted, the school curriculum was a place where participants felt they *should* learn about relationships, but instead they reported receiving very little formal pedagogic guidance in the classroom. Other researchers have reported that sexuality and relationships education is frequently inadequate and/or haphazard (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Sarigianides, 2014; Waling et al., 2020), findings that my participants affirmed. As explained by Jeremiah, ‘Oh I did it [a sex ed class] like once [...] in like year 8 I think [...] it was like, stuff I already learnt

in like, year 6.' Group Two conveyed that the 'sex ed' curriculum and/or teachers:

Arnett: They don't really talk about sex. They mainly just talk about yourself and body image and stuff like that, but not really relationships.

Tim Tam: And contraception!

The group discussed how the focus was mainly on how to stop 'STIs'(Tim Tam):

Bob: ...or pregnant, or anything like that but that's kind of the only-

Starburst: I haven't even had a class like that, I know you have.

Tim Tam: I have and that wasn't even health, that was applied microbiology.

Starburst: Yeah in health we didn't even really learn about it.

Tim Tam: In health we learnt how to stop pregnancy but not STIs.

Patrisha: We kind of all know how to stop that stuff already though.

Tim Tam: Yeah that's kind of like what you...

Patrisha: So, to be honest I'm not sure they're re-teaching us?

In these narratives we can see what Jessica Fields (2008) has identified as sexuality education programs/curriculums being 'defined more by what they hope to eradicate than what they hope to promote' (p. 162). In the case of Waratah High, this is positioned by participants as being about STIs, pregnancy, and poor body image. Participants also noted that the lessons/messages they did receive were framed heteronormatively (Quinlivan, 2018; Shannon, 2016), which Keith McIntosh described as 'just focusing, focusing, focusing, focusing on heterosexual relationships and things like that.' This is also evident in Tim Tam's acknowledgement that he learned more about queer contraception methods from his microbiology class than he did in

any other formal school curriculum. Given this absence, LGBTIQ+ young people created their own 'learning' spaces that were more reflective and inclusive of their experiences.

LGBTIQ+ students as 'experts' at school

Tim Tam and Alex were both involved in the creation of the schools 'Queer Straight Alliance' (QSA), something they both considered a vital space, particularly given what they described as the erasure/absence in the formal curriculum of any non-heterosexual identities/sexualities.

In our individual interview, I asked Alex how they started the group:

Alex: Um, well it was a bit of a rollercoaster actually. Um, the first day that it started we gathered up a bunch of our friends, and we um, we had that group, there was about, 15, 10 or 15 people, but then from then on, none of those people came again. And for a couple of days, like a couple of Tuesdays, it was just me and Tim Tam [laughs].

Sam: And what sort of things do you talk about in the group?

Alex: Um...hmm, what do we talk about? Ahhh...just, um, about the news, what's going on. Like there's been a lot of discussion about same sex marriage, same-sex marriage recently and the gender-neutral bathrooms in school. And, things like that.

The QSA was student-led, with the assistance of a Youth Worker from the local council who attended every second week. The group did invite teachers, as Alex explained:

Alex: We were talking about um, teachers who we could bring in and we made a list of someone, of some teachers who we think could be good allies, but that never really happened. nobody came in, so.

Sam: Ah, that must be a bit frustrating?

Alex: Yeah, it is a bit. Would be nice to have a teacher in.

Teachers did not feature in my discussions with young people often, but Alex described them as being on the whole, ‘pretty accepting of it’²⁷ too.’ To demonstrate what this meant, Alex recounted a ‘funny incident’ with one of their teachers. Alex describes Mr Smith, their woodworking teacher, as an ‘older man’ who noticed in class one day ‘there was a boy sitting in the lap of another boy,’ Alex recounts how Mr Smith²⁸ said ‘get off him, get off him. I accept it, I know the school's a safe school, but I was born in the 1950s.’ Alex laughs at this, telling me that ‘he was kind of making a joke about how, it wasn't the norm back then, but he accepts it now.’ Here we also see the teacher, in Alex’s re-telling of the incident, drawing on the ‘safe schools’ narrative as if to anchor his, and Waratah College’s, progressive ‘acceptance’ of something that ‘wasn’t the norm back then.’ This echoes findings from Fitzpatrick and McGlashan (2019) who suggest that young people take on the role of ‘experts’ when encountering what they described as ‘ignorant’ homophobia in schools. Tim Tam’s recounting of an experience he had in the classroom, where a fellow student he was talking to asked ‘what’s it like being gay?’ extends this idea further:

...and then ‘out of the blue, she just went “so do you have AIDS?” and I was like, “of course I have AIDS, ah” and then she was like “no I'm serious, like, do you have AIDS?” and I was like, oh my god! Oh. My. God. You're dumb. You're so dumb. So, then I just kind of was like, ah, so either she's like really stupid, which is probably the case, or like, maybe like, a lot of people think that, and just don't say it out of politeness? Like, that's insane. Right?

As we talked about this a little more, and Tim Tam attempted to reassure me that it ‘wasn’t out of malice. It was just ignorance’ and appeared to be forgiving of this girl’s question, *because* of what he identified as her ignorance. This is perhaps a recognition from Tim Tam that what

²⁷ ‘it’ here referring to diverse genders and sexualities

²⁸ Mr Smith is a pseudonym

is taught at Waratah College about ‘gay people’ is inherently connected to discussions around HIV and risky sex. Despite this example and others throughout our discussions, Tim Tam tells me he doesn’t feel as though he has ever been bullied at school because of his sexuality: ‘like, I’ve had rumours about me, and people talking about me behind my back, but it was nothing to my face and nothing like, aggressive.’ He continued, saying that this example was: ‘not like bullying, it’s just kind of ignorance. That’s the thing, and so I’m kind of lucky, cos I was born in a time where it’s kind of, different and more accepting.’ For Tim Tam in particular, there is a remarkable resilience in the way he is able to seemingly ‘celebrate’ how far we have come, as a way, possibly to accept, or live with the ‘ignorance’ of his peers.

Reimagining resilience for queer youth, Rob Cover (2016) argues that this can be pedagogical, which he defines as the ‘capacity to critique the conditions of liveability’ and in this case ‘includes the resilience against social factors that make certain queer lives unliveable’ (Cover, 2016, p. 344). This type of protective resilience appears to be reflected in Tim Tam’s account of the girl’s ignorance, as well as in his critique of the homonormativity of the school (below). Expanding upon similar ideas, Fitzpatrick and McGlashan (2019) argue that narratives such as these are evidence of the ways ‘some young people are going beyond subjectivities of marginalisation and resistance to take up “expert” subjectivities’ (p. 264). Tim Tam takes up the role of ‘expert’ specifically when he describes his use of Tumblr, sharing with me:

Well, I mean, online, I think, like, places like Tumblr, where people, um, are really sort of advocating, and like, kinda tryna spread messages about um, lots, lots of things like, mental health, women's rights, gay rights, all that kind of stuff. Um, people, do try to educate from behind a screen, um, and then, if, like, I read a lot of that stuff, um, and then I'll like, I'll come to school and have conversations with people and then we can like, let, like that kind of spread the knowledge...

In this narrative, Tim Tam actively positions himself as the ‘knower’ and the one responsible for spreading the knowledge. Of course, this does not downplay the experiences of those students who do experience homophobic bullying, as Tim Tam further reiterates his ‘luck,’ declaring that ‘I’m so lucky to not be, like ostracised and bullied, um, so I’ll take what I can get.’ But more affirmatively, Tim Tam’s narrative does offer a reimagining of power in schools (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2019; see also: Paechter et al., 2021). By this I mean, in the face of what he describes as ‘ignorance’ (and what could arguably be described as exclusionary practices), Tim Tam seeks ‘productive forms of power by opening up and disseminating subjugated understandings of sex, gender and sexuality’ (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2019, p. 272). Tim Tam challenges the dominant positioning of teachers as the *only* experts within the school grounds and reiterates young people’s capacity as holders of important (and powerful) knowledge.

This narrative points to the ways in which young people learn about intimacies are tied up in unpacking heteronormativity and proximities to these norms (Berlant & Warner, 1998), particularly in institutional spaces like schools. To explore this further, I now attend specifically to some of the ‘jokes’ of the playground.

“Jokes” and understanding the limits of your acceptance

Participants spoke frequently about how accepting and progressive they found Waratah College. Alex in particular told me that it was one of ‘the most friendly schools’ towards LGBTIQ+ students, and I asked what that meant:

Alex: Ah, I don't really know, cos I don't know about other schools. But, I just know, it's really rare to find someone who, um, I don't know, it's just a lot of people accept it here. Either, don't really have an opinion, or accept it. I don't think there's many people who don't, accept it here.

Sam: And by it you mean?

Alex: Ah, well, just queer issues in general, ah same-sex marriage, ah...

This idea of the school as a safe space, as an environment of ‘acceptance,’ was understood by students to represent a school that has achieved gender and sexuality equality. Alex found it difficult to explain what this meant further, ‘I don't have the words, um, people just don't, whether you're queer or not, people don't really conform to the gender stereotypes is what I'm sort of trying to say.’ I do not want to dispute Alex's notion of feeling safe and accepted in the school, but I do want to explore the ways others conceived of the limits of this safety and acceptance and, in particular, I want to consider the ‘jokes’ participants shared.

Bob talked about the ways in which jokes, specifically gendered jokes that draw on old stereotypes, are thrown around in the playground, reminding women of their traditional place (in the kitchen). She reflected: ‘I hear a lot like “oh, go to the kitchen” and like “go clean the dishes” everyone pulls out now. It used to be a joke, but now it's just stupid.’

Group Two also discussed the jokes that they encountered in the school yard; in this case they were considering what might happen when other students encountered a same-sex couple:

Tim Tam: But like, with the PDA thing, like, people will, like, say a straight couple's in public, if they're like, holding hands or something they're like “oh, that's so cute” but then, if gay couples do that, it's kind of like, it's either like “oh that's cute” as well, but then some people will be like “oh, that's disgusting.”

Group: Yeah.

Bob: Or they'll be like “that's so wrong” or something.

Sam: Is that something that still happens here at school do you think?

Starburst: I feel like it would, maybe, no one says anything.

Tim Tam: Well, no one *says* it. [emphasis Tim Tam's]

Starburst: But I feel like people would think it.

Bob: They might think it or say it to their friends, just not say it to them.

Starburst: And it's never to that extent like, nobody would be like "oh my god ew" but I feel like - or they would joke about it, like make it seem like a joke, but they're not joking.

Bob: A lot of people joke about things and like...

Stacey: They're not joking.

Bob: Yeah.

Tim Tam: There's like, just that little hint of truth. Um, yeah and it's just...

Sam: It's not funny?

Tim Tam: Yeah, yeah. But then, it's, there's still laughter, it's just like, a disguise!

Sam: Protective laughter?

Tim Tam: Mmm, but I mean, at this point I think, gay people are just used to it, like it's kind of just like something that is just a given.

The marriage equality debate that was taking place at this time also underlined the tenuous limits of this equality. Tim Tam explained that 'that's where a lot of the like, the um, the jokes come from it's like "oh, I voted no ha ha ha."' These statements highlight the ways the broader public and divisive discourse associated with the marriage equality vote intruded into the school yard:

Bob: A lot of people wouldn't want to get into like a gay, um, like relationship at the moment cos like, all that stuff going on, they wouldn't feel like, they'd fit in or like...

Stacey: ...feel safe.

Tim Tam: It's very confrontational now because people are being forced to have an opinion.

In recounting these 'jokes,' participants did not identify them as a form of violence, or as incidents of bullying. As Tim Tam said, 'it is kinda just like something that is a given,' meaning they are somewhat normalised in the school. Victoria Rawlings (2019) describes jokes as 'sites of social and political contestation' that function in three main ways: 'to repudiate transgressive identities; to test and assert a particular social hierarchy [...]; and to assess the school or social culture for any possible challenges to the dominant order' (p. 704). The boys telling girls to 'go back to the kitchen' and the students teasing they will 'vote no' are instances of asserting their dominance in the schools heteronormative pecking order. They serve as a reminder of the limits of the 'equality' discourse, limits that are further bolstered by the marriage equality vote and subsequent public 'debate': they can be disciplining, keeping people in place, and serve as a kind of moral policing. As Bob explained to the group, these jokes this would stop people from getting into a 'gay relationship at the moment,' which was a sad consequence of these 'jokes.'

I want to stay with this notion of equality and consider it in relation to how Alex and Tim Tam in particular spoke about stories and experiences of 'coming out.' Attempting to further explain how progressive things were at school, Alex observed:

Well, I'm know that, um, there's a lot more, out of the closet people here at the school, compared to back in year 7 for example. I know there's a lot of people who are very open about it and aren't scared to talk about it. Because a pretty big stereotype, um, in movies and

what not is that people, queer people are scared to come out cos they're afraid that they're gonna be, um, shunned for it, or exiled for it. But ah, I don't find that I don't know any, I can't think of any examples where people have been scared to come out, at this school.

For Alex, progress is captured here in what they see as an increase in the number of young people who are 'out' and who are no longer 'shunned' or 'exiled' for it. Alex makes this assumption based on people that are already 'out' but cannot, of course be completely sure if this is case. The issue of acceptance is one that Tim Tam fleshed out a little further. Tim Tam expressed to me how, from the moment he got to high school everyone assumed he was gay; while he initially denied it, and 'had two girlfriends in year seven,' by the end of the year he 'was like, "yeah, OK, I'm gay."' His 'coming out' wasn't particularly controversial, or threatening, he tells me, 'because I'm such a stereotype, so it wasn't you know, that big of a surprise.' He explained this further:

It kind of depends on your situation as well, cos like someone like me who's you know, the quote stereotype unquote, um, it's easier to just be like, 'oh he's gay, we can get along with him' like it'll be like, like happy!

Because he fits the 'stereotype,' Tim Tam suggests it was easier for him than it would be for someone who 'had a strong group of guy friends and was like, thinking he was gay, he'd be like in a lot more difficult situation.' By strong group of guy friends, he's referring to the 'straight boys,' who he's not that close with because he prefers to 'hang out with girls most of the time.'

'Homonormativity' is a concept that, according to Lisa Duggan (2002), refers to a LGBTIQ+ sexual politics that 'does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them' (p. 179). Tim Tam positions his own acceptance as being conditional upon this homonormativity: the 'straight boys' do not see him as a threat to their

own sexuality because they are able to neatly and discretely categorise him as, in their eyes, a ‘stereotypical gay’ (i.e., white, cisgender, effeminate, friends with girls). This means, in Tim Tam’s accounting of the situation, that those who stray further from the stereotype – or the (cis) gender or (hetero) sexual norm – are less likely to be afforded the same tolerance (Cover, 2020). Even so, the ‘straight boys’ that he’s friends with say to him ‘oh yeah, but just don’t look at me in that way, hahaha.’ He goes on to tell me about ‘those other people, if they’ve been acting straight for the past 4 years [...] it’s like a fear that all of your friends are going to turn on you.’ Such ‘joking’ has been described within masculinities research as being a mechanism to assert one’s own masculinity within heteronormative acceptability, whilst regulating the gendered expression of others (Pascoe, 2011; Phoenix et al., 2003). However, Tim Tam blames the prevalence of this fear on the way ‘a lot of gay people are portrayed in the media’ where they are seen to ‘get beaten up or whatever.’ Unlike Alex, he laments that these portrayals are ‘pretty accurate’ in terms of the lived experience of young people, at least the ones he knows.

What is important for Alex is that they *feel* safe at school; integral to this feeling of safety is their belief in the progressive character of the school, which affords them a kind of potential affective and pedagogical safety. Yet these narratives also reveal the limits of ‘progress’ and ‘safe spaces.’ Tim Tam, who is perhaps more visible than Alex (by virtue of his popularity), recounts a version of equality in which his acceptance is closely tied to a proximity to the ‘norm’ (i.e., homonormativity and whiteness). Tim Tam is aware of the issues of distance from the ‘norm’ and is cognisant of the privileges his proximity to gendered norms affords him to be himself – but others, he notes, are not so lucky. While LGBTIQ+ participants did not seem to engage with tropes of ‘risk’ that *are* somewhat reinforced in the institutional space of the schoolyard, there were clear attempts by participants to move beyond such tropes. Participants’ becomings were closely tied to their resistance or rewriting of these old tropes mediated also by their degree of closeness to the norms (at least at school) as ways of ‘surviving’ the present

(Berlant, 2011). In some sense, there is an awareness that for them to do the work of surviving, they need to move beyond the linear progress of the schoolyard and seek out alternative sites for this becoming.

Friends

Of particular significance were the *people* that participants identified learning through and with about intimate relationships. While these observations in part affirm what related research has noted, I link these forms of learning to my overall arguments concerning the capacities and agency of young people in relation to navigating intimacy (Byron & Hunt, 2017; Coll et al., 2018; Quinlivan, 2018). A small number of participants noted the role of their parents in this learning, with Patrisha sharing that ‘your parents will tell you “get, like, someone with respect, or good morals.”’ While Jeremiah and Tim Tam suggested that this type of learning was through observation, rather than formal advice: ‘I wouldn’t say that I learned from my parents specifically, it sort of just, a subconscious thing [...], it’s not like they’ve taught me stuff, it’s just stuff that I’ve picked up from them’ (Tim Tam). Other research has echoed this (Donoghue et al., 2017; Macintyre et al., 2015; Walker, 2004), with parents frequently positioned as key sites of sexuality and relationship information by educators and researchers in this field (Mulholland, 2021; Robinson et al., 2017; Stone et al., 2017). However, participants frequently made note of the stark generational differences between and their parents/carers, as this exchange between Dylan and Alice demonstrates:

Dylan: In my, in my opinion I think that adults don’t understand adolescent life as much as, obviously we do, so...

Alice: Yeah, like they don’t. They don’t take the time to go, like ‘hey what’s this,’ ‘what does this do?’

As Arnott observed: ‘Not my parents. They’re just like, “What the heck? Go figure out yourself.

Why are you asking me?” Probably yeah, more my friends than anyone else.’ Like Arnott, most participants preferred to learn with or from their friends than their parents.

In considering the role of friends, participant narratives position these relationships as not only a key site of care and intimacy more broadly, but also a key site for learning about how to be in or understand other types of relationships (Byron, 2020). This could be in the form of talking with their friends about their relationships and sharing these ‘lessons’; as Patrisha explained, ‘one of my good friends just got out of a relationship, so [...] she tells us stuff’; or observing their friends’ attempts to navigate relationships, as Alice elucidated:

Um, and I think, friends as well. Like, one of my friends, she’s talking to a guy actually who has a girlfriend at the moment and we’re all like, “that’s not good, don’t do that” but you know, she, she doesn’t – oh, she sees that it’s bad, but she doesn’t really...

These ‘observations’ also occurred online, and particularly on social media. As can be seen in Tim Tam’s response: ‘Um, and also, [...] what I was gonna say, like, other kids at school [...] that are in relationships and are [...] like posting about it on social media.’ Participants talked frequently about the way they saw relationships being presented on social media, and that these representations were crucial to their understandings of intimate relationships (which is explored in more depth Chapter Six).

Bob and Tim Tam noted that sometimes the discussions they shared with their friends about relationships were provoked by things they had encountered through different media:

Bob: I haven't taught anyone, but I've even just spoken to people outside of class and outside of school just about little things. We have a lot of conversations if me and my friends see a guy, or a video of a guy disrespecting someone, we'd be like that's so wrong.

I noted Tim Tam's engagement with Tumblr earlier when I was considering his role as 'expert,' but he also revealed that the TV show *13 Reasons Why* prompted discussion with his friends. Referring to a 'rape scene'²⁹ in the show, he attempted to describe the kind of discussion this had provoked:

There was [a rape scene], and a lot of people were kind of like, after that there was a surge in like, you know [...] Well, I think she was drunk. But she was saying no, she was like "no, no" so yeah, it was. Like, it was, that show was really sad. Like it wasn't good, and it like, made a lot of people very emotional.

Notably, both Bob and Tim Tam describe informal learning activities that are similar to those often implemented through Respectful Relationship curriculum programs at schools. For example, Debbie Ollis (2016b) describes the utilisation of 'textual analysis of media and music videos' as an activity to explore 'the notion of respect and a respectful sexual relationship' (p. 55). Bob and Tim Tam enact a similar activity with their friends, and although we are not privy to the nuances of these discussions, they highlight these exchanges as a specific space of learning. Tim Tam notes in particular how the scene made people 'emotional,' something he suggests prompted the discussion around consent and alcohol. While this scenario highlights the powerful role of media it also underlines the power and effectiveness of participants' (and their friends') own critical engagement with these texts beyond the classroom.

In each of these narratives, we see participants reflecting upon their learning with friends as having occurred after observing something that prompts discussion – whether that be observing others, TV shows or videos on social media. An important component of this learning is the

²⁹ At the time of its release, season one of the young adult TV series *13 Reasons Why* was hugely controversial for its depiction of teen suicide and rape (Quinn & Ford, 2018; Wang & Parris, 2021). The scene Tim Tam is referring to here is the sexual assault of one of the main characters, Jessica, who was drunk and unconscious at the time.

closeness, or the intimacy they shared with their friends. As Summer and Patrisha explained:

Summer: Yeah, my mates have just kind of, we've all shared similar things and it is all about how more the personality of the person and so.

Patrisha: Um, because, they, I trust them and like, they're like my age, so they like understand and they'd like, give out advice that parents wouldn't give.

These accounts of friendship and learning disrupt negative connotations of 'peer pressure' and risk that are often attached to analyses of peer interactions (Byron, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2019). At the same time, what is offered here is more than simple social or moral support (though this is definitely part of it); rather these reflections point to the ways in which the participants took charge of their own learning in and through friendship groups.

For some participants, this kind of learning generated through a relational closeness occurred in online spaces. To explore this further, I now attend to Alex's experiences with Tumblr.

Community Online

For Alex, learning about relationships through the media was largely through the 'internet in general' because 'there's nothing about it in mainstream media, I guess.' I asked Alex what they search for:

What does "this term" mean? Like what does "heteronormativity" mean? [...] if I see it somewhere, like it's probably, it's probably mostly Tumblr that I see it. There's a lot of authors on Tumblr that I read, well not like book authors but people who write blog entries, yeah.

Alex referred to Tumblr in particular as 'one of the best places for a community of genderqueer people, like me.' Alex and I discussed the things they had encountered on Tumblr, including radical feminism: 'a lot of people on Tumblr think that women should be the dominant gender,

whereas that's not what feminism is about'; or 'TERFs,'³⁰ 'that pisses me off, obviously.' What is important here is not specifically (or only) the content of what Alex was 'learning,' although this does potentially offer some insight into their sophisticated use of language in attempting to describe their own sexuality. However, in terms of *how* they were learning, I suggest the sense of connection and community they felt with their peers on Tumblr served a pedagogical purpose.

Aware of the ways Tumblr was used as a social networking platform, I asked Alex if they had made any friends on Tumblr: 'yeah I don't have, many like, friends on Tumblr. I don't talk to anybody but, it's definitely a community.' Alex described Tumblr as a 'community,' even though in their own words, they don't 'talk to anybody' or have any 'friends' on the site. 'Community' is a descriptor used often by LGBTIQ+ young people and media researchers to describe connections made and shared on/through Tumblr (Byron et al., 2019; Mondin, 2017; Renninger, 2015) in a way that complicates traditional conceptualisations of the term (Byron, et al, 2019). Instead, community is conceived of as 'amorphous' (Robards et al., 2020, p. 284), and strengthened through young people's capacity to choose to participate anonymously and where they are able to 'engage through quiet listening' (Byron, 2020, p. 66). Belonging to such a 'community,' Robards and colleagues (2020) argue, functions affectively and pedagogically for young LGBTIQ+ people as a space where they learn 'words and concepts to explain their feelings and learning that they are not alone' (p. 282). For Alex, this was a specific community of, in their own words, 'genderqueer people, like me' – a community that Alex did not appear to have access to offline.

In this section I have briefly examined participants' observations on how they learn from their friends/peers and online communities. This provides the foundation for a more in-depth

³⁰ Trans-exclusionary radical feminist.

analysis in subsequent chapters of youthful becomings and knowledge making through digital and social media in particular and also through the ways participants navigated their gender and sexualities in relationships. I now turn to a specific ‘flash of insight’ (Mason, 2011) provided by Tim Tam and consider the ways he positions ‘queer culture’ as being the space where he has learned the most about relationships, which brings forth similar notions of community.

‘Queer culture’ as pedagogy

Tim Tam is a storyteller and commands the attention of any room he is in. Our individual interview was full of anecdotes and laughter as I largely abandoned my interview questions in an effort to allow Tim Tam the space to guide the direction of our discussion. He had a roundabout way of answering my questions before I asked them. I think this was partly because, unlike many of the other young participants, this is not the first time he had thought about the things we were talking about. It was almost as though he had come to the interview prepared – but his preparation was really just his way of being, navigating, and becoming in this world. He told me, ‘I feel like a celebrity down here!’ [meaning the place where he lived], which I did not find too hard to believe, having heard his name countless times in conversations and interviews before we had ever met. This ‘celebrity status,’ he said, had intensified partly because of the ‘extravagant costume’ he dressed up in at the school athletics carnival, a costume of which he was incredibly proud. Tim Tam showed me photos, and I was impressed: platform boots, sprayed blue/black, a tutu like skirt, and dramatic blue makeup. He told me how he made the boots himself from op-shop materials, how he learned how to do the make-up, and how he hopes to one day to do drag, like the ‘club kids’ he so idolised. For Tim Tam, drag helped him to explore a different side to his ‘personality.’ It seemed some of the students were also impressed, as Tim Tam informed me how the following weekend, while fundraising for a

school trip, some ‘year sevens’ came up to him: ‘oh, you’re Tim Tam right? You’re that guy from athletics?’ He told me how they wanted photos with him: ‘and I was like, OH MY GOD, I actually felt like a celebrity.’

When I asked Tim Tam where he learned the most about relationships, he mentioned family and friends and then ‘obviously in the media, like, movies, TV shows, books even.’ He went on to tell me how ‘a lot of the time, it’s not accurate’ and then conceded, ‘sometimes it’s accurate, in um, media, I guess. Depending...’ He left the ‘depending’ hanging there and, curious to hear what he meant, I asked about queer representation in the media. He told me about the movie ‘Love, Simon,’ which he described as ‘awesome,’ and the ways in which queer representation in mainstream media has progressed since the ‘completely incorrect’ movie ‘Brokeback Mountain and stuff like that in the past.’ However, he still lamented the lack of inclusion of people who these stories are about, telling me:

...like a lot of straight people in Hollywood try to target stuff to certain audiences and they just get it wrong. It's like, a board of straight white men, writing a movie about feminism, it's not, you know, it's not right [laughs]. But, you know, it's still good that, an effort is being made I s'pose.

Following this criticism, Tim Tam continued to explain his media use to me, telling me about the ‘documentaries and stuff like that about queer culture’ that are out there if ‘you really look.’ He mentioned ‘Paris is Burning’ and ‘Party Monster,’ which he told me is ‘about the club kids in um, New York.’ He laughed, telling me these aren’t ‘necessarily about relationships,’ but are about ‘gay people, which is relationships basically.’ After explaining ‘Party Monster’ to me, Tim Tam remembered something else he wanted to talk about:

I wanted to talk about this, because it’s a TV show on Netflix about gay people, and gay relationships, it’s called *Eastsiders* and it’s actually really cool. [...] Um, and it’s like, it’s

not a really healthy relationship that is shown, but at least it's real. Like, it's a real homosexual relationship, and then actually, in the second season, it goes on and there's a relationship between a gay man and a drag queen. And it's kind of like, the man, the guy, didn't want the drag queen to do as much drag, he wanted him to just be him. It was kind of like, 'this is another part of my personality that I want to express' and it just, all that, there were lesbians...and also, um, polyamorous relationships as well. So, it explores all that.

For Tim Tam, *Eastsiders* challenged the 'homonormativity' that he described as being prominent in pop culture elsewhere. In this context, we see mainstream representations of queer relationships as following these normative trajectories, the promotion of social forms that Ahmed (2010b) suggests, 'minimise signs of queerness' (p. 112). While these media representations are problematic and may function as 'true' representations of queerness for some, for Tim Tam it was because the characters in *Eastsiders* disrupted this representation that he found them 'real.' They might have fought a lot, he suggested, 'but at least it's real, at least it's not false perceptions and stuff.' So, while he conceded that the queer relationships portrayed in *Eastsiders* weren't necessarily 'healthy,' they represented possibilities of being otherwise – a 'queer happiness' (Ahmed, 2010b) – that went beyond an assimilation into the hetero- and homonormative possibilities pervasive elsewhere. Given his drag aspirations, seeing a relationship portrayed with a character who performs drag was also significant. I asked Tim Tam to think about some relationships he admired:

There's certain drag queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, cos that's like my entire life, and in their personal lives, they've spoken about how their partners have been with them for like, 10 years and have supported them, you know, despite all the drama from the reality TV and them doing drag and having to tour, and it's like, you know, that's a goal, cos like, if there's no support, what's the point?

If, as Rachel O'Neil (2018) suggests, media does 'inform how we might feel' about certain

practices of intimacy, then *Drag Race* allowed Tim Tam to feel hope for a future beyond what is normatively available. *Drag Race*³¹ provided Tim Tam with a counterpoint to the difficulties of being in a relationship while performing drag, a scenario that was portrayed in *Eastsiders*. Whereas *Eastsiders* suggested to Tim Tam that drag desires are perhaps not compatible with a ‘healthy’ (read: supportive) relationship, *Drag Race* (‘his entire life’) provided him with models of relationships in which he could recognise himself and his future aspirations – giving him a form of what Ahmed describes as ‘queer hope.’ Tim Tam was able to recognise or imagine his future self in these scenarios; the relationships he saw on *Drag Race* in particular provided an example of a queer future to which he can aspire. Tim Tam’s engagement with *Eastsiders* and *Drag Race* and the queer documentaries he mentioned, and the clarity with which he recounted them to me, moved beyond an appreciation that ‘an effort is being made’ around the increasing visibility of queer stories, and instead demonstrated an interpretive, embodied, and affective engagement with pop culture that works towards ‘cracking the code of heterosexist texts’ (Marshall, 2010, p. 77).

For Tim Tam, pop culture provided not only cause for celebration that progress had been made, but also the expression of a hope that was possible. Hope here, as Muñoz (2009) demonstrates, functions as an ‘emotional recognition that structures belonging’ (p. 97); for Tim Tam, this involved facilitating queer imaginings as well as providing reassurances that he has a (legitimate) and recognisable place. He sought out media in which he saw glimpses of his own desire and possible fantasies, as well as his not-yet-imagined desires; a future that ruptured heterosexist and homonormative structures and offered hope, as Muñoz may have envisioned, for a different – queer – future.

³¹ A thorough engagement with the politics of *Drag Race* is not my intention here (See: González & Cavazos, 2016); other than to say that Tim Tam and I also engaged in a discussion over the treatment of trans participants and participants of colour. He participated in these critiques of the program, while still enjoying it.

I have considered learning (and not learning) through formal school curriculum and the broader school community, from family members, and from and with friends and online communities. I now explore a form of learning and becoming that was helpfully characterised by a participant as a kind of ‘trial and error’ process, and I argue that this form of learning is especially powerful (although does not occur in isolation). Rather than approach this as a series of mistakes, this type of learning and meaning making can be usefully reframed as an active and reflective practice of learning by doing.

‘Trial and error’ as pedagogy

In contrast to her earlier dismissive characterisation of youthful relationships as merely ‘puppy love,’ Patrisha highlighted what she saw as both the educative possibilities and the potential meaninglessness of ‘young relationships’: ‘like, I know young relationships are kind of pointless, but it’s how you learn.’

In other words, she simultaneously rejected young relationships as ‘not really real’ while also pointing to their pedagogical potential. The idea of ‘learning by doing,’ implicit in Patrisha’s observation, was a common thread in participants’ reflections. For many, it was precisely the perceived ephemerality of ‘high school relationships’ that enabled this kind of learning, with some identifying this as both a motivation for and an active benefit of being in a relationship. Amy shared that you learn ‘probably like, from your partner that you have,’ and Jeremiah, who had been in a relationship with his ‘best friend’ for over a year, reflected:

You learn a lot of things in your first relationship, like you learn lots of things from past relationships, so like, with time, there’s knowledge and you learn stuff. And so like, I don’t know, in your next relationship, you’ll know what to do and what not to do. Like, based from your last relationship.

For Jeremiah, knowledge about how to have a good relationship was something one

accumulated throughout relationship experiences, a process that was served well by the time of being a 'youth' and the apparent freedom this affords to explore a variety of intimate connections; this was a view shared by other participants. So, while 'puppy love' may be characterised as temporary and fleeting, its legacy goes beyond the duration of the actual relationship. In this respect, feelings of acceptance and of being cared for, or the 'something more,' in a relationship allow this kind of learning to take place. As Jeremiah explained, this learning is not 'in your primary school crushes' but actually 'the first time you actually love someone.' In Jeremiah's case, we see the relationship providing a very real sense of care and happiness in the present, but in his eyes, it also served a longer-term purpose in cultivating an orientation towards the future and to the nature of future relationships.

As Bob insightfully observed, this is learning by doing, through what she identifies more specifically as a process of 'trial and error':

I feel it's all about, I know this sounds bad, but also trial and error. You can get a lot out of a relationship. I had a boyfriend and I think it was like six months ago maybe now and he didn't go to this school, but I learned a lot from that relationship. I ended it because there was reasons in the end that I didn't like about him. I didn't want to be stuck in a relationship that I didn't enjoy. You learn a lot from people around you and watching them. It's just all-over social media as well. You could look at this it's like the perfect relationship. This is how you have a relationship, but I feel like it's more you have to trial and error with someone. It won't just be going around, fucking around with people. It would be like you actually have a relationship and you learn stuff from that relationship together and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. That's where you find what a relationship is and what you can do to improve it. After you have a few, you can actually know what's right.

Like Jeremiah, Bob also made what she saw as a necessary and important distinction between what she identified as 'fucking around' and being in a relationship to 'learn stuff [...] together.'

Tim Tam also referred to this style of learning as ‘trial and error’ and in this extract, Bob suggested that getting to ‘trial’ the relationship ‘with someone’ is more beneficial than, as she noted, observing others. In these reflections from participants, relationships were construed pedagogically, with learning understood as inherently experiential, relational, and affective (Ellsworth, 2007). Continuing our discussion from earlier, Bob reflected that after this relationship, she ‘felt more happy because I know a lot more about relationships [...] and how I could improve it.’ Here, it was not only about the opportunity to practice the relationship with someone, but also the ability to reflect upon the relationship, the *thinking-feeling*, that offers pedagogical promise. As Bob explained, ‘I’ve learnt stuff from that now and I’ve learnt how to be a better person in a relationship to make it work better.’

Alice also provided an example of this kind of reflective learning, telling me how she ‘never really thought about what an unhealthy relationship was until she was in one.’ It wasn’t until she started ‘looking back’ on a previous relationship that Alice recognised certain behaviours as ‘unhealthy.’ She told me:

I wasn’t allowed to do anything, it was all about sex, like that’s all he really wanted and like, at that point in time, I didn’t care, but like, now, looking back on it, it was so horrible of me to like, not notice, and like, and it was so unhealthy.

In her reflections, Alice placed the blame on herself for not noticing these behaviours, conceding that before she ‘didn’t think about what a healthy relationship is and what a healthy relationship isn’t’ and consequently she just accepted things as they were. It is unclear if Alice reflected on the relationship as unhealthy because it was ‘all about sex’ or because she didn’t notice these behaviours at the time. So, while relationship learning occurs with and through others, there is also a large focus on personal responsibility. While this can be interpreted as a reflection of neoliberal logics of individual responsibilisation (McNay, 2009; Scharff, 2016);

in the absence of more formal pedagogy, this learning *is* Alice's responsibility.

My analysis thus far suggests that 'trial and error' learning is both a function (you learn by doing) and a purpose (you do to learn) of intimate relationships for young people. The way young people come to understand intimacy and intimate relationships does not follow a neat linear or developmental process, although it is influenced by such logics. Instead, this form of learning is an affective and relational process of becoming, which is locally, socially, and historically situated. Sexuality and education researchers (Allen, 2005b; Byron & Hunt, 2017; Naezer et al., 2017) have also noted the ways young people learn by doing when it comes to sex, sexuality, and relationships, however acknowledgement of the character and influence of this type of pedagogic practice remains largely ignored in the formal school curriculum (Fields et al., 2015; Quinlivan, 2018).

The ambivalence of trial-and-error learning

While trial and error learning might have served as useful practice with an orientation towards future relationships, participants were cognisant of its limitations in the present, particularly in areas in which they were hungry for more information, notably on the 'emotional side of things,' consent, and 'sexting.' Tim Tam offered further insight into this when he explained:

Oh wow that's a really good question, because obviously I wanna educate people about like, um, LGBT+ stuff, actually, you know what? It'd be less about the physical side of things because you can always incorporate, like, gay sex into straight sex curriculum, like it's not that hard. But I think, definitely educating people about like, um, the mental side of relationships, I mean emotional side of relationships, and everything that isn't physical, I think. Um, like, consent, and, like mind-frames and attitudes towards, all that kind of stuff, um, is, and like, you know, consent, um, as well. It's all very important and I don't think a lot of people understand like, some people do, but other people just kind of think, ah, I dunno,

it's...it's, just really, hard to kind of explain, and I think, with the right tools, and the right education, a lot of people would understand more about sort of how relationships should work rather than, cos, I think, I think everyone learns, or most people learn eventually, but it'd just be so easier if you didn't have to trial and error it, because like, I had to trial and error it [laughs] um, and, yeah, it's just a lot less, you know difficult if you can just, learn from other people's words rather than your own actions, I think.

Tim Tam acknowledged that without the necessary vocabulary and understanding of something as complex as consent, it can be particularly difficult or risky to navigate through 'trial and error' learning. In this respect, it was an indirect criticism of the existing curriculum and other sites of formal learning as having failed to provide young people with the learning and understandings they actually wanted and needed. As with Alice's previous example, Tim Tam suggested that 'people [will] learn eventually,' but drawing on his own experience, Tim Tam questioned the emotional cost of this approach. He added: 'and some things you have to learn through personal experience I think, but, if you have like a little bit of a grasp on what you're learning, it's just so much easier, so I think, yeah.'

In a discussion around sexting,³² Group Two made similar observations, with Dan telling me:

I think that it should be a part of the education program, cos as time goes on, things change and it's a very common thing now, it happens everywhere and if it is gonna happen everywhere, then we should be taught about it. Like, if you're gonna do it be safe and do it to the right people, not to just someone that asks.

I asked if it was something they felt should be taught at school:

³² 'Sexting' here refers to the sending (via phone message or social media) of sexually explicit images.

Bob: Yeah, like the right and kind of wrong ways to do it, like, with respect. Like, there's asking for nudes and then there's sexting. Like, with consent.

Patrisha: We should be talking about the risks as well, like I know it's like, general knowledge to know like...some, boys and girls could be silly and boys and...

Dan: Some boys and girls *are* silly.

Patrisha: Well, yeah, they will send stuff out to people, or like, it will somehow go around and I think we should be talking about that in more depth.

Jeremiah: They should be teaching like, how to differentiate like right from wrong when it comes to sexting. Cos like, sexting is inevitable. Like, every teenager does it.

Dan: It's gonna happen.

Jeremiah: Like, we're teenagers. We're hormonal, everyone's gonna sext. But, instead of focusing on, not to do it, they need to focus on.

Starburst: The right way to do it.

Jeremiah: Yeah, how to teach how to do it right and what's wrong.

Dan: It sounds kind of bad when you say it like that. But it's true. Cos it's not gonna go back to just, no one does it. It's only gonna get worse.

A more detailed analysis of 'sexting' is developed in Chapter Seven, but here I want to draw out how the participants' assessment of the situation relates to the potential boundaries of this form of 'trial and error' or learning by doing. Like Tim Tam, they recognise the limits of their experience, and bring forth areas that may be somewhat tricky to navigate without some kind of guidance. They also suggest that learning how to sext 'safely' is a priority for young people;

they already know the risks, so they do not want to be told *not* to sext, but how to manage this. It is evident from these exchanges that any further instruction should build on what they already know and give proper recognition to the authority and power of experienced-based, social learning in context.

Despite their mature analysis, the participants nevertheless somewhat connected the need for further guidance to narratives of ‘puppy love,’ emotional immaturity or uncontrollable hormones. As Alice noted: ‘when you’re young, anything could happen because obviously, you make stupid decisions because we’re like, 14.’ However, such risks are heightened if constructs of, for example, ‘puppy love’ serve to render youthful uncertainty about relationships a biological inevitability rather than a pedagogic responsibility.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined a range of ways in which young people characterise and understand how they learn about intimacy and intimate relationships. During a period in which there was a concerted focus on implementing respectful relationships curriculum in Victorian schools, and a heightened sense of the responsibility of schools to educate for gender equality and to be ‘safe schools,’ the participants’ observations were especially revealing. A raft of scholarship has documented the limitations of a range of curriculum programs on relationship and sexuality education (Allen et al., 2014; for example: Coll & Charlton, 2018; Jones, 2013; Quinlivan et al., 2014; Shannon, 2016). On the whole, my findings affirm this work, but do so in way that is situated in a particular time and place where there was a reasonable expectation that the educational and social climate noted above might have helped shaped curriculum and its take-up differently.

The limitations of the formal curriculum were thus patently evident, yet what was most striking was the creative and agentic ways in which young people approached their own learning and

what their narratives revealed about their meaning making and learning by doing practices. In bringing together these various ways of learning, I have shown what young people see as the necessary conditions for this learning, and this has further highlighted the capacity of young people to undertake this learning independently and reflectively. While their intimate relationships might be socially and culturally constructed as ‘merely temporary’ or viewed even by themselves as ‘puppy love,’ threaded through their narratives was also a knowingness about the place and role of relationships in who they were becoming. Within such intimacies, young people collect knowledge about how to *be* in a relationship through ‘practice’ – often noted as a motivation for being in a relationship. ‘Trial and error’ thus positions intimate relationships as being aspirational, a good life fantasy to work towards.

Drawing on Ellsworth’s conceptualisation of learning (2005) has underscored the pedagogical value of feelings and experience/s, inviting a consideration of learning as an affective, experiential, and relational process. Although many participants offered ‘trial and error’ as a key site for learning about relationships, what this and the preceding chapter have demonstrated is that this ‘learning’ or ‘knowledge in the making’ (Ellsworth, 2005) is deeply contextual. It is influenced by history, social, and spatial context as well as circulating affects that attach to normative ideas of youth sexuality (Talbert, 2018) that can regulate, disrupt, or motivate this learning. In these chapters, we saw young people carving out their own spaces of learning, whether that be in/through their relationships, the relationships of others, or through digital and social media. Participant narratives about this learning also suggest a mature analysis of the state of play – they are hungry for more information and insights about relationships that extends beyond heteronormative conceptualisations of ‘puppy love’ that limit intimacy imaginings to linear and narrow ideas about sex. In particular, the idea of the school itself being a ‘safe space’ for LGBTIQ+ students came up in a number of discussions, with the school being seen as directly connected to the ways in which young people learnt about relationships

or attempted to understand their sexualities and/or gender identity. In the absence of inclusive and comprehensive relationship and sexuality education, young people rely upon a version of ‘trial and error’ learning. Therefore, exploring the ways genders and sexualities are understood and policed in the broader school environment offers important context to participants’ navigations of intimacy (see also: Bragg et al., 2018).

Chapters Four and Five have laid the groundwork for the remainder of the thesis. In Chapter Six, I build upon the idea of knowledge in the making to think through the ways young people both learn about and experience intimacy on mobile and social media by following the way participants narrated their digitally mediated intimacy practices. To do this, I draw upon Lauren Berlant’s concept of the ‘intimate public’ (2008) to further bring forth the sense-making role of friends and intimate others. In Chapter Seven, I return to some of these understandings of intimacy to consider how gendered notions of respect, self-care, and moral economies shape and restrict participant negotiations of intimacy.

CHAPTER SIX: (RE)NEGOTIATING INTIMACY WITH AND THROUGH MOBILE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Introduction

Building on the exploration of young people's perspectives on intimacy developed across chapters four and five, in this chapter I examine in detail the digital practices and spaces in which young people experience intimacy and their relationships. The specific focus on digital practices in this chapter is not intended to further reify a presumed binary distinction between online and offline worlds; rather the aim is to draw out different zones and scales of intimacy. Numerous scholars have argued that social media and other digital practices have the capacity to broaden and diversify traditional zones of intimacy (boyd, 2014; Kofoed & Larsen, 2016; McGlotten, 2013; Pascoe, 2009). In their book on digital intimate publics, Dobson, Robards and Carah (2018) argue that 'in more mundane, less spectacular ways, the social and cultural meaning of 'intimacy' is currently being contested and struggled over via debates about and use of social media' (Dobson, et al., 2018, p. 6). In this chapter, I explore such propositions in relation to the experiences and perspectives of young people. I argue that similar contestations arise across the various spaces young people occupy, and that their everyday digital practices are critical to how they (re)shape their experiences and understandings of intimacy and intimate relationships. Rather than focus on a single digital platform and its affordances, I will examine the way young people draw from their experiences across a range of platforms to bring forth, represent and make sense of their everyday practices, affects and expectations of intimacy.

To do this, I conceive of young people's practices of digitally mediated intimacy as representative of an 'intimate public' (Berlant, 2008).

A public is intimate when it foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and sense of ordinariness, a space where the social world is rich with anonymity and local recognitions, and where challenging and banal conditions of life take place in proximity to the attentions of power but also squarely in the radar of a recognition that can be provided by other humans. (Berlant, 2008, p. 10)

The notion of an ‘intimate public’ was originally developed by Berlant as a way to explore women’s culture in the US, and it is becoming an increasingly common concept to make sense of and analyse the affects and effects of digital cultures (Andreassen et al., 2018; Dobson, et al., 2018; Hjorth & Hinton, 2019; Kanai, 2017). As Dobson et al., (2018) argue, ‘the theoretical frame of “intimate publics” helps us to think about how contestations over power play out in the generative liminal space where the public and the private intermingle’ (p. 6). Following this lead, I explore how ‘the public and the private intermingle’ in participants’ navigations of intimate relationships in the crossover space of digital cultures.

In doing so, I acknowledge Berlant’s observation of the circular logic that structures the intimate public, one that assumes a shared ‘worldview and emotional knowledge’ where its narratives are ‘deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging’ (Berlant, 2008, p. viii). These structures, Berlant (2008) argues, situate the intimate public as affording a ‘critical assessment of the way things are’ (p. viii). The theoretical frame of the intimate public helps to identify these conventions, but also to consider how young people both participate in and potentially resist them, while also consuming and making sense of them as they emerge and become a part of their everyday lives. Dobson et al (2018) position digital intimate publics as ‘scenes’ of ‘pedagogical discipline about normativity and normative intimate desires’ (p. 5). This is a useful provocation for this chapter, as it is helpful to consider digital and social media as sites of informal learning where young people are not necessarily seeking out advice on how to be in a relationship, but are engaging daily with cultural texts and

social media feeds saturated with ‘cute couple posts’ and public displays of pleasure and desire. It is the way that young people narrate, affectively experience, and make sense of these types of practices that I will follow here.

There is a significant body of scholarship detailing concerns about the way young people engage with mobile and social media – some of which is further examined in Chapter Seven. While not wanting to discount such concerns, this chapter gives prominence to the productive and pleasurable ways in which mobile and social media figure in the everyday intimacy experiences of young people. Putting young people’s perspectives front and centre– a strong impetus for the research design of this project – has brought to the surface what is involved in responsible and reflexive mobile and social media use. In doing so, it has also challenged my own conceptions of what comes to count as intimacy. I open this chapter with a dialogue between two participants – Alex and Summer – as a route into exploring how young people navigate the ways intimacy is increasingly mediated by mobile and social media.

‘You hear stories’: the good old days?

In our individual interview, Summer told me that she loves doing her make-up and although fresh-faced at school, her Instagram account is full of photos of herself (selfies) and the make-up looks she experiments with. She told me that while she enjoys taking selfies, she also thinks social media can sometimes be a ‘curse’ because ‘I really don’t want to use it and then I do anyway’.

Summer: Sometimes I’m like, “Oh, I was born in the wrong century.” Sometimes I wish that social media was just wasn't as-

Dylan: [interrupting] People are too anti-social, I'm pretty sure. Especially when you go out somewhere, you are just like, “Get off your phone.”

For Summer, there is a nostalgia for the imagined way relations were undertaken at a time when mobile phones, as we now know them, didn't exist. Svetlana Boym (2001) offers a useful definition of nostalgia as 'as a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy' (p. 17). This resonates with Summer and Dylan's reflections here, where there is a romanticised remembering of a past time, albeit one that they did not experience directly. Summer in particular carried this sense of nostalgia through our group sessions and individual interviews, but other participants also shared similar feelings. Bob explained how it used to be 'all different because there were no mobile phones and all that' and that she feels as though it has 'gone downhill, maybe, because people are using different things to communicate with people [and] not just themselves'.

Not all the young people felt this nostalgia in the same way. In the same group session, Alex reacted to Summer's desire for the 'good old days' by responding,

Sorry, Summer, but I hate when adults talk about what they used to do when they were young because they didn't have phones and technology. We get it, but times have changed, and we've got to accept that. People use social media to connect with other people around the world.

Alex is careful to connect the desire for the good old days to adults broadly, rather than blaming Summer specifically. As demonstrated in Chapter Five, Alex sees mobile and social media as increasing opportunities for connection, in ways that extend the geographical or social location, as well as moving beyond heteronormative norms. Part of this connection for Alex, comes from what they learn online and how they experience these spaces in ways different to their parents. Telling us,

We know so much. We know so much more than adults. I'm always teaching my parents stuff from the things that I've seen around on the news online, because I've learned so much more. If I didn't have it, then I wouldn't be doing as good as I am.

In a separate discussion, Alex told me how 'society is just changing through technology' and rather than this being a negative thing, for young people in particular it means 'not feeling like you have to conform to the agenda'. Alex's ability to find and maintain community in online spaces, as argued in Chapter Five, has been vital to their own process of becoming and feelings of belonging. It is also the space where they describe their greatest intimacies: 'I talk to my best friend every day over Snapchat'. This is consistent with findings from two decades of digital media scholarship which has recognised the internet more broadly as place that engenders greater possibilities for people whose desires for intimacy fall beyond the limits of 'heteronormative acceptability' (Attwood et al., 2017, p. 250).

Summer emphasised to Alex, 'I understand your side as well. I understand your side. I really understand your side', acknowledging that while 'social media is a great thing to learn' she still thinks it was 'just as good in those days'. It's unclear if the 'it' here refers to the learning, or to relationships more broadly, but Summer remained sceptical of the kind of connection that can be mediated through screens:

You hear stories, like even with my grandparents when they would ride horses to school... like, all the 'cute' dates that they went on, they would write letters to each other. Or, my Mum had like writing friends, something like that. But, now it's just like, there's nothing there. It's just like, you go on Facebook, search them up, send them a text - stop. You know what I mean?

Summer's assertion that 'you hear stories' suggests that, in part, her nostalgia comes from the stories she hears from the adults in her life of their 'good old days'; stories of a happiness that

existed in the past, something that was attainable and attached to simpler things, like horse-riding and letter writing. Although this was a form of intimacy that was still mediated and disembodied, it was mediated in ways that have been historically romanticised and legitimised, and come to be seen as ‘natural’ and ‘uncomplicated’. In our individual interview, she elaborated on this more when describing her interactions with a boy with whom she went to primary school. Here Summer provides a glimpse into the way mobile and social media facilitates dating, whilst also bringing her concerns to the fore:

Summer: [he texted] “Oh, do you like me?” “No.” “Are you sure?” “No.” “Sure?”
“Yeah, I do.” And it's like, “Oh, I like you too.” Then it just kinda happened.
It's more ... it's easier to text people your feelings than speak to them in real
life, I think, because then it went into outside of the texting and we didn't talk
that much. So that's kinda when I was like, “There's no point. Nothing's
happening.”

Sam: So, it was easier to have that relationship when you could be honest through
texting?

Summer: Yeah. I think if there wasn't the phones and we were just at school, or, you
were just at the playground, it would have been so much nicer, meant
something to you.

For Summer, the present holds some promise – her suggestion that it's ‘easier to text people your feelings than speak to them in real life’ is evidence of this. Here then, it is not necessarily the case that the intimacy she shares online is not ‘real’. In fact, she (like many of her peers) describes it as ‘easier’ - it is more that it doesn't fit within her nostalgic understanding of ‘real’ intimacy as being embodied/corporeal and she therefore imagines it to be less than, diminished or ‘failed’ (McGlotten, 2013).

Summer's ambivalent relationship with mobile and social media is powerfully and affectively captured in her drawing³³ [Image 10, p.224]. I explore Summer's experience of harassment further in Chapter Seven, but here I want to attend to the text that accompanies Summer's drawing. She writes: 'girls and boys are more in "danger" of being sent a[n] abusive private picture because of technology and how easy it is for them to do. And trust me, it hurts!'

The pain attached to her experience of receiving a 'dick pic'³⁴ is palpable here and may explain some of the basis for her nostalgia for earlier times. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant (2011) argues that 'the desire for a less-bad life involves finding resting places' (p. 180). Summer imagines such a 'resting place' or a reprieve from the pain of the dick pic nostalgically. She understandably yearns for days when this 'danger' – one she clearly identifies as tied up with technology – did not exist, and where she could have avoided the experience of being 'hurt' in such a way.

Summer's reckoning with digital intimacy reveals the paradox that many young people in this research attempted to describe, and it is one that digital media scholars have long attempted to resolve (See: Dobson et al, 2018; Hart, 2015; McGlotten, 2013). While Summer experiences the possibilities of increased connection through 'texting', she also yearns for the days when a supposed deeper connection was made possible without a reliance on phones and other technologies, alongside expressing very real concerns for her safety. In contrast, for Alex, such nostalgia speaks to a time or a historical moment when they 'wouldn't be doing as good as I am'. Or as Sara Ahmed (2010b) describes, 'a past that wasn't possible as a present' (p. 52). This is related not only to the affordances of digital spaces in terms of their own intimacy with others, but for Alex it is also a reflection of the sexuality and gender equality progress they see

³³ I have described the methodology of this picture in Chapter 3, see page 83.

³⁴ I explore the phenomenon of 'dick pics' more in Chapter Seven, but in this instance, Summer is sharing the story of having been sent an unsolicited image of a penis from a boy she was talking to on Snapchat.

as having been made possible through the accessibility of information and community in online spaces. While Alex has not completely romanticised the possibilities of mobile and social media, they are more alert to the dangers and limits of the past that Summer minimises or erases from view.

In placing Summer and Alex's narratives alongside one another my point has not been to pathologise or privilege one experience over the other. Nor have I intended to draw a neat comparison between their experiences, for there is a nuanced overlap in their expectations and desires. I have highlighted Alex and Summer's narratives because of the productive dialogue they shared. The navigation of nostalgic narratives about the past unearths the diverse ways in which young people productively participate in and/or benefit from digital and social media, whilst simultaneously reflecting upon and critiquing its impact upon interpersonal relationships. Berlant (2011) offers further insight into the function of such nostalgia and its role in the 'reproduction of normativity' which, Berlant maintains, 'occurs when rest is imagined nostalgically – that is, in the places where rest is supposed to have happened' (p. 180). In part Summer's fantasy of the good old days, is a 'resting place', where digital intimacy (and its associated risks) were yet to exist. While mobile and social media might also serve as a 'resting place' for Alex, they do so in ways that serve as a reminder of 'progress' in the present and buttress the promise of what they celebrate as the 'new'.

Exploring Summer's nostalgia for the good old days and Alex's resistance to this nostalgia, highlights the ways in which conceptualisations of what is considered intimate are constantly and dynamically negotiated, even if not always changed, and draws attention to the range of influences on these understandings. Continuing to describe digitally mediated intimacy in binaries of risk or potential, or of real or fake, not only fails to account for the diversity of experiences of young people but also denies the complex ways in which young people

themselves understand and negotiate the role of technology in their intimate lives.

I will now unpack the ways young people understand and negotiate digitally mediated intimacy practices through attending to the enactment of what I have termed ‘cute’.

‘A really good social media thing going on’

Alice had been with her boyfriend, who I will call Shaun, for almost ten months at the beginning of my time at Waratah College. They met at school while she was dating someone else and started chatting to one another on Snapchat, until Alice finally ended her relationship to be with Shaun. He is older than her by a few years and was expelled from school a few months before I arrived, making it harder for them to see one another. Alice told me before one of our group sessions that she spent the weekend at Shaun’s place helping him cope with the loss of his grandmother and although his Mum ‘hates her’, she helped him choose a new suit for the funeral, which she also went to. Alice has a complicated relationship with her own family and lives with her Grandmother, who is ‘cool’ and accepting of Alice and Shaun. Alice is quite open about the difficulties that she experiences in her relationship with Shaun. He is unemployed and out of school and he has a temper that they have worked out how to manage together. Other students name Alice and Shaun as an example of what an ‘unhealthy’ relationship looks like in our individual interviews, and at times, Alice seems to be aware that her relationship is seen by others in this way. In reflecting on her relationship difficulties, Alice also touched on the significance of public perceptions and what she considers the performance of a good relationship, particularly on social media.

Sam: So, the way you have your relationships online is just about making it look perfect?

Alice: Mmm

Alex: Maybe, maybe

Alice: That is...the story of my life.

Sam: Yeah?

Alice: Yep.

Sam: Just in terms of relationships, or online in general?

Alice: Yeah, like my relationship is really not great, but like everyone thinks it's like-

Dylan: You never know what's real-

Alice: We've been together so long, everyone just thinks it's, like, A+, but it's really not

Sam: How long have you been together?

Alice: 10 months this month, yeah [...] We just have like a really, good like, social media, thing going on, but then like, when it's off social media, it's like, not as like great. Like it's not terrible, but it's just not...

Alice and her boyfriend have a 'really good social media thing going on' partly because they have been together 'a really long time', but also because they know and make visible, social practices that are associated with the performance of, in her words, an 'A+' relationship. I asked Alice how they use social media in this way, she explained: 'oh, we just like, post like cute photos together and we're always like, posting like, appreciation posts. Like boyfriend appreciation post, girlfriend appreciation posts and cute stuff like that.'

While the 'appreciation posts' Alice mentioned were less common among other participants, many of them described a number of other practices that they had either encountered or participated in on social media. According to Chambers (2013), young people have always

‘found ways to insert details and shared meanings in describing their intimacy and to indicate to others in their public networks that they are spoken for’ (Chambers, 2013, p. 125–126). The practices participants in this study described include the public posting of photos and video stories (largely on Snapchat and Instagram) of time spent together or anniversary gifts given and/or received; couples publicly commenting on each other’s Instagram posts with emojis; and including your partner’s name and when you started dating in your bio³⁵, often accompanied by a ❤️ red heart emoji. These are a collection of practices intended to enact and experience, in Alice’s words, an ‘A+’ relationship. To anchor this analysis, I attend to key words and motifs that participants engaged with and explore practices that I am characterising collectively as ‘cute’ – a term that is deployed in multiple ways and, as I will show, signals some of the subtle diversity in their forms of public intimacy. The use of the word ‘cute’ was pervasive throughout many of my discussions with participants and was a signifier commonly used by young people, across different platforms and with many different registers.

To explore the way participants engaged with and participated in this type of posting, I am attending to ‘cute’ as a particular ‘genre’ (Berlant, 2008) of intimacy, following Berlant’s conceptualisation of the term as:

an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme (2008, p. 4).

Tobias Raun (2018) in his work on YouTube communities follows ‘intimacy as a genre’ not as a means of authenticating the intimacy between YouTubers and their followers, but to see how

³⁵ ‘Instagram bio’ is the space underneath your username where you can provide information (in written or emoji form) about yourself and/or your interests – with a limit of 150 characters.

it ‘can be evoked in various ways and is anticipated by the audience’ (Raun, 2018, p. 105). For the remainder of this chapter, I follow ‘cute’ in much the same way, attempting to explore the conventions of the genre and the ways in which young people experience and make sense of its aesthetic and affective expectations/attachments. Although authenticity also becomes an important component of these discussions, it is the ways young people attempt to make sense of what is ‘authentic’ that I attend to. Important here is Berlant’s understanding of the ‘porous boundaries’ of the genre which, she argues, allow for ‘complex audience identifications’ (p. 4) as a way to bring forth productive accounts of participants’ negotiations and, in particular, their ambivalences.

The practices I explore here are enacted across different social media platforms, but mostly on Snapchat and Instagram. Although most participants had a Facebook account, the platform is largely seen as something that is obsolete and, as Jeremiah suggests, for ‘older people.’ However, Facebook retains utility largely in relation to the relationship status function, which allows users to publicly identify their relationship status (single, in a relationship, it’s complicated) on their Facebook home page. Amy explained her recent status update to me in her individual interview: ‘no, yeah, and then last night he said to me “oh, look at my Instagram” [giggles happily] and then I checked and then I went on Facebook this morning and he also changed his Facebook’. Here, young people perform a public declaration of their relationship, a kind of proprietary claim, that signals their relationship to the world (see also: Robards & Lincoln, 2016). As Bob suggested ‘a lot of people put it on Facebook like “I’m in a relationship” and then everyone sees it.’ The motivation of ‘everyone sees it’ is important, because these practices – to some degree – are expected to be enacted when young people are in a relationship, by not only those within the relationship, but also their friends and/or followers. For Summer, the relationship is what is mediated through the online space:

I think that having, say, a boyfriend or a girlfriend, whatever happens, it's kind of like your relationship for me, is stated on what's on your Instagram. When, say you've got a girlfriend or boyfriend you would have photos of them on Instagram...

It's also to know if you're stalking someone. Or, not stalking someone, that's not a good word. If you're looking to see you like someone, you're on their Instagram, it's also a way to know if they're single or not, to see that they don't have photos of girls.

Joni Meenagh (2015) writes about 'Facebook stalking' specifically, as a practice young people employ to 'covertly' find out further information about each other, which is essentially what Summer describes here, albeit with a more specific focus. C.J. Pascoe (2009) defines this 'stalking' behaviour as 'monitoring', something young people do to 'check in' on their romantic interests. 'Monitoring' someone can involve seeking out information about a potential crush, including whether or not they are single, or maintaining surveillance over a current significant other (Pascoe, 2009). As Summer hints at here, 'stalking' can be a behaviour associated with harassment and online violence, but this is not how she means to describe it. Here, young people appear to be more motivated by curiosity and 'looking to see' the status of others, and young people seem to be aware that these are the 'rules' of this engagement. Patrisha expands on this, suggesting that 'some people, some relationships feel like they have to post pictures with them to prove that they've got a boyfriend, or make, their whole like, status...'. I will return to the 'whole, like status' comment later in the chapter, but Patrisha reiterates Summer's thinking that uploading public 'proof' of a relationship is, if not essential, then commonly expected. So, despite the benign intentions of such 'stalking', we can also see it as a kind of monitoring and policing of the online behaviours of others (Meenagh, 2015; Pascoe, 2009).

Taken together these narratives suggest that one of the purposes of ‘cute’ is as a documentary action, a storytelling ritual, and one that is necessary for providing evidence of your relationship. While these are not the only motivations and/or benefits of publicly posting your relationship, they arise frequently within participant narratives. Thus, while communication can – and does – happen privately, it is in part the sharing of these practices through the intimate public that provides the relationship with legitimacy and affirmation from others. However, it is also important to note that at the same time participants were also highly sceptical of such practices, preoccupied with what was ‘real’ and passing judgement on the behaviours of others. I will now explore the way participants described the aesthetics of ‘cute’.

Aesthetics of the ‘good life’

Including your partner’s name in your Instagram bio signals to the world that you are in a romantic relationship; following this up with ‘cute’ couple photos and appreciation posts for your partner signals to your followers that you are in a ‘good’ relationship – one that is based on an affection and appreciation for one another. In their work exploring going ‘Facebook Official’, Robards and Lincoln (2016) suggest that the performative aspects of these practices are ‘anchored to a linear and uncomplicated narrative about romantic relationships’ (p. 9), largely bound by heteronormative aspirations for the ‘good life’: namely love, children and marriage. We see this most clearly in the celebration of ‘monthsaries’ or monthly celebrations of the date the couple first started dating (Abidin, 2016, p. 54). This is a practice that even those who say they do not regularly participate in ‘cute’ seem to participate in. As Tim Tam explained, ‘some people are just, they post, like, say 6-month anniversary post, I did [laughs] the other week’.

Further, in foregrounding these normative features of intimacy/relationships, couples are able to publicly celebrate the ‘achievement’ of being in a romantic relationship, one that is framed

as a key to happiness (Ahmed, 2010b) in very specific ways. Alice recognises this as one of the intended functions of her own social media posting, describing her practice as ‘showing-off’:

Alice: It’s just like, being cute and just like, making everyone jealous and I dunno [group giggles]. I dunno, not making everyone jealous...

Sam: No, that’s ok...

Alice: Just like, showing off I guess, that you have a boyfriend or like, your boyfriend has a girlfriend to like, [...] it’s just, like showing off that you’re dating I guess, I dunno...

Alice’s admission that her relationship is less than perfect, alongside her suggestion that she is enacting ‘cute’ for an intended audience other than her partner (in this instance), indicate that there is an element of curation here. Alice is making a judgement about what she believes a good relationship *looks* like and aestheticises this through her public posting. This involves choosing what to post in order to support a narrative of romantic success, which I suggest relies upon an awareness of how to enact ‘cute’ in the ‘socially legible ways’ (Dobson et al., 2018) that are absorbed within the digital intimate public.

Participants descriptions of the hashtags³⁶ #relationshipgoals and #goals – a type of posting from which ‘cute’ draws aesthetic inspiration and also contributes to – offers further evidence of what ‘cute’ looks like. Explained here by Bob and Stacey:

³⁶ Hashtags can be characterised by digital media scholars in a variety of ways (McCosker and Gerard, 2020). However, for the purposes of this thesis, can be understood as ‘a word or phrase preceded by a hash sign (#), used on social media websites and applications, especially Twitter and Instagram, to identify digital content on a specific topic’ (Oxford Dictionary). If your social media account is on public and someone searches for a specific hashtag, your content will also be available to view.

Bob: Um, you see it a lot over like, social media and Instagram and everything, like a lot of people talk about it as well, they just put a hashtag on it it's really annoying [group laughs]

Stacey: Like, when it's just like a cute photo of them you know, together, it's like #relationshipgoals [more group laughter]

Such posts might be shared by celebrities or influencers,³⁷ or ordinary couples who apply the hashtag themselves, or as in this example, participants' own friends. Arnott characterised #relationshipgoals posts as couples posting photos or videos together that make their followers be 'like "don't you want this" and stuff'. Summer explained this further: 'Um, It's just kinda like, like so you get a photo of you with, like your boyfriend or something, and like, you're like hugging and it's like hashtag relationship goals. Like, this is what you *aim* to be.'

#Relationshipgoals, and more specifically 'cute' provides a template for what an aspirational relationship looks like on social media, something for young people to *aim to be*. In a different group session, Group Two described #relationshipgoals as:

Starburst: But then there are those Instagram sites that's called 'relationship goals' or 'couple goals' and it's just, like videos of um, couples making out or something...

Sam: Is that all it is?

Starburst: Pretty much, or like, dramatic stuff. Like when they run into each other's arms or something, and it's all like cutesy

³⁷ There are diverse definitions of 'influencers' that recognise the different platforms and different level of audience they have. Here, I refer to Cyrstal Abidin's (2015) broad definition as 'everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles' (p. 1).

Arnott: Yeah, it's like 'don't you want this' and stuff

Starburst: Yeah, and it's, a lot of the time it's like 'protective boyfriends' and stuff too.
but, um...

Sam: Protective boyfriends or protect your boyfriends did you say?

Starburst: No, protective boyfriends. Like, jealous boyfriends and stuff like that.

In our individual interview Summer also noted the role of the 'protective boyfriend', reinforcing the gendered aspects of 'cute':

Sam: What do those rules that you talked about mean for how we behave in a relationship?

Summer: Um, I, in with the rules of social media, the male should always behave as kind of the protective one for her, and like, stick up for her and carry her, kind of thing. And then the female should be the innocent one that's kind of like all precious and she likes get looked after by him do you know what I mean?

I asked Summer if she posted like that and she responded: 'No, I don't believe that. I believe that every relationship is different, you can be who you are just as long as you accept each other, um, so I don't think relationship goals needs to be a hot guy carrying a girl or anything like that.' Despite an awareness of this being the apparent 'rules' of social media, Summer rejects the stereotypical representation of male strength and female passiveness as being 'goals'. She does however, acknowledge that 'online to get the most likes and goals that's what you need'. I want to position Summer's ambivalence here as a potentially productive position. For Berlant (2008), 'even when people speak out against the terms the intimate public sets out as normative, they are still participating in the promise of belonging that it represents insofar as they are trying to recalibrate whose experience it can absorb' (p. ix). That is, through posting

in ways that reject the premise of ‘protective boyfriends’, Summer’s ambivalence may serve as an ‘opening’ (Banet-Weiser, 2012) that potentially subverts or re-shapes the more stereotypical hetero norms of belonging set forth through ‘cute’.

I am not wanting to suggest that practices associated with ‘cute’ were limited to heterosexual participants or heterosexual young people more broadly. Yet, participant narratives drew primarily from examples of heterosexual couples, which is seemingly reflective of what they mostly encounter on their social media feeds. As Tim Tam put it, there are ‘not many gays down here’³⁸. Patrisha noted that aside from one friend who is not ‘out’, ‘the only other person that’s gay that I know that’s in a relationship is Tim Tam.’ Arguably, the silence regarding non-heterosexual posting is revealing about the norms of belonging, and by extension intimate relationships, that are established through the intimate public. As I have argued above, the gendered and heteronormative ways in which ‘cute’ is enacted online closely adhere to the fantasy of what the heteronormative ‘good life’ looks like, following a generic, and heteronormative script of how to be in a relationship that mirrors offline expectations which I explored in Chapter Four.

Hanckel, Vivienne, Byron, Robards and Churchill (2019) propose that the posting practices of LGBTIQ+ young people may be constrained by continued privileging of content that reflects ‘heteronormative expectations’ (p. 1274), particularly because their own experiences do not match up with such narratives. Moreover, Stefanie Duguay (2016) notes the awareness LGBTIQ+ young people maintain of the potentially violent ways expressions of their sexuality may be received by some in online spaces, and thus tailor their performances and posts to specific audiences or platforms. Certainly, some of the ‘jokes’ and experiences I analysed in Chapter Five may also reflect these rationales. For example, Alex noted on multiple occasions

³⁸ By ‘down here’ Tim Tam is referring to the broader Waratah community.

that they never posted about their relationship publicly in this way, and while Tim Tam implied that he does not post often, he did admit to the ‘six-month anniversary post [he] did, last week’. Summer also told me about her ‘gay friend’ who has,

Got like a boyfriend and I think he goes along with like the social media to get the likes and stuff, so I think there's no difference between the male and the female or, same gender kind of thing. I think they both react the same to social media and stuff like that, so yeah. I don't think there's any difference between them.

This is not to suggest that LGBTIQ+ young people do not also enact intimacy in other digitally mediated ways; indeed, I have explored how Alex finds a sense of community through their participation on Tumblr. Nevertheless, there remains a striking heteronormative structuring of intimacy and ‘cute’ practices.

Navigating the right mix of ‘cute’

Navigating the presentation of couples online was a highly calibrated activity. Sharing such photos so publicly and openly can be seen as a challenge to normative aspirations of the ‘good life’ that are tethered to the ‘idealization of domestic privacy’ (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 91). Yet, such practices can also re-inscribe the same norms that regulate perceptions of how and why these photos are shared. This is something that emerges and is simultaneously reinforced and challenged through an ‘intimacy hierarchy’ - analysed below. As Stacey told me, ‘the only time you are gonna judge someone our age for having a relationship’ is if they ‘really put it out there way too much’. For Stacey, this meant ‘always posting things together, videoing it’ and she tells me they ‘just need to like, calm down’. Bob agreed with Stacey’s sentiment, speaking about the couples that she admired most as:

Those relationships that like, they might post a photo every now and again, but it's not like, every time you see them you have to put it on your story, put it on Instagram, and be like love hearts and everything. It's kind of like, we know you're with them, enjoy your time.

Bob and Stacey view these practices as detracting from bodily experiences of intimacy – questioning why a couple would interrupt their time together to take and post a photo. When I asked Patrisha if she would post couple photos, she responded: 'Like, every now and then. But I wouldn't keep up that constant, weekly [...] like I'll post something like, once every two months or something, but yeah'. There doesn't appear to be a specific number of acceptable posts, and these examples demonstrate the delicate balance that exists between oversharing and performing just the right amount of 'cute' 'every now and again.' These reflections do, however, illustrate the constant and careful negotiations young people engage with in their attempts to get this balance right.

Jenny Kennedy (2018) argues that 'oversharing is a productive social process' one that 'assert[s] and establish[es] new social norms' (p. 279). Whether or not young people engage in 'cute' themselves, most participate in the intimate public either actively (through posting, liking, or commenting) or passively (through scrolling feeds or watching drama unfold). The ways in which young people explore their own understandings of 'cute' bring forth these norms and suggest there is a set of rules about how to be acceptably and authentically 'cute' – make sure you post, but not too frequently; be affectionate, but not too affectionate; don't display too much drama, but don't show too much happiness in case it appears inauthentic. There is a degree of ambiguity to these rules, which highlights the ways young people are constantly negotiating what is 'acceptable' and how this constantly shifts and shapes norms for how to be in a relationship. Simultaneously, there is a certain confidence and authority in these rules, particularly in knowing when they have been broken, with young people able to identify when something is decidedly not 'cute'.

This is especially the case when it comes to ‘public displays of affection’ or as the participants called it ‘PDA’. As Tim Tam suggests, ‘you wouldn’t post a video of yourself, like you two making out on Instagram, you wouldn’t do that’. Tim Tam reiterates this sentiment a number of times throughout our discussions, emphasising that more overtly sexualised imagery of people making out is not considered ‘cute’: ‘Um, and, like, some people just like post sweet stuff like that, other people will like, post picture of them making out, just like, calm down [laughs] no one wants to see that’. The comparison between the ‘sweet stuff’ (anniversary posts, videos/photos of activities) and ‘making out’ is stark here, and is further supported by Group One, who in a separate group session appeared to agree with Tim Tam’s observation,

Dylan: I saw this girl once; it was like two weeks ago. Then I saw her boyfriend and her making out with each other, and the camera was on. I was just like, “Oh god, give me a break.” Get out of my sight.

Summer: Too much!

While the celebrity posting or #relationshipgoals hashtags that ‘cute’ is modelled on may include these types of posts, some young people in this study found it to be ‘too much’. For these participants, it’s not that the couples are kissing, as this behaviour is acceptable offline, but filming and uploading it seemingly transgressed the ‘cute’ code for acceptable online performance. In this way, we see how engaging with ‘cute’ is both a way to stage and regulate intimate relations on social media.

‘Cute’ and popularity

Participants were open in their observations that ‘cute’ is enacted through social media with the clear expectation that your friends/followers will engage with it. As Starburst explained, there are ‘some people who will think “oh, she’s my friend, I have to comment like, relationship goals or something”, regardless of whether they really believe the post to be an example of

‘goals’. This engagement from your friends and broader followers on social media – whether this is through comments or likes – also functions as a reason to be in a relationship, a way to accrue followers and/or likes. As Summer illuminated in a story about one of her friends:

Oh, I guess um, with like relationships, what I'm kind of just thinking in my head is that it's kinda, I always think relationships, you're against other people in relationships. Like, I um, back to friends and stuff, she [her friend] goes, "oh, I wish I had a boyfriend so I could do one of these photos that gets the most likes" so she would always talk about how "I wish I had a boyfriend so I can do this photo of a famous person which got millions and millions of likes" and she goes, "well that's goals".

In order to garner ‘millions of likes’ from her followers, Summer’s friend wants a boyfriend with whom she can emulate these posts. Summer talks about the ‘obsession’ some people have with getting ‘likes’ on Instagram, and the lengths they will go to generate likes – posting at a certain time of day, curating photos of what #goals looks like. For Summer, this translates into pressure to be in a relationship:

I think there's pressure to be in a relationship, [...] if you always wanna be the best on social media. Like the girl that I've got [her friend] she's got thousands of followers, she's like "well I need to do this photo and I need to have a boyfriend and I need to do this at the beach with him and then so we can get the photo and stuff" and I'm just kinda like, wow you're planned out, fantasies on a timeline!

Summer alluded to the labour behind this posting, the planning, and the maintenance of posting in this way. Bob explained this pressure to keep up with the posting in order to keep the likes (and by extension some version of popularity):

Sam: Do you think social media adds pressure to be in a relationship?

Bob: Yes, because people say a lot on social media instead of in person. People just hide behind it. On social media or something you can say like, “Oh you guys are like the cutest couple ever” and then you feel pressured to be that couple that everyone admires or something or like, “Oh my god I want this” or “You guys are that cute”. You feel pressured to be that number one couple that everyone wants and then it puts pressure on both of you to be that. A lot of the time you learn that you just got to lock it all out and do whatever you want because it is your relationship.

There is thus a particular kind of vigilant and affective labour in representing relationships online (see also: Dobson et al., 2018; van Doorn, 2011). Other participants were less forthcoming about their own participation in these practices, preferring to speak to the performances of others they encounter on their social media feeds. However, through these discussions, many participants identified the achievement of being in a romantic relationship as a marker of ‘popularity’ (as also discussed in Chapter Four). While participants struggled to provide a clear description of what ‘popular’ means, it was seen to be something that ‘others’ desire/aspire to. For Jeremiah, this meant that some couples are sharing their relationships on social media because ‘a lot of people also will be, like, in relationships for the social status’. As Patrisha also noted earlier, this is a way to ‘make their whole, like status’. Digital and media scholars are increasingly documenting the ways ‘intimacy’ more broadly is used as a strategy to increase engagement with your followers (Harvey & Ringrose, 2016; Lambert, 2016; Raun, 2018; Reade, 2020). This is evident in the ways participants suggest that ‘cute’ is enacted as a strategy to generate greater likes from your friends/followers. Through enacting the coded version of ‘cute’ online, intimacy can be conceived, I suggest, as a form of social capital that operates in much the same way as ‘popularity capital’ functions in the schoolyard. Intimacy then, ‘works as an important currency within social media’ (Raun, 2018, p. 101), whereby ‘likes’ serve as ‘quantified measures of popularity’ (Dobson, 2018, p. 100).

While many participants raised questions about the legitimacy of such interactions, most still agreed that ‘cute’ remained a significant marker of the ‘good life’, and a cluster of practices that brings access to better or more normatively appealing social standing.

They’re just doing it for attention: drama and negotiating publics

Despite a desire for ‘cute’ to include more evidence of ‘realness’, young people were also critical of the ways in which some couples posted about their less successful #goals behaviours, or more specifically their relationship conflicts, on social media. As Bob and Stacey discussed:

Bob: It does kind of get a bit annoying when like, like, something goes on with someone and they put it on their story or something and they’re like “oh my god this was the worst day” with cry faces and like, sad faces and everything.

Stacey: Keep it to yourself

Bob: Yeah, and you’re doing that for attention, like, you can talk to your friends about it, but like, you don’t need everyone to reply asking you because like, then it’s the words gonna get out, you’re gonna tell people you don’t want tell someone

Stacey: And then they’ll be even more upset about it

I am referring to this as ‘drama’, drawing from the work of Marwick and boyd (2014) who define this as ‘social and interpersonal, about other people and relationships and intrinsically involves conflict’ (p. 1191). For Marwick and boyd, ‘drama is performative’ because its participants are aware that their ‘interpersonal conflict [that] takes place in front of an active engaged audience, often on social media’ (2014, p. 1191). For Stacey and Bob, while it is okay to discuss your issues with your friends offline in private, public declarations of unhappiness

or appeals for engagement with that unhappiness are unacceptable. Arnott further explained how the ‘drama’ often plays out on social media,

Arnott: Um, but you probably hear more about “oh my Gosh, this person’s been messaging this person and we’re still dating” and then that gets posted all over social media.

Sam: So people post it?

Arnott: Yeah. They’ll be like, “oh my God, my boyfriend’s, my boyfriend’s like um, so rude and he’s messaging these other people and I don’t even want to be with him anymore.” And I’m like, hun, “shouldn’t you be saying this directly to him instead of putting it on your story or something?”

Arnott questioned the rationale behind this kind of posting and went on to tell me how ‘they probably won’t say his name’, instead posting something vague that alludes to the drama, without having to name it. Arnott wondered why ‘instead of going to the person that made them sad or something, they’ll just put it over their Instagram?’ Like Bob and Stacey, Arnott questioned the need for this drama to play out publicly. In this exchange, Arnott points to the boundary protocols around what is acceptable conduct in a relationship, including negotiation of the public and private, and these protocols are both highly contextual and supposedly self-evident. Moreover, there is a clear inference that young people should simply know how to do this correctly.

Descriptions of this drama are also highly gendered. When I asked Arnott about who posts in this way, she told me, ‘I mean, mostly girls but I think girls would do it more because I feel like some people do it for the attention too’. Arnott elaborated on what she meant by ‘attention’, telling me that some girls will ‘post pictures’ that are ‘just like nothing and then they’ll just write sad faces’. Dobson (2015) writes about the ‘affective tones of disapproval around

attention-seeking’ (p. 92) directed towards the behaviour of girls and their intimate social media practices. This is evident in Arnott and Bob’s attempts to explain the motivations behind publicly posting this ‘drama’, where they display little consideration for the girl’s feelings, or an acknowledgement for what she might be going through. Because of their perceived ‘attention seeking’, these girls are seen to be ‘culpable’ (Dobson, 2015, p. 92) for being treated badly – your boyfriend is cheating on you, why didn’t you go and talk to him? You’re having a bad day? Go and speak to your friends then. Do not post it online.

These findings are in-line with those of Marwick & boyd (2014) who cogently argue that ‘drama’ is largely conceptualised by young people dismissively as a ‘girl thing’, irrespective of who the drama may be between. What is seen as overly emotional posting by participants remains connected to traditional norms of femininity whereby the girl is positioned as the emotional and irrational partner (Dobson, 2014; Keddie, 2009; Robinson, 2012) – despite the presentation of the drama being reciprocated (Marwick & boyd, 2014). I suggest that ‘cute’ is also policed in the same way, particularly in relation to heterosexual relationships. As I have argued above, there is an expectation that girls in heterosexual relationships participate in ‘cute’, yet they are judged by their peers for *how* they engage in these practices. This contradiction manifests most clearly in the way participants were more distrustful of girls’ behaviour, questioning both its authenticity and their motivations.

Finally, this drama does not play out equally across all social media accounts and is instead performed to a more specific audience, through what young people described to me as their ‘second account’. Jeremiah told me that posting about feelings is ‘pretty much every girl’s second account’ and ‘pretty much every girl has a second account’. While your ‘main’ account is more curated and, according to Arnott, ‘where you post all your good photos’, the second account is where people post ‘literally about their life’. As Jeremiah also explained,

Your second account like you post every day it's like about your daily life, whereas your main account, you might have like 1000 followers or whatever, and it's just got good pictures of you. Whereas like, your second will just have like people you're friends with and they like see everything that's going on with your life.

For Jeremiah, the second account is just for people that he 'trusts' so that he can 'just post whatever' and not have to 'worry about it'. Or more specifically, the second account is shared with only those you know also offline, your 'real friends'. Dan had a similar explanation in a different group session, telling the group:

It's like, it's like, you've got your main account and then you've got your second account that's private and you only let your friends follow and then there's the people who just let everyone follow it. Which is really dumb.

The way young people describe the use of a second account demonstrates a selectiveness around who gets to bear witness to this 'drama'. There are choices being made here, for as Marwick and boyd (2014) argue, young people imagine a specific and engaged audience for their 'drama', and 'strategically act to appeal to their peers' (p. 1191). While the 'cute' posts are shared widely with a broader audience, the 'drama' is more likely (but not always) to be shared with a more select few, those deemed to be 'real friends'. There appears to be some ambivalence here though, and that while a specific type of openness may be attached to and a prerequisite for a presumed authenticity online, the parameters for what is acceptably shared with a 'public' remain quite narrow. In these narratives, there is a graduated sense of public and private distinctions along a continuum that is highly policed by young people in ways that also relate to genders and sexualities.

Further, if one of the functions of 'cute' within the intimate public is to uphold a sense of affective belonging through a closeness to the norms set forth through #relationshipgoals, then

choosing to share your drama with a more selective audience demonstrates some understanding of the limits of that experience of belonging. It also offers an insight into the limits of the ‘good life’ narratives, pointing to the tension that arises in trying to maintain these amongst the messiness of everyday life. That is, the relationship ‘drama’, which is presented to a more restricted audience, contrasts with and disturbs the more curated version of the self and the relationship that is presented on the ‘main’ account. Young people know what relationship success looks like – happy photos posted occasionally, for example – and in creating different audiences for relationship dramas and difficulties, they are able to uphold or reflect these aspirational relationship goals.

The subtle negotiations of the two accounts demonstrates a sophisticated reimagining of what is considered ‘public’ and what is ‘private’ (Baym & boyd, 2012). And this happens in ways that also challenge the prevailing risk discourse (Livingstone, 2008; Pascoe, 2011) that young people are not able to properly manage their online time and use. Other research has also documented young people’s ability (and desire) to engage with complex and considered negotiations of privacy, as well as strategies to manage these boundaries (see: boyd, 2014; Hodgkinson, 2017; Lincoln, 2014; Livingstone, 2005). Amy described her own strategies as: ‘I only accept, on my second account, I only accept like, people I know. But then anyone can follow the other one. But um, I thought that’s what you’re supposed to do, have like, one private and one public’.

Amy reiterated the idea that she ‘thought this is what you’re supposed to do’ twice, suggesting that this is somewhat understood as the ‘rules’ of negotiating publicness through social media. Such negotiations are not only about your audience and managing expectations, but they are also about *who* makes up that audience. What it actually means to ‘know’ someone is unclear in participant narratives – for example have they met them offline? Are they a friend of a friend

to whom they have never spoken? Even so, it is clear that these sort of negotiations are happening dynamically and reflectively, as young people navigate what it means to *them*.

In drawing this discussion together, a key argument is that online practices which are considered ‘cute’ and/or ‘drama’ are not ‘mere’ performances of intimacy, with the ‘real thing’ happening offline and/or in private. Although sometimes they can be dismissed by participants in this way, my argument is that this categorisation not only misses the educational potential of online spaces for learning about relationships (such as through trial-and-error learning), but also ignores the very real care, love and closeness these practices can convey. I will now turn to explore these potentials.

The affective promises of ‘cute’

[...] if you guys start dating, especially in year 7, having your name in each other's bios and having like your date of when you got together and stuff, like I know I do it, but I just do it because like, I think it's cute.

This statement from Alice hints at the paradox of ‘cute’ as something that is both mocked and celebrated; as aspirational and as inauthentic, and she appears rather self-conscious about her own participation in these practices. She recognises here that they may be somewhat contrived and staged, yet also alludes to their serious and ‘real world’ meanings and affective capacities.

I think social media, as much as it can be damaging in a relationship, I think it's also really good to just like have posting photos of each other and all that cute stuff, and also having, like, your name on each other's Instagram's or whatever and like saying you're in a relationship on Facebook and like, all that kind of stuff, like I think it's, really good. But as much as it is bad, it's very important to some couples, to have that, like, online thing.

I return to some of the ‘bad’ that Alice is referring to in Chapter Seven, but here I focus on the

productive capacities of cute. The ‘online thing’ Alice described transcends digital boundaries and supplements the relationship conducted offline, providing Alice with a ‘very important’ opportunity to participate – publicly – in caring practices with Shaun. Alice’s #relationshipgoals mapping³⁹ (Image 5) from our first group session also reveals this. Unlike most of her peers (see Image 6, 7, & 8), Alice does not demarcate online and offline practices based on authenticity alone. However, the line drawn down the middle of the page gives the impression that she does see ‘social media’ and ‘real life’ as two distinct sets of practices.

Image 5: Alice #relationshipgoals

Alice seemed to be grappling with the tension between the ‘damaging’ or ‘bad’ side of social media alongside the potential for the social media practices she engages in to nourish her relationship. Thus, while she acknowledged the curatorial aesthetics of the ‘perfect appearance’

³⁹ See below (pg. 189) for Activity description

and/or being the ‘cutest couple’ on social media, for Alice, these practices also have affective capacity, producing feelings of being ‘happy and in love’. Kennedy (2018) suggests that digital sharing practices have the potential to ‘bring people into a sense of affective belonging with others’ and also a ‘feeling that others feel the same way’ (p. 277). This can be read as sharing to a public that engages with your posts – through the intimate public more broadly, which as I have argued above, happens through ‘likes’ and comments. But it also involves sharing with an intimate other. Shaun participates in Alice’s enactment of ‘cute’ – he is together with her in the photos (whether they are ‘staged’ or not) and the way Facebook is designed means he has to agree to becoming Facebook official.

These practices are reciprocated, and both behaviours seem to indicate that Shaun feels the same way (or similar) about Alice. For Berlant (2008) a ‘longing for reciprocity’ (p. 5) is what keeps women attached to the project of romantic love, and this desire is often circulated *through* intimate publics. Here, reciprocity works through engagement enacted in quite public ways. While Alice acknowledged that relationship practices online might be ‘bad’, particularly if judged by norms around privacy and the familiar (and often warranted) concerns regarding perceived risks, she nonetheless participates in, and benefits from, *reciprocating* these practices *with* Shaun. This was particularly important given the difficulties Alice had experienced with Shaun’s Mum and Shaun’s expulsion from school – meaning their face-to-face time had become more limited than in the past and more regulated by adults in their lives.

Kennedy (2018) notes the role of ‘reciprocity’ in shaping and rewarding the practices of sharing, that is, ‘where such reciprocity is encountered, the person’s oversharing is recognised and redeemed into affective intensity’ (p. 272). The ‘affective intensity’ in the cases I am discussing, is the feeling of thinking you’ve done it (‘cute’) right. In this way, enacting relationships through this intimate public is a way for young people to affirm or to assess if

they are *doing* the relationship correctly, according to prevailing social norms governing their peer groups and beyond. I suggest that it is also as a way to test and/or shape these norms. There are elements here of the learning by ‘trial and error’ process examined in the previous chapter; young people post and then see how it is received (or how many likes they get), and potentially shape their behaviour accordingly. This ‘trial and error’ learning also materialises in the way they talk about this amongst their friendship groups – they are discussing the way others post, questioning whether they are faking it, for example – as part of decision making about what is authentic and what is pure performance. As such, ‘new norms are legitimated through reciprocity’ (Kennedy, 2018, p. 278) – and this important insight helps to understand the multi-faceted nature of how relationships norms are navigated by young people. This is evident in the reworking of norms and a sense of playfulness above in how Alice described her own practices of ‘cute’. She was aware of the ways her posting may be perceived by her peers, but she did it anyway. She is perhaps emboldened by an expectation that regardless of how her friends feel about these posts, they will still engage with them. At the same time, Alice is being reassured that she is doing it right *because of* the engagement she gets from her friends.

For Alice, the ‘cute stuff’ online was not just about documenting or ‘showing off’ her relationship but about generating greater intimacy, publicly, with Shaun beyond adult-conceived and imposed regulations. As Abidin (2016) has similarly suggested, these kinds of practices are particularly necessary for young people who may have limited opportunities to be alone and close with their significant other. boyd (2014) has written about the ‘resilient and creative’ ways young people are ‘repurposing technology’ to meet their desires (p. 212). As Alice does here, young people ‘are imagining new possibilities, asserting control over their lives, and finding ways to be a part of public life’ (boyd, 2014, p. 212). I suggest that this is both a key impetus to participate in ‘cute’ as well as a reward for that participation. ‘Cute’ serves to extend the spaces for this kind of intimacy, but also allows for an understanding that

you ‘do not need to be physically co-present to experience the bodily and affective effects’ (Lasén & Hjorth, 2015, p. 133) of posting your intimate stories. I argued in Chapter Four, that young people’s relationships continue to be framed predominantly as temporary, or not real, or as only in relation to sex. In this respect, participation in the intimate public through enacting ‘cute’ provides a counter-narrative as it allows young people to engage in something that may be considered more ‘real’ – posting photos of your time spent together (at the beach, on adventures or gifts shared) – and conveys a level of intimate connection that is reflective of more ‘mature’ relationships.

‘Cute’, but is it real? Unpacking mobile and social media authenticity

As noted at the opening of the chapter, it is not my intention to determine what is and is not real regarding the digitally mediated intimacy practices of my participants. However, young people’s attempts to define what is and is not authentic, offers some insight into the ways they navigate these tensions, as well as their critical engagement with social media posting.

To further explore this, I draw upon data generated by an activity titled ‘*#relationshipgoals*⁴⁰ *mapping*’. In the first group session with both Groups, I gave each participant a piece of paper and asked them to consider what makes a relationship ‘relationship goals’. I explained to the participants that our discussion was about relationships in general and not limited to online practices. In the first session (Group One), Summer asked whether she could ‘do them separately?’ and I responded that it was totally up to her. The rest of the group followed Summer, and all of them made a very strong and very clear distinction between what made ‘online’, ‘offline’ or ‘in real life’ relationship goals. Without any prompting from me, most

⁴⁰ #relationshipgoals is a hashtag used across different social media platforms on pictures/videos of couples. There are over 20 million posts with this hashtag on Instagram alone. I will offer a fuller account of the hashtag and participants’ descriptions of it below.

members of Group Two also made this distinction and, as is evident in the images below, both Groups responded in very similar ways. It may have been the name of the activity that stimulated such reflections from participants. I chose #relationshipgoals as a prompt in an attempt to utilise language I anticipated participants were familiar with, drawing from my own engagement with Instagram and internet culture. Within these maps, ‘online/social media’ is largely dismissed by participants as being related to the aesthetics of the ‘perfect appearance’ or ‘to look good’, with multiple participants characterising this as ‘showing off’. Offline, in comparison, is where you ‘don’t show off’, with participants noting that ‘aesthetics aren’t as important IRL [in real life]’. As with notions of ‘puppy love’, a differentiation is made here based upon what participants perceive as being the motivation for or benefits of being in a relationship. Because they perceive the offline aspects of relationships as being related to the more affective ‘goals’ of intimacy – ‘caring’, ‘trusting’, ‘listening’, ‘respect’ and ‘feeling good’ – it is more readily considered to be ‘real’ or ‘true’. While the online, with its goals of ‘drama’, ‘pressure’ and ‘amount of followers’ raises questions of authenticity for them. My analysis here is informed by the powerful way this was represented in the following, participant generated images.



Image 6: Summer #relationshipgoals Activity

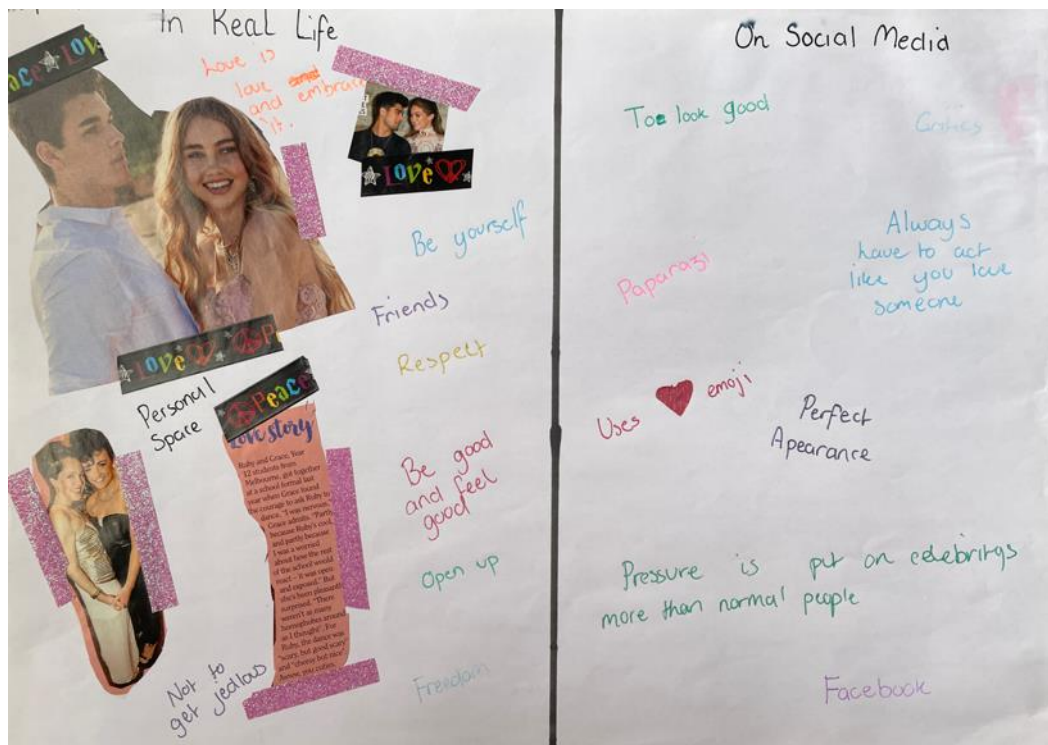


Image 7: Dylan #relationshipgoals Activity

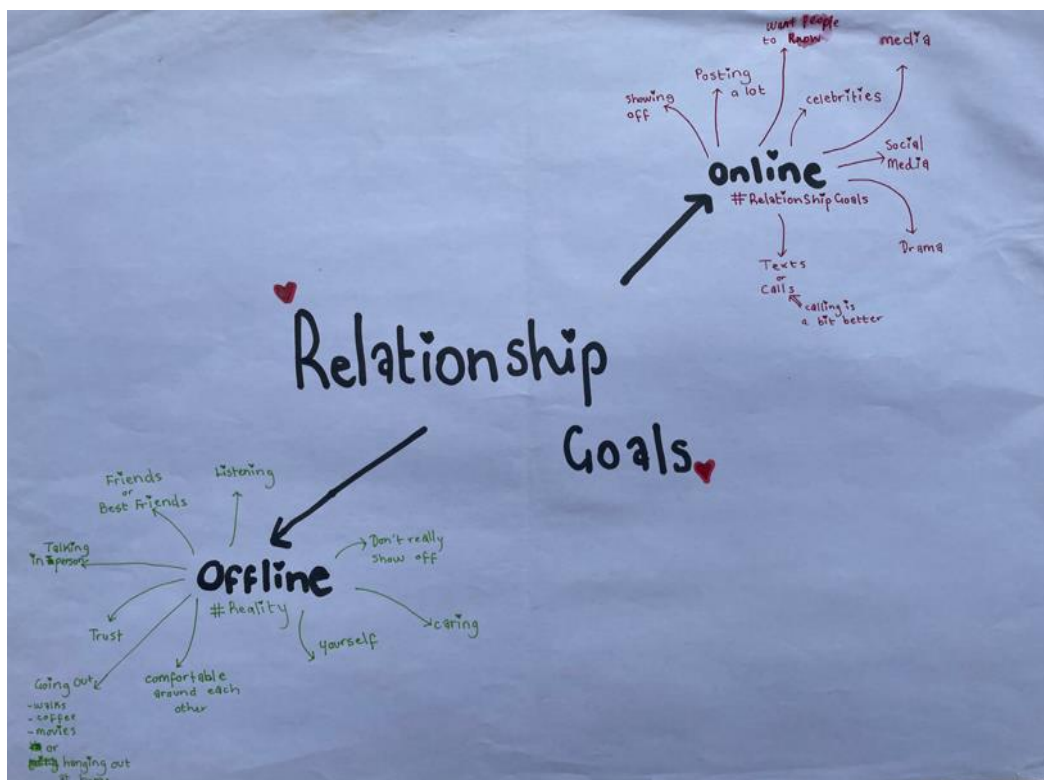


Image 8: Starburst #relationshipgoals

In their individual interviews, Starburst described ‘cute’ as ‘staged’, while Patrisha suggested it was ‘far from reality’. Bob took this a little further, explaining:

Cos like, you could post a photo of you and your boyfriend, or you and your girlfriend, like being really happy and all that, but then maybe next time you see them or in person, you’re actually like, not happy, something like that.

One of the contradictions young people grappled with in these discussions was that despite public social media activity providing legitimacy to a couple, it was the *publicness* of these intimate interactions that simultaneously brought up questions of authenticity from those who witnessed (and participated in or authorised) them. In particular, there was a level of distrust of visual/online content from participants and they questioned the images/videos of a ‘happy couple’ they were seeing on their feeds. As Tim Tam explained: ‘it’s very visual as well, like it’s not, like the couple that just made out on your iPhone, they could, like hate each other, you know, they could be like, really abusive’.

In part, this mistrust was because participants were unable to bear witness to what was being posted in real life, as a way to verify its authenticity. But also, there was a keen awareness of the careful selection of what to post in order to uphold and curate ‘cute’. This is something Alice alluded to earlier when she described her own relationship as ‘not as great’ as it appears online. Group Two explored this idea further:

Starburst: I think some people choose to flaunt their relationship online

Stacey: Like I think some people just want a relationship to make it look pretty, not to actually love the person

Tim Tam: For the sake of having a relationship

Starburst: And to get people to comment relationship goals

In this excerpt, Starburst, Stacey, and Tim Tam seemingly question the authenticity of ‘some people’ who post their relationship online, because of the motivations behind such posting. There is a recognition of the connection between being in a relationship and the proximity to social capital, or popularity. Attached to such notions is a belief that young people who engage in ‘cute’ are aware of how to do this in a way that attracts likes and gets people to comment #relationshipgoals. This is similar to young people’s dismissals of ‘puppy love’ as not real that I analysed in Chapter Four.

The way participants attempt to make sense of this authenticity is also tied up in how they understand more private communications that occur through mobile and social medias. I want to step away from ‘cute’ for a moment to consider these briefly here, as I suggest they point to a hierarchy of value around digitally mediated practices that also regulates perceptions of ‘cute’. A tension persists around what young people perceive to be the benefits of mobile and social medias, and how they understand its role in potentially disrupting or limiting their ability to generate meaningful intimacies, or more specifically, what they understand as ‘real’ intimacies (Baym, 2010; McGlotten, 2013). In part this also echoes similar tensions to those expressed by Alex and Summer in relation to feelings of nostalgia, and what was ‘real’ or authentic now compared to the past. Participants frequently noted the capacity for digitally mediated communication to, as Tim Tam suggested, get ‘real deep’ and facilitate connections that may not exist in the schoolyard.

Arnott: I guess, some people are kind of like, feel less, not, embarrassed to talk to someone over social media than in person

Starburst: Yeah, cos social, like you can kind of think about what you're saying, and you can type it but when it's face-to-face it doesn't feel like it's easier.

This was particularly important for young people whose significant other attended a different

school. As Starburst explained, ‘I think if you've got, like, if you can't see them, like if they go to another school or if they, like, live somewhere else like long distance or whatever, I think it's the best way to communicate’. However, it was also important for these online communications to translate into ‘real’ offline intimacy, otherwise, this is what Dan referred to this as having a ‘Snapchat boyfriend’, where ‘you say you're dating, and you don't talk at school and stuff’. This points to an imagined hierarchy between online and offline worlds that is mediated by perceptions of risk, negotiations of privacy and visibility, as well as ideas about what counts as ‘real’ or authentic intimacy. Through this hierarchy – albeit one with porous boundaries – we see the ways young people negotiate the role of technology in their intimacies and how this shapes norms for how they engage in communication with their intimate others. Digital scholars (Robards & Lincoln, 2016; Yang et al., 2014) have theorised similar hierarchies, ones that establish different technologies as related to the different stages of relationship progression. For Yang, Brown, and Braun (2014, p. 5), beginning with relationship initiation on Facebook, these ‘layers of electronic intimacy’ form a sequence whereby an increasing sense of intimacy in the relationship is accompanied by more personal forms of technological communication, culminating in text messages/phone calls (Yang et al., 2014). For my participants, there was less of a focus on the sequencing of these transitions, although this was part of it, and more emphasis placed on the ability to generate what they perceived as ‘real’ intimacy through these mediums. The quest for authenticity structures the hierarchy, and ‘cute’, with its very public and seemingly curated and contrived practices, sits at the bottom of this hierarchy.

However, these narratives extend the focus of digitally mediated intimacies beyond the notion of the clearly defined binary that participants reflected in their collages for the #relationshipgoals activity. Although participants often referred to relationships in binary terms as online = fake, offline = real, there were also contradictions and tensions in their ‘sense-

making’ of relationships that challenged such thinking. Online communications were ‘*shallow*’, whilst also allowing for deeper connection; ‘*awkward*’, but also ‘*less embarrassing*’. Throughout these discussions, questions of authenticity emerge as central to the way participants engaged with practices of ‘cute’, as well as with the increasing mediatisation and publicisation of intimacy more broadly. It is important to note that participants did not dismiss the *entire* relationship as fake, but there was a sense of recognition that what they are engaging with or witnessing on social media was deeply curated and performed according to certain codes of conduct or rules of engagement. Through these narratives, as well as the intimacy hierarchy and my earlier discussion of nostalgia, we see the way participants attempted to balance this uncertainty with their own experiences of intimacy in online/social media spaces.

Conclusion

The notion of the ‘intimate public’ has provided a valuable conceptual lens for understanding the ways in which young people participated in and potentially resisted enacting the practices associated with ‘cute’, while also consuming and making sense of them as a part of their everyday lives. This analysis has attempted to illuminate how young people are re-negotiating and re-imagining what intimacy – and by extension, their gender and sexuality identities – can and do look like in real time.

While I did not witness the posts, videos, or photos I refer to as ‘cute’ myself, and relied instead upon participant narratives, their salience to my own questions lies in part in the affective response they provoked in those who do engage with them, and the role these ‘cute’ practices played in shaping the norms of the intimate public and beyond. Whether or not such displays of intimacy are ‘real’ or not has little bearing on the way norms are shaped or displayed in this space. In participant narratives, we see #relationshipgoals and the ‘cute’ it inspires, positioned as something you *should* desire, even if you question the authenticity of these posts. Whether

that desire centres on having a partner, and/or as a way to generate ‘popularity capital’ through likes on social media. Through these narratives, we begin to see the *value* placed upon relationships more broadly but accrued through engaging with ‘cute’ more specifically. Participation in practices associated with cute is structured by an affective expectation, one that is suggestive of good life narratives that affix happiness to the achievement of being in love and/or in a relationship. In other words, you are affectively rewarded through your participation in ‘cute’.

Through exploring ‘cute’ as a genre in Berlant’s terms (Berlant, 2008), I have shown some of the ways in which young people’s intimacies remain legible largely through the prism of heteronormativity. If, as Berlant argues, a ‘genre is always a scene of potentiality, a promise of a certain affective experience’ (Berlant, 2008, p. 271), then ‘cute’ orientates young people to perform intimacy in very specific – heteronormative – ways. The hierarchy of intimacy demonstrates that young people *are* navigating their relationships in a hybrid form of online/offline communications and attempting to make sense of these interpersonal interactions in real time. Such accounts show the relational aspects of this learning, bringing forth the ways participants practice with one another *and* their intimate other. Young people are testing the boundaries of what is considered intimate, but also testing the ‘rules’ around how to communicate with their intimate other. They make moves to negotiate the risks – both to safety and to intimacy itself – while they embrace and question the possibilities for greater connection. This does not constitute a clear rejection or celebration of cute and online intimacies, but rather an ambivalence that exists somewhere between what they experience as the possibilities of technology and what they see as the potential pitfalls of becoming increasingly ‘online’. Notably, rather than an indiscriminate endorsement of the possibilities of digital technology, as many commentators and the popular press would have us believe, participants are cautious and critical of the ubiquity and reliance on digital technologies. To continue to view what

happens online as separate, or unreal, means a denial of both the very real care that happens in these places, the learnings and the identity work involved.

In Chapter Seven I extend analysis of how norms around gender and sexuality continue to hold power and shape young people's intimacies through exploration of the fuckboi, which I argue, offers insight into not only the persistence of such norms, but also an emerging gender politics of care.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CARE, SHAME, AND FUCKBOIS

Introduction

The preceding chapter examined the ways in which young people present and enact their intimate relationships through digital and social media. Building on this analysis, this chapter takes as its focus questions of morality, care, and shame, and the contexts in which young people navigate these dimensions of intimate relationships. To do this, I introduce the ‘fuckboi’ – a figure whose actions, and responses to them, crystallises these gendered dynamics and an attendant regime of moral double-standards.

I bring a close-up attention to young people’s navigation of this complex landscape, revealing both degrees of ambivalence and uncertainty along with some clear parameters and moral boundaries. In the course of my research, I observed a moral economy (Ahmed, 2010) emerging that strengthened the effects of shame imposed upon and felt by girls in relation to their sexuality and moral responsibility. Across a range of research activities and conversations, shame was mobilised in a number of different ways, which I analyse below in discussion of the circulation of unsolicited ‘dick pics’ and ‘nudes.’ Amy Dobson (2018) suggests that ‘through conceptualising the value of intimate and sexual media practices we can better conceptualise power and inequality’ (p. 95). Building on this provocation, I identify the active and productive agency of young people while also exposing some of the gendered dimensions of the difficult terrain they are trying to navigate and make sense of.

These discussions often proceeded in very binary ways, with the fuckboi frequently positioned as the tormentor of girls. The following accounts reflect the structure of these conversations – the way participants presented their reasoning to me – but I also attempt to unpack the binary categorisations of masculinities and femininities as always and only in opposition. In doing so,

I show the dominance of heteronormative regimes that continue to underpin the parameters of young people's moral economy.

One of the key aims of this thesis was to understand young people's agency in how they navigated their intimate relationships and sexuality. I conclude this chapter by considering the ways young people, and girls in particular, were able to mobilise around their capacity to name the 'fuckboi' and clearly identify and analyse the effects of this behaviour. To start, therefore, I introduce the 'fuckboi.'

The 'fuckboi'

The 'fuckboi' was a persistent presence throughout my fieldwork, as they are apparently in the everyday lives of young people. Jeremiah explained: 'fuckbois are just prominent everywhere. They're like, scattered around. Like, 1 in 5 dudes is a fuckboi or whatever.' Given this prominence, during the second last session with Group Two, I asked the group 'so, tell me about fuckbois.' I noted after the session that it felt like the group were excited to be asked about fuckbois and during this interaction, I had to remind them to only speak one at a time. Nevertheless, it was difficult to catch all of their responses on the recording.

Bob: They're stupid.

Jeremiah: Male equivalent of a slut

Sam: What does that mean?

Dan: A guy that just goes around

Jeremiah: Gets around

Patrisha: And just uses people

Starburst: They don't have any self-respect-

Dan: -they don't have any respect for women

Bob: I'd just say it's like them using you and then just, like, not respecting you in any way at all.

Sam: Yeah. And by you, you mean?

Dan: Women

For Starburst, they 'just chat you up and then just not talk to you or get what they want and go'; with Bob agreeing and adding 'and then you might think there's like, a connection there or something and then they just like, leave.' Keith McIntosh describes them as, 'kind of like pirates, in the way that they like, find a treasure, and they like, take it back and they use it, and then they just find another one.' I asked the group what it was the fuckbois wanted:

Dan: They act real nice, until they get what they want

Starburst: Exactly

Dan: Which is either sex or, sex related things

Bob: Yeah, the majority sexual stuff

Sam: Sex or sexting?

Dan: Yeah, either one or the two. Then once that's happened, they're gone.

Bob: They just ditch you

Dan: Onto the next woman

Sam: Yeah. And so what happens to the girl?

Dan: Left in the dirt

As the discussion with Group Two continued, they explained the ‘different levels of fuckbois’ (Bob). Bob characterised a ‘mild’ fuckboi, as being ‘where they just kind of flirt with you [...] but it doesn’t mean anything to them and it’s kind of like, leading you on.’ For the girls in the group, this kind of fuckboi was one that played with your ‘like, emotions’ (Starburst). Bob described the ‘bigger’ level of a fuckboi as where they ‘just want sex or stuff.’ This was referred to as a ‘top-tier fuckboi’ by Dan, with the ‘stuff’ Bob refers to largely related to making persistent requests for digital images – ‘nudes,’ or the sending of unsolicited images of their genitals (‘dick pics’). These are the two practices of the fuckboi I will be focusing on in this chapter. Although it is difficult to discern clear boundaries between the different ‘levels,’ the pattern to the fuckbois’ behaviour appears to be the same: they ‘act real nice until they get what they want’ (Dan), whether that be emotional engagement, sexual images, or sexual activity, and then ‘they just ditch you’ (Bob). As Patrisha astutely observes, ‘like both of the levels have the same kind of outcome when the girls like, they’ll still be feeling hurt and like...’

Unlike discussions of young people reported in other research (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Salter, 2016; Thomas, 2018), participants in my study *did* critique fuckbois’ behaviours. Within participant narratives, the fuckboi provoked an affective response of disgust; they’re ‘stupid’ (Bob) or they’re ‘gross’ (Alice). Participants’ statements demonstrated that the fuckboi – or their behaviours towards girls/women – were generally not well liked and were to be avoided (at least by this group of young people). Further, there was a sense among participants that many fuckbois would in fact deny any association with the behaviour of a fuckboi:

Starburst: Then if it came to people confronting you about it, they’d be like, no, I’m not like that. I would never do that. Yeah.

Sam: And do people confront them?

Patrisha: I think sometimes probably change the story and turn it on the girl.

Jeremiah: That's when the whole like, labelling comes it, when he gets confronted about it, that's when it's like, he's the victim and the girl's the slut.

Lee and Crofts (2015) suggest that boys who share sexual images can be shamed for their behaviours, however they note that 'there is no equivalent of "slut" that is likely to have the same derogatory implications' for boys (p. 458). I suggest that naming the 'fuckboi' creates a similar kind of category and provides young people with a way to describe and repudiate behaviours enacted by boys/men that are recognised as harmful. However, there are obvious limits to this categorisation. We see in this exchange that a double-standard persists, where despite the poor behaviour of the fuckboi: 'he's the victim and the girl's the slut.' It is unclear whether the 'disgust' directed towards the fuckboi has the affective capacity to *do* anything that will challenge any kind of gendered power differentials or double-standards in any material ways for young women. To unpack this further, I now explore what participants identified as potential motivations for the fuckbois behaviours.

Boys asking for nudes: the value of bodies and (re)producing masculinities

The notion that fuckbois lacked respect for women arose frequently in our discussions. Jeremiah noted that 'a lot of guys don't really respect women that much'; and more specifically 'I'd say like, a fuckboi, his perception of women isn't that they're people. Just sexual objects.' Notably, Starburst was the only participant to bring forth the notion of a lack of 'self-respect' in the context of the fuckboi. This contrasts starkly with characterising the behaviour of girls when sharing/receiving pictures as I elaborate below. In our individual interview, I asked Jeremiah what fuckbois should be doing to respect women: 'I guess with fuckbois, not being a fuckboi! Like, just don't play with their feelings, I guess. You know? Like, you're just copping a nude and to what, like, fuck with her feelings?' Participants noted on a number of occasions that such lack of respect is demonstrated through the way the fuckboi takes what he wants

(largely sex/sexual images) and leaves the girl, as Dan says, in the ‘dirt.’ Researchers exploring youth heterosexual masculinities (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Holland et al., 1998; Richardson, 2010) have suggested that the desire to exercise such power over girls/women has been traditionally framed as ‘doing’ heterosexual masculinity right. This is not just an expression of the culturally dominant form of masculinity, but the ‘expression of the privilege men *collectively* have over women’ (Connell, 1996, p. 209). Participant accounts here position the motivations behind the fuckbois’ behaviours in similar ways.

In attempting to make sense of the persistent requesting and non-consensual sharing of nudes by the fuckboi, Jeremiah and Dan offer further insight:

Jeremiah: There’s a big, um, thing around getting nudes and shit. Like, getting ‘in.’ But it’s all fake. Like, it’s not genuine, you know?”

Sam: So, when they get the nudes, they share them with each other? Or it’s just like, “oh, I’ve got 5! How many have you got?”

Jeremiah: I don’t know, I really don’t know. I wouldn’t say they show them to each other, cos like, on Snapchat you can like screenshots and people know⁴¹ But it’s more like “oh, she sent me nudes” instead of “oh, look at these nudes”

Sam: So, it’s just like bragging?

Jeremiah: Yeah, pretty much.

Although Jeremiah acknowledges that they do not always share the actual images, he suggests that the fuckboi recognises the value of possessing images of girls’ bodies (Ravn et al., 2021;

⁴¹ Snapchat messages are ephemeral, they only last for 10 seconds. You have the opportunity to replay a message that has been sent to you one time, before it disappears forever. You can take a screenshot of a message that has been sent to you, *however*, the person that sent the message will be notified.

Ringrose & Harvey, 2015), as well as the potential power this gives them over the girl depicted in the image. I asked if this is how fuckbois think they will get a girlfriend, and he responded 'I don't think it's how they think they'd get a girlfriend. I think it's more; I don't know! I really don't like, personally, I'm not like that. So, I can't really speak from that.' Dan highlighted this further, noting what he saw as a relic of outdated stereotypes that place value on the objectification of women's bodies and the value accrued through circulation of these images:

My mate showed me photos of girls and there's no shame. They are proud of themselves. It's the whole idea that if a girl gets with heaps of guys, she's a slut. If a guy gets with heaps of girls, he's a man. It's that whole stereotype. It's just backwards.

Although Jeremiah and Dan do not admit to requesting nudes themselves in this way and make multiple attempts to distance themselves from this behaviour, they do offer some insight into the potential motivations of fuckbois and their quest for nudes. While Jeremiah notes that there is 'no shame' among the fuckbois when sharing the photos between their male friends, his earlier suggestion that the fuckboi was unlikely to take a screenshot of an image on Snapchat, implies that they (fuckbois) are somewhat aware/afraid of potential repercussions. The boys narratives here seemingly hint at what Jessica Ringrose and colleagues have categorised as the 'homosocial exchange economy of youth sexting' (Ringrose et al., 2021b, p. 14), whereby images of girls' bodies are used to obtain bragging rights and/or assurance from your friends (see also: Mandau, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021).

Although participants identified an adherence to traditional notions of heterosexual masculinity as the key impetus behind the behaviours of the fuckboi, I also suggest that through Dan and Jeremiah's narratives here and their strong denouncement of the fuckboi, we see alternative versions of heterosexual masculinities emerging that potentially disrupt the dominance of the fuckboi. It is not only that Jeremiah and Dan do not engage in 'sexting' they both assured me

that it was a 'normal' part of being 'young.' However, it is evident in their prioritisation of intimacy, respect, and consent in these interactions, and in ways that demonstrate an ethics of care that the fuckbois seemingly do not possess (Ravn et al., 2021). However, participants also frequently noted the fuckbois were the 'popular' boys, who Patrisha described as 'those popular boys kind of have more power over the rest.' The fuckboi then, can be considered a way of 'doing' hegemonic masculinity, which Kerry Robinson (2005) explains, as a 'dynamic, socially and historically sanctioned performance that is generally rewarded with power and popularity' (p.22). So, despite participants apparent dislike and lack of respect for the fuckboi, the fuckboi seemingly remains at the top of the school's social hierarchy regardless.

While the fuckboi was spoken about most frequently in this research in terms of boys wielding power over girls, Tim Tam also shared his experiences with fuckbois, telling me in our individual interview: 'the thing is, I've had my fair share of fuckbois, there's one guy at this school, I'm not gonna name names, but he is still in the closet, but he was like, asking me for nudes and everything, sending me nudes and it was like, "ok, back off please"':

Sam: And you like, how did that make you feel?

Tim Tam: Well, it, just kind of like, mmm, no. Cos like, no, I just NO! Like, like, at the very least, I'd wanna be like, 6 months into a relationship before any of that kind of stuff started, and he, isn't out of the closet and, isn't looking for a relationship, as far as I know, and was basically, you know, trying to use me as like a porn site and I was like. No. Um, and so I basically, I was like "I don't want to talk to you anymore, goodbye" and I was like, I didn't I didn't like, oh, it's weird, cos like, I yelled at him and like, confronted him and was like "no" and I said, I didn't say particularly nasty stuff, but I said relevant stuff that was nasty [laughing] so it wasn't like bullying, it was just like, teaching him a

lesson. Um, and, but he just keeps coming back, because, gay boys that don't have any other options are horny and desperate, I'll tell you that.

Tim Tam went on to share an experience with another guy: 'it's just like, they're all so desperate, like I was desperate, but [exhales], it's just like a constant.' Tim Tam notes that the fuckbois sending him/requesting the images are 'still in the closet,' suggesting that it is unlikely they are attempting to gain a social reward through ownership of the images. There is a lack of research exploring sexting and unsolicited image exchange for LGBTIQ+ young people (Albury & Byron, 2014), and that which exists largely focuses on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ young people (aged 18+) on dating apps (see: Albury & Byron, 2016; Dietzel, 2021; Tziallas, 2015). This research suggests that the sending/requesting of dick pics is viewed differently within queer relations compared to heterosexual relations (Paasonen et al., 2019; Tziallas, 2015), particularly for gay men where it can be considered 'a part of the culture' (Bonilla et al., 2021). Unlike the way Jeremiah and Dan describe the motivations of the heterosexual fuckboi in this research, according to Tim Tam, the aim of the 'gay boys' is sexual, a way to express their desire towards another boy and what seems like their ineffective attempts to have it reciprocated. He does not view these practices as desirable however, and while he displays a guarded empathy for their situation – 'like *I* was desperate' – he is also frustrated by these constant requests. Tim Tam positions his function here as an 'object' of desire to the fuckboi – the 'porn site' – rather than as an active and consenting participant in the process. In this way, and in the persistence of the fuckbois' behaviour beyond Tim Tam's clear 'no,' there is a suggestion that the gay fuckbois attempt to gain access to the rewards (power) typically associated with the 'popular' heteronormative masculinity as described above.

Sexting with/out consent

Before I examine the ways participants discussed fuckbois in greater depth, it is first important to consider the definitional distinctions between what participants referred to as sexting (with consent) and the ways they described fuckbois as always ‘asking for nudes.’ Sexting, defined by Amy Hasinoff (2015b) as ‘the creation and sharing of personal sexual images or text messages via mobile phones or internet applications, including Facebook, Snapchat, and email.’ (p. 1). I never asked participants to unpack specifically what it was that they considered to be a ‘nude,’ however in their work with young women in New Zealand, Thorburn et al. (2021) found that ‘an image may be perceived as a nude if it involves at least some degree of semi-nakedness and could be interpreted as sexually suggestive.’ (p. 4). Sexting was, according to Group Two, an ‘inevitable’ part of youth relationships, as Dan described: ‘there’s the two sides to it, the intimate side and then there’s just the fuckboi asking a chick for nudes and getting pressured into it.’ Similarly, in a discussion with Group One, Alex shared: ‘people within relationships sending each other nudes, I don’t see a problem with that. If it’s just boys going around sending pics to random girls or to people, then that’s a problem. That’s definitely a problem.’

These statements highlight a very clear distinction between the ‘intimate side’ of sexting and a ‘fuckboi’ pressuring a ‘chick for nudes,’ Bob characterises the difference as ‘like, the right and kind of wrong ways to do it. Like, with respect. Like, there’s asking for nudes and then there’s sexting, like, with consent.’ Far from being considered as *only* shameful (Albury & Crawford, 2012; de Ridder, 2019), participants describe sexting as a potentially ‘intimate’ experience, particularly when done within a relationship, where respect is also present. Tim Tam and Alice both noted that they would want to be ‘at least six months’ into a relationship before considering sharing a sexual image with someone and they reinforced the importance of these

practices happening *within* a relationship (Meehan, 2021), and one that had been long enough to ensure the relationship is ‘real,’

Notions of ‘consent’ were also key to this distinction. Given the ways participants described the fuckbois persistence in asking for nudes, I asked Group Two:

Sam: So, do you think if someone's being pressured and they send a photo, is that consent?

Group: No! [a very definite no]

Sam: What does consent mean then?

Dan: Both partners are OK with it.

Jeremiah: Verbally agreeing and making it clear that it's OK.

Patrisha: And like, there's not that pressure

Bob: And it's not like one side of, like, not one person wants to, like, they both want it.

In describing consent, participants draw upon ideal notions of ‘affirmative consent’⁴² a model of consent advocated by feminist activists and anti-rape legal reformers (Hasinoff, 2015b) and one that relies on ‘clear, voluntary, and direct mutual communication’ (Hasinoff, 2015a, p. 59). Media and education scholars have advocated broadening notions of ‘affirmative consent’ to include sexting and the sharing of sexual images (Albury et al., 2017; Hasinoff, 2015b).

Participants’ understanding of consent in relation to the sharing of images also extended to an

⁴² Affirmative consent is a model for consent that depends on ‘clear, voluntary, and direct mutual communication’ (Hasinoff, 2015a, p. 59). Colloquially referred to as ‘yes means yes’ (Gilbert, 2018). Affirmative sexual consent laws have recently (November 2021) been passed in the Australian state of New South Wales.

awareness of legal frameworks, with Jeremiah expressing that ‘age comes into play as well. Like, age difference. It’s like, it could be consensual, like between an 18-year-old and like, a 14-year-old, but that’s still like, morally wrong. Yeah.’ What Jeremiah describes here is actually illegal under Australian law;⁴³ but he focuses on the moral implications of the age/power imbalance, implying an awareness that this is *probably* not consensual. Participants in Group One had a similar discussion around sexting more broadly:

Summer: I think it’s actually illegal.

Alex: Under-

Alice: Under 18.

Alex: Yeah.

Summer: Under 18, it’s illegal, yeah.

Alice: I think it also depends on who you’re sending it to, in terms of the legal side of it.

Alex: Okay.

Summer: Maybe.

Alice: Oh yeah, of course. If you send, if you’re an adult who sends maybe, under age people, then that’s even worse, I think, than just two kids doing it.

Despite a lack of ‘formal’ education around sexting, participants are somewhat aware of the criminal implications of sharing and possessing ‘nudes,’ As Patrisha explained:

⁴³ In Australia, sexting is criminalised under Child Pornography laws, which state that it is illegal to possess sexual imagery of a person under 18 years of age (Crofts & Lievens, 2018)

but still, even if you both have your consent, it's still gonna be on there forever. Like, what if, I dunno, I'm thinking of like the, something that's probably never gonna happen, but what if cops check your phone or something, like for something bullying thing that happens, or? Cos, I know, I think, someone got, it was a rumour that someone got suspended cos they had nudes on their phone, but yeah.

Participants demonstrate an imprecise understanding of the legal frameworks (Albury et al., 2013), though they are aware of the potential ramifications of storing sexual images of underage people on a phone. Participants' discussion of consent in these situations is largely focused on the sending of images within a relationship, rather than the non-consensual sharing of images to people *outside* a relationship. There was limited discussion of the bounded nature of consent. By this I mean, an awareness that in sending a person a sexual image, you are giving *them* consent to view this image – but this does not mean you give consent for them to then share this image with *others*.

These narratives draw attention to participants' complex and critical understandings and navigations of norms and ethics (Albury et al., 2013) around sexting and getting/sending 'nudes.' While there seems to be an awareness of the potential power imbalances at play that may actually negate consent in certain contexts – whether that be through age or coercion – I suggest that participants also had difficulty applying this understanding of consent to their current social and cultural realities. In particular, difficulties seemed to emerge around the gendered moralising and individualised notions of 'risk,' particularly for girls, as I discuss below.

Girls *sending* nudes: individualising risk and choice

In this section, I explore girls' considerations of being asked for and sending 'nudes' of themselves; importantly, the girls in my research displayed a critical awareness of perceived risks attached to the sending of nude pictures (Henry & Powell, 2015; Needham, 2021; Powell & Henry, 2014; Thorburn et al., 2021). In our individual interview, Bob considered whether she would send a nude:

I've never done it and I don't think I will want to because it's my body and anything can happen over social media. Even if they don't screenshot, they can have a phone behind them like taking a photo or something it's pretty... I've heard a lot of people do that and it's just so wrong. I'd rather not do that.

For Bob, refraining from sending a nude is about bodily autonomy; she wants to have control over how her body is seen and by whom. She displays an awareness of potential tactics used by fuckbois to circumnavigate the screenshot⁴⁴ feature of Snapchat, and ultimately worries that her nude will be 'leaked' (as a photo or as gossip): 'There's people that have done that and it's always ended up bad. It's always leaked.'

Awareness of the high value placed on images of women's bodies (Dobson, 2015; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Setty, 2019) and of the potential for nudes to get 'leaked'⁴⁵ or become a form of 'revenge porn'⁴⁶ (Henry & Powell, 2015) permeated girls' accounts of fuckbois and consensual sexting more broadly. While the non-consensual sharing of nudes was something participants

⁴⁴ When someone takes a screenshot of an image they have received on Snapchat, the sender of the image is notified.

⁴⁵ Participants did not offer a specific definition for what 'leaked' meant; but examples included images being posted on stories, sent to others via digital and social media, and/or shown to others through the phone.

⁴⁶ Henry and Powell (2018) define 'revenge porn' as 'the creation, distribution, or threat of distribution, of intimate or sexually explicit images without their consent' (p. 201). My participants rarely used this terminology, instead preferring more casual language like 'getting nudes sent around' or 'sending nudes around.'

mentioned often, none spoke of their own experiences of having their private images ‘leaked’. Instead, they mentioned the experiences of friends, or girls at school who had their images sent around:

Amy: I know that I know there's a few boys that, do get pictures off girls that, they send them around and stuff. Like it happened to um, one of my friends

Sam: And is she ok?

Amy: She, yeah, she was kind of like, she kind of just, she's an idiot though

The threat of ‘revenge porn’ was something that shaped girls’ decision-making and was also seen by many young people as a factor that *should* influence them to make the ‘right’ decisions when it came to sexting. There is an unstated expectation for a ‘rational’ and responsible decision; that is, because they know what happens (how the fuckboi might behave), these girls should know better, or not be an ‘idiot’ as Amy suggests and have the good sense to refuse such requests.

This idea of ‘choice’ was important to the way young people made sense of nudes and in particular, the repercussions for nudes being sent around by fuckbois. For example, Patrisha told me that ‘having your nudes sent around’ was not a concern for her personally, because ‘it’s something you can control.’ She hesitated a little, trying to find the words to explain what she meant, ‘the thing is, I don’t understand how other girls feel about it.’ I asked her how *she* felt about it: ‘For me, I think it’s avoidable. Like, just say no and it’s not gonna happen. But yeah. Some girls want the attention and then they don’t think of the, what could happen.’

In this interaction, Patrisha doesn’t want to speak on behalf of ‘other girls’ but ultimately circled back around to lay the blame on girls who ‘want the attention.’ There is some ambivalence here, as Patrisha hesitated, noting ‘I probably shouldn’t say that,’ indicating that

she is somewhat uneasy about the moral position she is attempting to take, but continued, nevertheless. Earlier in our discussion, Patrisha told me that ‘some girls would give in easily’ to sending nudes, hinting further at the persistence and pressure placed upon girls by fuckbois to send the image. This was something Group Two also discussed:

Sam: So, if a “top tier fuckboi” is asking a girl who is not maybe, I don't know not in a relationship, constantly for pictures is there a possibility that she can consent to that?

Bob: I guess it's just by choice. Like, if she wants to then sure

Dan: Most girls probably would feel pressured into saying yes. Would you?

Bob: Yeah. Oh, like top fuckboi. That, yeah. Yeah.

Sam: You'd feel pressured to say yes?

Bob: Yeah.

Patrisha: But that doesn't mean that you'd necessarily send it?

Bob: Yeah. It's all by choice. And like, if you are like fully pressured, then I guess some people would just be pressured and say yes, but like, if you've got enough, like strength, just say, no.

Starburst: I feel like it's pretty easy. Once you say no the first time and they keep asking, you can just not open the messages.

These statements further highlight the complex negotiations participants are attempting to make around what is considered ‘consent,’ toying with positions that are somewhat at odds with their earlier views. Specifically, these narratives show the way notions of personal choice and responsibility seem to trump earlier ideas about pressure from fuckbois in effect negating

consent. The girls in particular appear to be expressing a postfeminist dilemma – if you want to send a nude, then you should be able to. But if you chose to send a nude and it gets leaked, you should have been more responsible, or made better choices. That is, a postfeminist sensibility suggests gendered equality has been achieved, and thus young women are positioned as ‘empowered’ to make their own choices (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Budgeon, 2015; Gill, 2016). Harris and Dobson (2015) suggest, however, that this is ‘conditional on explicit analyses of a gendered structure of power being relinquished’ (Harris & Dobson, 2015, p. 150). The girls in this research were not unaware of the power the fuckboi holds and wields, and they were affectively aware of the double-standard response to his behaviours. As Bob explained: ‘the thing is like, if you do say no, like the tables can always turn and like, he could, I dunno, like make stories up and go tell everyone.’ Yet it was not always clear to me that they were able to extend or apply this reasoning to build a more empathetic understanding of others, specifically to other young women. However, this is complicated by what I characterise their networks of care and solidarity that I discuss later.

I now want to return to Patrisha’s naming of ‘some girls’ as being the ones who are positioned as being more likely to ‘give in’ to fuckbois requests.

The moral economy and the ‘right’ kind of relationships

Bob referred more specifically to ‘those girls’ as ‘sluts’ or ‘hoes’ which she explained to me in our individual interview:

I'd say a hoe is kind of like a fuckboi. You can call them a slut, but I don't really like that word. It's like a milder word is a hoe because it's going around and basically a fuckboi but a girl version. It's doing the same stuff, but just the girl doing it. Using guys. You don't see it as often as guys, but I guess it's not also just the girl. It could be the fuckboi, but the girl turns

into a hoe because she's just going around sleeping with other guys or fucking around with other guys and making everyone feel uncomfortable.

Bob displays some guarded empathy towards the slut here. In her attempts to explain these behaviours, she also seems to recognise that girls can be unjustly labelled a slut or a hoe. And yet, it is the hoe who ultimately makes 'everyone feel uncomfortable,'

You don't just call someone a slut unless you know they are. [...] You wouldn't just go around calling a random girl a slut if they have hooked up with one guy because they could actually like that person or something.

Bob hints at just how bad it is to be designated a slut by your peers and friends, but distinguishes this behaviour as potentially being based on actually 'liking' someone, rather than, in her words just 'fucking around,' A key distinction emerges between someone who might be a slut, and someone who is with a guy for the right, morally acceptable reasons:

Sam: So, in terms of having sex with someone you are not getting called a hoe or a slut if you are having sex with somebody [while] in a relationship?

Bob: If it's outside of a relationship and I guess if you have it once or twice with the same person it's not as bad. If you are going around with random people then, yes. If you are in a relationship, it's definitely not classified as a hoe because there's a connection there and you are together so it's your kind of thing. It's fun. It just depends on the people. I definitely wouldn't call anyone in a relationship a hoe because they are in a relationship, so they have made themselves commit to this person, so they are definitely not. If someone does call someone a hoe in a relationship that's really wrong. It doesn't make sense why you would.

In Bob's response, the different layers of a 'moral economy' start to become visible (see also:

Skeggs, 2004) in which ‘moral distinctions of worth are also social distinctions of value’ (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 34). ‘Moral distinctions’ here are based upon what Bob identifies as being in a relationship for the right reasons (commitment, actually liking someone, or to learn), rather than just ‘fucking around.’ The figure of the slut/hoe that Bob attempts to describe has a negative affective value, through a gendered association with what has traditionally been considered unacceptable, or more specifically, shameful: that is, heterosexual girls’ desire beyond the bounds of what is considered a loving, trusting relationship (see also: Maxwell, 2006; Summit et al., 2016; Tolman, 2002). The moral economy, therefore, suggests that being in a relationship for the ‘right’ reasons has a positive affective value, one that denotes ‘who is worthy as well as capable of being happy “in the right way”’ (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 13).

‘Shame’ is frequently theorised as attached to women’s and girls’ sexuality as a regulating affect – (See: Attwood, 2007; Dobson, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2012) –and is central to maintaining this moral economy. It is important to note that Bob talks about sluts/hoes without ever drawing upon any specific girls or giving details of the instances of this behaviour that she has encountered. She relies instead on generic ‘myths’ (Attwood, 2007) and prevailing narratives that sustain the moral economy, regardless of what she actually feels or experiences herself. However, the way shame ‘sticks’ to the *idea* of the ‘slut,’ affectively functions as a ‘deterrent’ for Bob, and she feels that in order to avoid this herself, she must adhere to the ‘scripts of normative existence’ (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 106–107).

Group Two provided a different perspective by suggestion that having your nudes leaked was less likely if girls sent them while they were in a relationship:

Dan: yeah, she can get definitely more of a bad rep, than the dude would

Sam: Even if it was in a relationship?

Dan: Yep, oh, if you're in a relationship, it wouldn't be seen as, *as* bad I don't reckon. It's a common thing.

Starburst: I think it's different in a relationship

Bob: It's mutual if it's in a relationship

Jeremiah: If a guy does that, leaks a chick's nudes, that's gonna, that's definitely gonna reflect badly on him. For sure, if you're in a consensual relationship and then you put something like that, everyone's just going to think you're a Dick.

Starburst: It's also less likely [if you're in a relationship]

Sam: But only if you're in a relationship?

Jeremiah: Yeah. It depends on the circumstances.

I asked, 'and if you're not in a relationship?':

Dan: It would be less bad for the boy

Bob: But it's still worse on the girl.

These exchanges not only point to the nuances of coding morally acceptable conduct, but they also reveal remarkably heteronormative and gendered constructions of what counts as a proper relationship, and how it can offer a soft, if unreliable, protective space for young women. In the context of the fuckboi, I suggest the moral economy maintains its strength amongst the girls in particular, because it promises some protection from the social ramifications of being associated with a fuckboi. Even if inconsistently. Similarly, in their research with young men who engage in sexting, Roberts and colleagues (2021) have defined this in terms of a 'hierarchy of respect' (p.38), whereby the different levels of 'attachment' (i.e., in a relationship, flirting, hooking up) are connected to the amount of respect afforded to girls by their male partners

(Roberts et al., 2021).

The stigma of receiving unsolicited dick pics

I now want to return to a specific behaviour of the fuckboi that young people, and in particular young girls, spoke about frequently: the sending of dick pics via mobile and social media, focussing on non-consensual sharing of dick pics in a heterosexual⁴⁷ context. As I described above, I draw a distinction – one made very clearly by the participants – between consensual sexting, which may include the sending of dick pics at the request of a partner, and the non-consensual sending of a dick pic, or an ‘unsolicited dick pic,’ a practice referred to by Ringrose and colleagues as ‘cyber-flashing’ (2021b, p. 1). Although participants didn’t use this terminology, instead preferring the term ‘dick pic,’ I use ‘unsolicited’ in an attempt to draw a clear line between mutually consensual and unsolicited sharing of images. As I reasoned above, consent, and not only the sexual nature of the images being circulated, is a critical issue here. Even so, it is important to acknowledge that participants never specifically identified unsolicited dick pics as a form of digital sexual harassment (Ringrose et al., 2021b).

I begin with a discussion among some of the girls about ‘dick pics’:

Summer: Yes, it’s very. Sexting and asking girls for the boobs pics or “do you wanna see my dick?”, or just dick pics, is very, very, very common.

Sam: How does that happen in the first place?

Summer: Sometimes you just get up on Snapchat, straight away it’ll just come up, see it and that’s it. Just send it straight away.

In such contexts, there is no opportunity for the boys to seek or gain consent for the sharing of

⁴⁷ Although it is important to note that not all the girls who receive unsolicited dick pics are heterosexual.

an image, nor any discussion about whether the receiver is interested in seeing a picture of their penis. In our individual interview, I also asked Amy if she had ever been sent any unsolicited dick pics:

Amy: Yeah, I have. Normally, it's not even, like – obviously I don't ask for it – but people just send it, like we want it or something.

Sam: And do you?

Amy: no! It's gross!

An account of unsolicited dick pics as 'gross' was a common theme throughout participant narratives, with the girls often expressing feelings of disgust and bewilderment that 'fuckbois' thought this was an appropriate form of communication. 'Gross,' here was affectively directed towards the boys who sent the pictures, and more specifically their penises in a way that marked this behaviour as undesirable. This is similar to the affective response provoked by the fuckboi more broadly, one of disgust:

Amy: Just gross. Like, to think that guys actually think that's ok. To just like, send it. Like, without even, like, even if they ask, that's still, not, like, not cool dude.

Bob: Even if I do get one, I don't feel like, "Oh my god that's nice" I feel really grossed out because I don't want to see that.

These observations further suggest that even within a relationship the girls would be reluctant to *receive* a dick pic. However, there is also a possibility, given the ways girls' expression of sexuality is highly regulated (Dobson, 2015; Egan, 2013; Renold & Ringrose, 2016), as well as the gendered moral economy, that they may be reluctant to admit their desire to receive a dick pic, and particularly from someone they are not in a relationship with. Waling and Pym

(2019) have argued that public commentary surrounding dick pics has served to reinforce such feelings, further limiting considerations of girls' sexuality, pleasure, and desire. The outcome of this then, and something that emerges from my participants' narratives, is that it is potentially thought of as shameful to *want to* see a dick pic. In the excerpt below Patrisha unsuccessfully attempts to imagine an occasion on which she would desire a dick pic.

maybe if I was with someone and we were doing stuff or something, but I don't want to [...] like it doesn't give me any pleasure at all. It's kind of like, that's gross. I don't want to see that. If something came up in my phone, I'd just turn it off a bit. No, just, no!

Given their disgust at the dick pics and their very clear lack of desire to receive them, the girls remained unsure as to why the boys sent the images in the first place. Bob offers a potential explanation:

I don't get any dick pics anymore, but sometimes guys just send me photos of them in their jocks or something. I still don't want that. I actually want someone to talk to me. I don't want to see that. It doesn't make me happy at all. Just makes me feel like they want my body because they are sending photos of their body.

For Bob, it *feels* like they are only after her body, yet this is felt as a kind of shame, and as something for which she is potentially responsible. She explained this further, telling me: 'I'd feel bad about myself because that's come to me. It could have gone to any other girl, but it's come to me. I'd feel like, maybe people would think I like that, but I don't.' This was a common feeling for girls when discussing unsolicited dick pics, as I explore further through Summer's experience.

Attempting to make sense of the shame

For Summer, there was a particular experience with an unsolicited dick pic that she spoke about frequently during our sessions and in our individual interviews she gave a fuller account of this. Summer was ‘talking to’⁴⁸ a boy she knew from primary school. She was enjoying their chats, mostly over Snapchat, beginning to think that maybe there was something more there than just being friends. One day, she uploaded a selfie to Snapchat, and he wrote ‘nice’ to her in response, a common way to start flirting with someone in whom you might be interested. Summer tells me that she thought ‘oh that’s cute!’ and he followed it up with questions and she answered, kind of ‘going along with it.’ Finally, he asked her ‘oh, do you have any more photos?’ At first, she wasn’t entirely sure what he meant by this, but he kept going, telling her: ‘oh send me this, do this’ until finally he said, ‘send me a picture of your boobs.’ For Summer, it ‘kinda clicked’ in her ‘head that, that’s not right,’ and she told him ‘no.’ In response, he sent her a ‘porno picture of himself’ and with it said ‘oh, do you wanna see my dick?’ Summer ‘hit the roof on him’ and sent him ‘a massive rant’ with a lot of ‘swearing and a lot of anger’ she recounted how she stood up for herself and told him how ‘inappropriate’ and ‘disrespectful’ it was. Then she ‘blocked him on everything and unliked all old photos of him’ and ‘hasn’t spoken to him since.’ While Summer’s immediate response was anger, she described its subsequent impact:

It’s horrible and it makes *you* [emphasis Summer’s] feel horrible. I was bawling my eyes out, because it’s like, it’s like your fault. Then you feel like you can’t tell anyone, because it’s like “well, you did it, you started it”. It was probably one of the worst experiences of my life.

⁴⁸ Participants described this as the beginning of getting to know someone, or the ‘flirting’ stage.

Summer's reflections reveal the impact of the image itself, but also the cumulative impact of the lack of consent, the belief that she will be held responsible, and her powerful explanation of these factors fuels part of Summer's fury. Summer's affective response is captured so powerfully in her drawing from our final group session, where I gave Group One free rein to respond to the provocation: 'What do you want adults to know?' I have explained this task in Chapter Three (p. 83), and it was one that Summer approached with enthusiasm. As the bell signalled the end of our final session, I noticed that Summer's drawing looked unfinished. She asked if she could take it home to finish it and bring it back when we had our individual interview. Given the difficulties I had with scheduling interviews with students on specific days, I wasn't hopeful that I would see the drawing again, so asked Summer if I could take a photo of it as it was [Image 9].

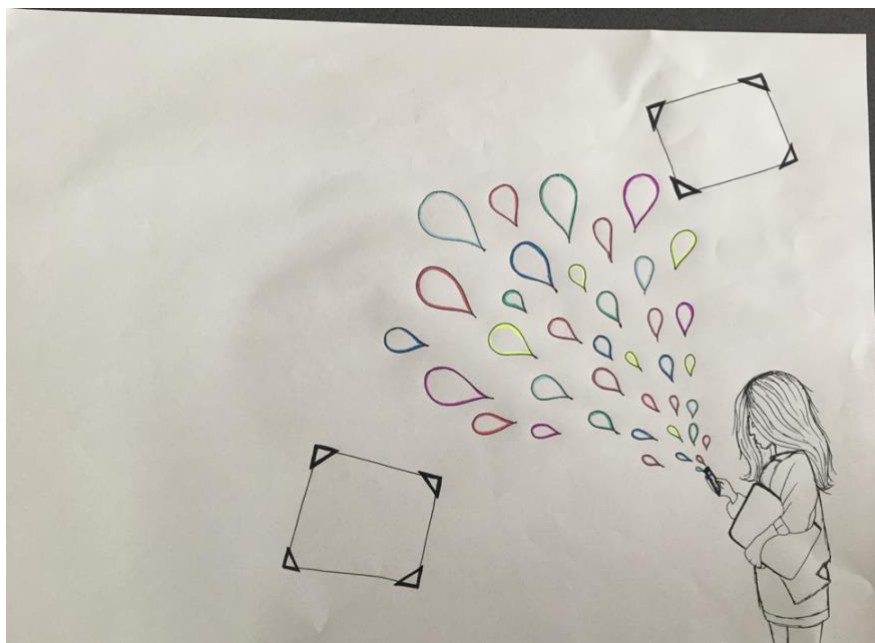


Image 9: Summer's initial drawing

A couple of months later, Summer and I met at the canteen for an individual interview. In the pouring rain, we ran to find a room to chat in and once we arrived at the room, she pulled a piece of folded paper [Image 10] out of her pocket and placed it on the table. She had finished her drawing and proudly lay the work on the table for me to see.

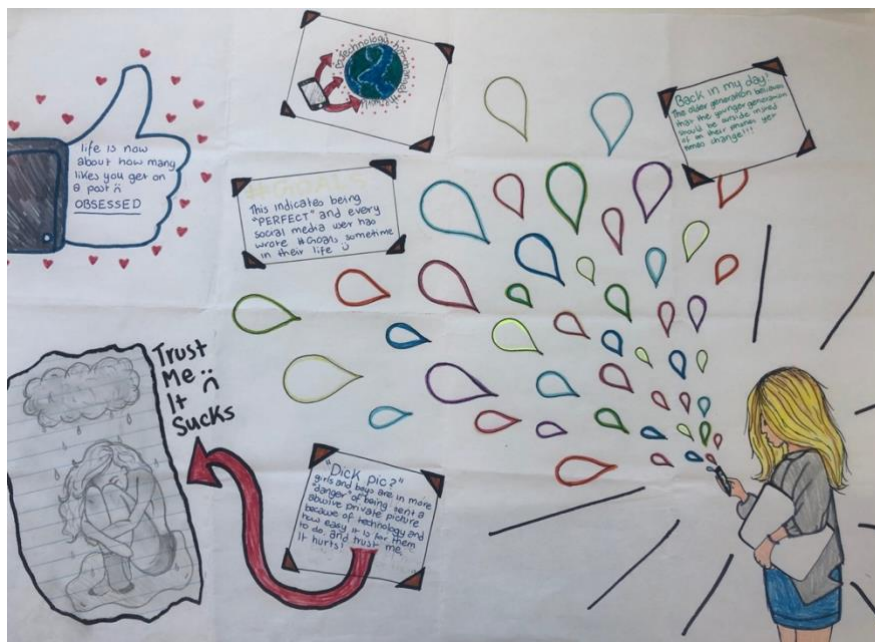


Image 10: Summer's completed drawing

In the *Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sara Ahmed offers an account of shame as an 'intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 103). Ahmed argues that a sense of shame is felt as a burning on the skin, that makes its subject 'turn away from the other's gaze or drop the head in a sensation more acute and intense than embarrassment' (p.103). The embodiment of this shame is powerfully captured in Summer's drawing, and in particular in the image of the girl in the bottom left-hand corner. The text right next to the picture reads: 'Trust Me...It Sucks,' suggesting that this girl represents Summer's own personal experience. She pulls her knees tightly to her chest, burying her face in between them, attempting to make herself as small as possible. We can't see her face, but an ominous cloud floats above from which raindrops fall on her head, forming a puddle at her feet. In describing how the work came together, Summer tells me that she had 'actually drawn' and when she needed something for this, she 'cut it out' and apologises for how 'rough' it looks. This girl is the only part of the picture that remains in grey lead pencil, in amongst the bright colours of the rest, perhaps hinting at the ephemerality of the affect, or perhaps suggesting that it was such an effacing 'affect' that it emptied her out;

sucked the life and vibrancy out of her. Our interview was interrupted by a severe thunderstorm, and the chaos of the schoolyard as the children all ran for cover, so I missed the opportunity to ask Summer why the girl remained in pencil,⁴⁹ while she had brightly coloured in the rest. However, later in the interview Summer offered some further insight:

And then I just, I was crying, and it, uh – I know this might sound funny, but I can still remember in my head when it happened, I didn't know that I would ever get over it. Cos in my head at that time, I was like, I am never ever going to get over what happened. And like, yeah, that was probably the most hard part about it.

Summer finds various ways to express her feelings and reactions to what happened but doesn't quite have the framework to identify what happened to *her* as a form of sexual violence. Summer can acknowledge that she never consented to receiving the dick pic and more importantly, that she was never given the *opportunity* to consent. And yet she still has difficulty in breaking down the shame, and the self-blame.

Her awareness of the ways women are sexualised and how they are socially and culturally perceived as somehow deserving of gendered and sexual violence intensifies these feelings of shame. As Summer explained:

I do feel like it's like, well you put yourself in that situation, it's like, there's a big difference between like - I'm just gonna go into this - between like, rape and stuff like that and sexual abuse and *this* [emphasis Summer's], but it's a lot of the time with girls when it happens to them, it's like, well “she shouldn't be wearing that dress”, or “she shouldn't be out at that time of night” or it's like this “well she shouldn't have been asking for it” or “she was flirting and

⁴⁹ It is difficult to see in the photograph, but in the original image, much of the writing/drawing was first done in pencil and then coloured over with markers.

things like that”. So that’s why I think it was hard for me, cos I thought it was my fault. But yeah.

Summer does not see unsolicited dick pics as a type of sexual violence on the same level as ‘rape and stuff.’ However, in an attempt to make sense of her experience, she brings forth frequently used victim-blaming narratives that manifest in news and broader popular and social media to describe victims of sexual violence (Dobson, 2019; Powell & Henry, 2014; Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018). Despite her apparent awareness of discussions of sexual violence (evident in her description of the above myths), Summer is still not able to *name* what happened to *her* as a form of violence. This is significant because it tends to minimise the seriousness of her experience which, I suggest, impedes her capacity to critically consider these same myths as they apply to herself.

Summer explained how, after it happened, she was: ‘In bed crying, because I thought it was my fault and I felt as though I couldn’t tell anyone, cos then I would be told off. Cos then I wasn’t sure if it’s like, well you pressured him to do it.’ She is somewhat resigned to such notions because the frameworks she draws upon to make sense of her experiences – victim-blaming, the localised moral economy, and notions of ‘choice’ and self-respect – tell her this is so. Summer is disturbed that, despite the image being sent without any prior discussion, she will be positioned as the one ‘*asking for it.*’

Bringing Summer’s reflections together with Bob’s from earlier, points to how the dick pic becomes affectively ‘shameful,’ as Bob too questions why it has been sent to her, or what she has done to make it seem like this is something *she* would want. These responses from the young women – imbued with shame and self-doubt – highlight the potential stigmatisation girls feel simply by virtue of receiving a dick pic (Ringrose et al., 2021a), even when they have no say in the matter.

Emerging gendered ethics of care and solidarity

Calling out bad behaviour, privately.

Despite being aware of, and largely disgusted by the behaviour of fuckbois, the young men in this research shared only limited examples of how they or others might have challenged this behaviour. As Dan illustrated through sharing his experience with a ‘mate’ who had showed him ‘photos of girls, with no shame’:

Sam: Does anyone ever call them out?

Dan: Call the guys out? Not really. I don't think so. For like being a fuckboi? No.

Sam: Do the girls?

Dan: Call the guys out? Yes, but not to the guys just to the other girls. So, the girl will know what's going on, but I don't understand how, but they're still just lured into the same trap every time and it just blows my mind that this guy can just keep pulling this off. It's just going to work over and over again.

Dan was aware of the way the girls warn one another but did not mention participating in this warning himself. While there is a sense that it is the girls’ responsibility to ‘know what’s going on,’ he was also cognisant of the ways in which the guys are able to ‘lure’ them in. Dan did not say any more about this particular encounter, although he did tell me about the time he had to have words with his best mate (and fellow participant) Jeremiah:

Dan: I heard him talking to her on the phone one day. He was just so rude to her, and I had to talk to him about it and give him a bit of kick up the ass and what he needed and I said to him, "Why would you want to talk to her like that? Why would you want to make her feel like that?" It worked.

Sam: Was he surprised? Did he realize he was talking that way or?

Dan: Yes, I guess so, but there was a bit more back story to it that doesn't really matter [...] I was like, he told me that and I was like, "It's still no reason to speak like that to your girlfriend but I understand where you are coming from"

Jeremiah also described an encounter with one of his mates who had 'crossed the line':

Jeremiah: Ah, well one of my mates just did some shit that like, crossed the line.

Sam: And he told you about it? Or was he bragging?

Jeremiah: I heard about it [...] I just said "don't pull that shit ever again" and I told him that it was fucked up and that something will happen to him if he ever like, does it again, because like, people find out and people like, non-shit people don't take that shit lightly. And I said, like, if you actually do that again, someone will do something to you, if like, they find out. And like, I wanted to, I wanted to...like, really just hit him. But like, what's that gonna do? That's not gonna get the point across, and so I didn't talk to him for a few days, just cos like I had to calm down, cos if I had of spoken to him, I just would have, flipped it at him. But like, I just told him. I dunno, I think he listened.

Jeremiah did not or would not disclose any further information about what this encounter was about, only that he was not there at the time and that there was alcohol involved. He made no mention of the girl or whether he had checked-in with the girl to make sure that she was okay. Interestingly, neither Dan nor Jeremiah identify their friends behaviours as fuckboi conduct. There is seemingly a kind of dissociation between what their 'mates' do, and what they know as being wrong in a more general sense, in ways that may be seen as 'upholding the primacy of the male friendship group' (Robinson, 2005, p. 33). This, as I will explore below, is what the girls assessment of the situation is. But in these narratives, Jeremiah and Dan put forth a

helplessness, where they position themselves as being aware of poor behaviours, but largely unable to effect any change.

Notably, in each of these accounts Jeremiah and Dan referred specifically to admonishing a friend or mate in a somewhat private instance. While this may be similar to the girls warning only their close friends, exchanges among the girls suggests that they were generally unaware that these kinds of discussions were happening among the boys. Bob alluded to this in our individual interview, commenting that our group sessions were the first time she had heard such expressions of ‘respect’ from the boys; she explained:

Bob: I feel like last Friday [the group session] was really good because it was both genders talking about things and I didn't think that some guys had that much respect. There was, I think there was only three guys in our class, but they still had a lot of respect. They weren't saying, "Oh, that's not like girls blah, blah, blah" they actually have respect for both genders.

Sam: You were shocked by that?

Bob: Yes. I didn't see those people to have that much respect. I know them all, I just didn't expect it.

This was somewhat surprising to me, given the often sophisticated and at times feminist critique that all three of the ‘guys’ to whom Bob referred (Tim Tam, Dan, and Jeremiah) had engaged with in our discussions. Significantly, this also suggests that girls *feel* as though they are alone in dealing with the fuckbois. Because this ‘call out’ happens in private, or only amongst (male) friends, Bob (fairly) assumes that it is not happening at all. Additionally, Bob’s experience with the gendered moral economy and its sexual double-standard shapes this reaction; she imagines that the boys would respect and support other boys, rather than the girls (or ‘victims’ of the fuckboi more specifically) because that is the nature of the gendered status

quo.

I noted earlier in the chapter that Jeremiah and Dan's narratives hint at what Ralph and Roberts (2020) have described as a 'weakening' of 'hegemonic gender structures' (p.83). In actively challenging what they have identified as the poor behaviour of their 'mates' towards girls/their girlfriends, Dan and Jeremiah may be expressing a more 'inclusive masculinity'⁵⁰ one that emphasises 'an embrace of openness and intimacy' (Roberts et al., 2021, p. 37). This comes through not only in the ways they react to the poor behaviours of their friends, but also in the way they describe their interactions with girls and/or their girlfriends. This is perhaps what Bob finds most reassuring from our discussions; amongst the ubiquity of the fuckboi, and the need for girls to navigate the moral and social implications of this, Dan and Jeremiah provided her with the reassurance that an alternative *is* possible. However, it was only through our group discussions that Bob was able to feel this possibility. It thus appears that whatever these shifts potentially involve, they have yet to have a material impact upon gender relations – and girls' access to power within heterosexual relations – within the participants contemporary social context (Allen, 2007; de Boise & Hearn, 2017).

⁵⁰I recognise that there are tensions in the field of masculinity studies around the use of the term 'inclusive masculinity theory' (Anderson, 2009). . I am not attempting to overstate this 'weakening' or transformation, only to contribute albeit in a limited way to the discussion about masculinities in a plural sense (see: Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; de Boise & Hearn, 2017; O'Neill, 2015)

Affective solidarity and care

About halfway through my interview with Alice, a boy walked past and as he turned and looked at Alice for the second time, she threw both her arms in the air and enthusiastically stuck both her middle fingers up at him. She then turned and explained her response to me:

that dude that I just stuck my finger up at, actually, he is like always asking chicks for nudes and stuff [...] if you send em, then a coupla months later you do something to him, or you hurt him in anyway, he'll put them up or he'll do stuff with them. He's a dickhead!

Although this 'dude' did not ask Alice personally for nudes, her rage was palpable – both in her description of the situation and her embodied reaction to his presence – she responded to him this way because of the way he has treated other girls. In interpersonal and social contexts that reinforce a gendered double-standard whereby girls remain simultaneously victimised by the 'fuckboi' (or in close proximity to such victimisation) whilst also largely bearing responsibility for these behaviours, the girls spoke about the creation of what I am referring to as 'warning networks.' The girls of Group Two discussed the 'talk' that goes around among other girls:

Stacey: And there's some people that you can just, you can just, um, they're just known for being like that.

Bob: Yeah, the reputation.

Sam: So, if you get a message from them, you're like-

Bob: Byeeee

Stacey: But then there's some people that might be like that, but nobody really says that they are like that cos, cos they're a certain person.

Sam: So, do you, kind of like, do the girls then kind of tell each other who to watch out for?

Bob: I feel like there is a lot of talk that goes around

Stacey: You know, it might be like, um, “oh guys, don’t” let’s say it’s James, it’s like, “guys, don’t ever talk to James.” It’s like, if someone comes up and is like “hey guys, I’m talking to this guy.”

Arnott: And it’s like, “No!”

Stacey: Oh honey, don’t do that.

The girls can recognise and name someone based on their ‘fuckboi’ behaviour as being potentially dangerous and, as Summer recounted to me in our individual interview, ‘I’ll just tell my friends about it... most of the time, it’s like “he’s a fuckboi” and that’s what we kind of base it off. So, most people who send it, we’ll call them that.’ Using the fuckboi’ label enables the girls to make a threat recognisable to each other and provides something to mobilise around. Returning to her own encounter with a fuckboi, Summer explained: ‘I haven’t spoken to him since, and I’ve warned girls about him. I told my friend and she’s like “Yeah, he’s done it to me as well”.’

The girls were well aware that providing a ‘warning’ to your friends was unlikely to result in formal repercussions for the fuckboi and, largely, this was not something the girls desired. Bob explained:

Sam: Do you warn your friends when they-

Bob: Yes, I tell them this person is doing that, but I’m not going to tell everyone because that’s probably going to embarrass them or something. I tell my close friends what’s going on.

So, the ‘warning’ here is provided only to your close friends. For Bob, this is because she is aware of the potential shame and embarrassment attached to being propositioned by a fuckboi. The considered assessment was that the trade-off of reporting such behaviours more widely may not be worth it, with little faith in the school system for example. However, mobilising around a warning network was particularly important for girls who may fear reprisal from the fuckbois or their friends. Amy shared a story about one of her friends who had had her nudes leaked, and when I asked her if the school knew she told me, ‘I don’t think so, no.’

Sam: They’re probably aware that it’s happening?

Amy: That’s another thing, like a lot of people are like, scared of being called like a, what is it, snitch, that’s it.

Sam: If someone ‘dobs’?

Amy: If they say like "oh, this person's sending someone’s nudes around" like, yeah. People just, wouldn't like it.

Amy is less clear about the repercussions for the ‘snitch,’ but Summer also shared with the group a story about one of her friends who has had ‘multiple people do it’ (send dick pics):

She’s from [...] my old school. She self-harms all over because people do and then she will tell them “don’t send it to me again” and they’ll be like “well, kill yourself”

Summer’s visceral recounting of a very troubling story, yet also told in a somewhat ‘matter of fact’ way, is an acknowledgment of her understanding that this is the way things are. There is a sense for them then, that warning each other, is not only what they have to do. But all they *can* do.

These accounts suggest that girls keep their ‘warning networks’ small also out of safety

concerns and an awareness of the limited power they have in this situation to be believed or supported (both institutionally and socially). Of course, this also extends the sense of responsibility the girls feel – to heed the warnings, protect themselves, and sometimes protect the perpetrator. Elsewhere, we see a strengthening of the blame placed upon girls who, for example, despite the warnings, still ‘chose’ the fuckboi:

There’s some guys that I know, well rumours about some guys like ‘that guy’s got a reputation’ but then there’s girls that are still like, “Oh my god, I wish he would like me!”
Like, you know he has a reputation...

In this situation, the existence of ‘warning networks’ fortifies the notions of choice I explored earlier, firmly placing the onus on girls (who have the knowledge) to make the right decisions.

Through these ‘warning networks’ the girls warn one another to ‘stay away’ from certain guys, they comfort one another, bringing other girls into their collective and affective sense that these behaviours are not acceptable, representing a caring reminder that they do not experience these things alone. Yet this also points to the centrality of ‘community’ in dealing with and/or surviving fuckbois in ways that are not only about providing a ‘warning’. The girls in this research are accessing the very limited resources they have available to them to form a network of ‘affective solidarity’ (Hemmings, 2012), one that shares, repudiates, and resists the injustices they experience or fear experiencing as a result of fuckboi behaviours. For Hemmings (2012) ‘affective solidarity’ ‘draws on a broader range of affects [...] as necessary for a sustainable feminist politics of transformation’ (p. 148).

For the girls in this research, this sense of solidarity is one that allows their shame, disgust, rage, and/or frustration, to propel them towards one another; and arguably, it points to a burgeoning feminist critique and basis for action. As Summer suggested: ‘it just makes you feel better to know that you’re not alone, as much as it’s horrible it’s happened to more people,

but you just feel like, it's nice hearing how he's a dick, kind of thing.' The girls in this research recognised that the persistence of the sexual double standards of the schoolyard meant the structures were skewed against them: if your nudes are leaked, you will be blamed, rather than the boy who leaked them. If you sleep with a boy who only wants your body, you will be called a slut, while he will attain homosocial benefits, and face limited institutional ramifications. Yet, while they may accept this, to some extent as being the way that the world works, they are also mobilising against it and doing so via emerging forms collective action.

Conclusion

In examining a range of youth sexting practices, my aim in this chapter has not been to contribute to or exacerbate 'panics' about them (Albury et al., 2013; Hasinoff, 2015b; Ringrose et al., 2013) nor to generate alarmist discussions of 'youth-at-risk.' Rather I have attempted to provide a close-up picture of the complex moral economy which these young people inhabited, and to draw out the nuanced and reflective reasoning they engaged to navigate this world. This is not to deny the coercive and abusive nature of many of these behaviours, from the conduct of the fuckbois to the sending of unsolicited dick pics and asking for nude images to be sent. It is, however, to also draw attention to other aspects of these encounters and to put the spotlight on how young people themselves worked out these interactions.

In participants' active negotiation of these practices there were signs of resistance, questioning, and critique as well as uncertainty in their meaning making. For example, I have showed how participants clearly distinguished consensual sexting from sexting under pressure (or coercion), which they decidedly stated was *not* consensual. They also highlighted the potential intimacy of participating in sexting within a relationship, a finding borne out by other research (Amundsen, 2020a; Burkett, 2015; Setty, 2019). Yet in my study the girls in particular were mostly unable to dislodge prevailing notions of 'choice' from considerations of shame and why

– aware of the ‘risks’ – girls would send nudes. Moreover, girls had to navigate competing notions of choice and agency in order to do ‘the right thing.’ A body of work has elaborated the expectations for the good postfeminist subject (Dobson, 2015; Harris, 2004) to perform an ‘empowered’ sexuality and voluntarily sending nudes could be construed as an instance of sexual empowerment (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016). However, in my research, ‘empowerment’ was more often expressed in the individual agency and moral judgement to *resist* such pressures, or to be able to identify a good boy rather than a fuckboi – both other forms of pressure (Thorburn et al., 2021). These competing pressures contribute to the responsibility the girls feel, one that is further entrenched by adult constructions of youth sexting as *only* risky/dangerous (Hasinoff, 2015b) and abstinence only approaches to ‘sext education’ (Albury et al., 2017; Dobson & Ringrose, 2016).

However, rather than seeing girls as simply being duped or passive in these interactions, there was evidence in my research of their developing a burgeoning feminist critique, one that recognised the gendered inequalities that perpetuate moral double-standards. However, they also recognised their limited power to change this and so they are ‘creative’ (Harris & Dobson, 2015) and ‘ambivalent’ (Nash, 2017) in their attempts to navigate the intimate moral landscape. In many of these interactions, traditional gendered norms are reinforced, most notably through ‘slut-shaming,’ where overly sexualised behaviours or desires are regulated through the affective stickiness of ‘shame’ (whether directed towards the self or others).

Other girls in this research embraced the *idea* of the regulatory moral economy as a way to distance themselves from the risky figure of the mythical ‘slut’ and thus consequential associations (such as shame or self-blame) with the fuckboi. However, through girls’ ‘warning networks,’ they were also able to recognise the unequal distribution of gendered power that facilitated fuckbois’ ability to act with impunity and the girls thus mobilised *collectively*. This

solidarity emerged despite the moral economy affectively and socially marking girls' behaviours as shameful. These spaces of uncertainty, I argue, are thus potentially productive, offering insight into the ways the double-standard persists, whilst also creating scenes that hint at change. While the behaviours, responses, and affects I have analysed in this chapter are largely governed through the persistence of a regulatory heteronormativity that rewards a 'popular' masculinity, there is also evidence of critique of those regimes accompanied by emerging forms of solidarity and care.

CONCLUSION

Introduction

This thesis investigated how young people come to understand, negotiate, and experience their intimate relationships. Beginning from their vantage point, it sought to reframe widespread understandings of young people's relationships through a study that built in feminist, queer, participatory, and arts-based approaches. Situated during a time of heightened public anxiety about young people's intimate relationships and circulating panics around youth sexualities and digital spaces, I wanted to gain a better understanding of whether and if so, how young people were absorbing these 'public feelings' in reference to their own intimate relationships. Further, I was intrigued by research indicating that, despite being supportive of gender equality at the public and institutional level, young people were less likely to hold the same sort of commitments in the domain of interpersonal relationships, where gender-based inequities appeared to persist (Politoff et al., 2019). In the presence of increased visibility of diverse gender and sexuality identities (Bragg et al., 2018), alongside waves of school-based curriculum reform in relationship education (Jones and Hillier, 2013; Ollis, 2014; Shannon, 2016), I also wanted to better understand the ways in which young people potentially experienced and negotiated (both reinforcing and resisting) these forms of inequality and asymmetries in intimate relationships, and how they came to these understandings.

In this chapter, I draw together findings and insights from fieldwork to highlight the overall arguments of the thesis and its empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions. I then offer some suggestions for future research and indicate potential educational policy and program implications. I will first provide a brief overview of this thesis.

To summarise briefly, beginning with Chapter One, which mapped the context and prompts for this study, noting policy, public and political debates, and my own professional, and scholarly interests. It set out the key research questions and scope of the inquiry, leading to Chapter Two that provided a critical review of relevant research literature, identifying main debates as well as gaps which this thesis sought to address. Chapter Three explicated the theoretical and methodological approach as well as explaining ethical processes and dilemmas and the details of the study design. My fieldwork chapters – Chapters Four to Seven – drew on participant narratives and visual artefacts to develop a series of close-up analyses of the diverse ways in which participants negotiated intimate relationships and their meaning making practices.

Below I synthesise the key findings and insights from my fieldwork.

Making sense of intimate relationships

This study showed, first, the ways in which young people navigate and make meaning out of their intimate relationships and how this is fundamentally connected to their future thinking and notions of the ‘good life’. Second, it revealed that while young people may be setting new definitions and norms around intimacy, they are *also* doing this in ways that in some respects are rearticulating old gender binaries and heterosexual privileges. Third, it showed how young people also imported some of the public anxieties surrounding their relationships – particularly to do with risk, sex, ephemerality, immaturity, and ‘realness’ – into their narratives and meaning making. I analysed the impact of the persistence of this type of framing for young people, in particular the effects of its potential regulatory functions. For example, through close analysis of Alex and Alice’s feelings and narratives, I showed the way sex ‘sticks’ (Ahmed, 2010b) to young people’s relationships in the curriculum and broader public discourse and how this has also come to make some young people’s relationships intelligible to themselves, or

‘real’, only when sex is present. I argued that this was particularly felt by young people whose desires fall beyond hetero and cisgender norms.

Throughout this thesis, I have built a case for agentic and creative ways young people are learning about intimate relationships, genders, and sexualities, and argued that these capacities warrant greater recognition in research, in curriculum discourses, and in program reforms. As I showed, some of the most powerful learning was not in classrooms or formal curriculum but took place in other spaces and interactions.

In attending to the key motif of ‘cute’ in representing relationships and notions of ‘trial and error’ learning, I was able to illuminate some of the resources young people draw upon to make sense of their relationships – friends, digital spaces and online community, traditional media, and a ‘learning by doing’ approach. In these ‘places of learning’ (Ellsworth, 2007), participants prioritised learning as relational, affective, and experiential. ‘Cute’ and ‘trial and error’ practices simultaneously reinforced and challenged norms around intimacy, but also made evident how these norms shape or regulate the processes of becoming that are attached to intimate relationships. For example, I showed how the enactment of ‘cute’ was an important mechanism for ‘trial and error’ learning and for learning how to be and feel in a relationship. However, this was an opportunity that appeared to be withheld from LGBTIQ+ young people who, for myriad reasons, were less likely to enact ‘cute’ on social media. This is not to say that young people only ‘do’ or ‘learn’ intimacy on social media through the use of ‘cute’; for example, I have also described a number of creative and hopeful ways LGBTIQ+ participants learn how to be and feel in a relationship and took this learning into their own hands. Rather it is to suggest that at its most pervasive form, ‘cute’ demonstrates how traditional ideas about relationships, sexuality, and gender continue to hold power and shape the ways young people both make sense of *and* experience intimacy. Yet, as importantly, in paying heed to young

people's meaning-making, I have identified emerging ambivalences in participants' attachments to heteronormative notions of the 'good life' that demonstrate the ways young people are actively engaged in working out and contesting these norms, pointing to signs of change.

Intimate relationships and attachments to the 'good life'

Theoretically, I brought concepts of affect, the 'good life', and public feelings into dialogue with my fieldwork and, in doing so, showed how participants' perspectives on intimacy were tied to their imaginations of the future and to who they wanted to be and to become, while also being attuned to the role of their intimate relationships in who they are, and who they are becoming in the present.

Working with Lauren Berlant's (1998) provocation that 'intimacy builds worlds' (p. 282) afforded a critical attention to the relations and affects that sustain attachments to heteronormative notions of the 'good life'. For participants in this research, I suggest that these attachments persisted, in part, because of their astute observations of the way things are. That is, an awareness of the institutional and structural conditions that continue to privilege, reward, and uphold a hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. In this research, we see evidence of this continued privileging socially, where the fuckboi can be at once 'disgusting', while remaining on top of the social hierarchy; institutionally, through Tim Tam's critique of the homonormative limits of acceptance at Waratah College; and interpersonally, through girls' attempts to manage their sexuality and desires within the bounds of the localised moral economy. Following the ways this gendered power operated affectively, and drawing from Jennifer C. Nash (2019), meant that I was able to gain insight into how this *feels* for participants, and to follow what these feelings then *do* for participants (Ahmed, 2010a). For example, examining the ways certain affects 'stick' to considerations of girls' sexualities

revealed the nature of the operating ‘double-standard’ moral economy and highlighted the ways heterosexual femininity continues to be regulated along strict moral codes. This generated particular feelings of ‘shame’ and the participant narratives expressed the complexities of this shame and how it was leveraged by girls against other girls in order to enact a more acceptable feminine heterosexuality. I suggest that to think about this shame as what ‘sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects’ (Ahmed, 2014, p. 29), offers insight into *why* the girls in this research felt they needed to remain attached to heteronormative imaginings of the ‘good life’.

Attending to the more mundane, or ‘ordinary’ (Stewart, 2007) affects and affective capacities – rather than a focus on gender-based violence for example - also fostered close-up attention to ways in which young people were attempting to resist or reshape norms of the ‘good life’ that were more incremental and subtle. While they may not have been as obvious or explicit as expressions of ‘social transformation’ it is essential not to ignore the ways in which young people are in the process of daily making and re-making these norms. As Berlant (2011, p.286) argues, ‘to rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones many are living.’ The imagining otherwise that Berlant hints at here is reflected in Tim Tam’s queer hope, as I explored in Chapter Five. Tim Tam positioned his account of intimacy within the context of queer histories, alongside an awareness of what is possible for him within the conditions of the present and draws upon in his words ‘queer culture’ to imagine something else.

Overall, I found that despite the persistence of heteronormative regimes and of moral economies fuelled by double-standards, there were signs of young people exercising agency in negotiating and reframing intimacy norms and expectations. Additionally, there was an awareness of self and care for others that tends to be under recognised in research on youth

relationships (see also: Byron, 2020). This is most evident in the emerging forms of ‘affective solidarity’ (Hemmings, 2012), that I argue were built upon an emerging gender politics and *ambivalence* towards the fantasy of the ‘good life’. Although these ‘warning networks’, as I have described them in Chapter Seven, are yet to change the material conditions of gendered inequalities for the girls in this research, I suggest that they are evidence of, as Hemmings argues a ‘feminist politics of transformation’ (2012, p. 147).

I will now offer an overview of the methodological implications of this thesis.

Youth-centred research: methodological possibilities

As I explained in Chapter Three, I deliberately adopted an open and exploratory approach to the research group sessions, drawing upon feminist, queer, and participatory and arts-based methodologies that promoted participant-led discussions and activities. This facilitated what I have described as a youth-centred approach, one that prioritised creating space and different opportunities for participants to define the terms of their engagement and to guide the research into areas that were important to *them*. In adopting this approach, this thesis has demonstrated the value of listening to young people, beginning from the assumption that they are informed about their own lived experiences and are able, and willing, to share this knowledge.

This was reflected best in the group sessions, where what the participants shared with me was often different to what I might have learned had I only asked questions based upon my own assumptions or dominant concerns in the research literature. For example, in session two with Group One I had designed an activity to try and draw out discussion about the ways young people use mobile and social media to communicate *privately* with their friends, families, and/or intimate others. The emojis I had brought with me to the session prompted talk amongst the participants about the intimate relationships they saw of their friends on social media, and about how they also posted their relationships in this way. Participants described and critiqued

these practices, in ways that I had not anticipated. It was this discussion, one that was primarily led by the participants, that prompted my focus on ‘cute’ as a site of learning for young people. Before this session, I envisioned digital intimacies as occurring *privately*. This assumption speaks to my own normative conceptualisations of intimacy at the beginning of the project and highlights how participants’ sharing their own experiences and feelings pushed me towards broader or indeed newer constructions of intimacy.

The space to capture participants’ critical reflections was a further benefit of the combined aspects of the group, interview, and ‘shortitudinal’ approach of this project. This was evident in Bob’s reflections on how surprised she was the boys also present in the group session, were able to demonstrate as she described it, ‘respect for both genders’. Firstly, through the initial research encounter and discussion of fuckbois, Bob was able to witness perspectives from Tim Tam, Dan, and Jeremiah that made her realise that ‘some guys had that respect’, something she stated she was not aware of prior to this research. On its own, this was a powerful moment for Bob, one made possible because of the participant-led focus of the group discussion (see also: Whittington, 2019). But it was also one I might have missed, in my own analysis, *without* also having Bob’s critical reflections of the encounter and what the interaction with the boys meant to her in the individual interview.

Of course, just because I attempted to promote participant-led exploration of key ideas does not mean I was always successful in these aims. Like others navigating similar methods (Coll et al., 2018; Holland et al., 2010), I constantly negotiated what it meant to prioritise participation and how this might have left some students feeling excluded. Managing group dynamics was an important aspect of this and has been well documented elsewhere (Överlien, Aronsson & Hydén, 2005; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). For me, this also involved remaining attuned to the different ways participants might have understood or prioritised participation.

Given the public nature of the group sessions and the sometimes-sensitive topics we discussed, I was also aware that not all students would *want* to contribute to every discussion. This was further complicated by the broader socio-political context (noted above and in Chapter One) in which the fieldwork took place. This was thus an ethical consideration for me as well as a practical one, which together illustrate some of the dilemmas of participatory style research.

Having synthesised the key findings and arguments of the thesis, I will now briefly consider some of the issues the thesis did not address, noting that all study designs have limitations in terms of what they can and cannot do.

Limitations of the research

Any study has limitations imposed by its scope and the timeframe within which it must be undertaken. In this research, the fieldwork period of eight months might be considered a limitation to understanding how attachments to notions of the ‘good life’ remain as young people change and have more experiences of intimate relationships. Here, a longitudinal approach would offer insight into how these attachments shift and change over time, and what influences these transformations. However, my intention in this study was to provide close insight into the way young people experienced these things in the present (with an eye to their imagined future).

Similarly, one could consider my decision not to undertake a relationship and sexuality education policy and curriculum analysis as a limitation (see: Ezer et al., 2019, 2020 for recent Australian examples of this). While it would be illuminating to follow public feelings related to risk for example, in these documents, and to explore the way sex ‘sticks’ to and/or obscures broader considerations of intimacy, the aim of this research was to understand how these broader feelings and discourses were felt and experienced by young people – from their perspectives. At the time I began my thesis there was a considerable body of scholarly and

policy research addressing curriculum and program reforms in relationship and sexuality education, and I deliberately wanted to bring a different lens – that of young people’s lived experience and perspectives – to these matters.

In Chapter Two I identified the ways questions of risk and risky practices are frequently directed towards particular gendered, classed, raced, and sexuality identities (Cover, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2012b; Weekes; 2002), with, for example, the white, middle-class, heterosexual girl becoming the normative identity to be protected. One limitation of this study might be that all participants identified as white and were predominantly heterosexual girls. While this was not intentional on my behalf, but the outcome of the recruitment procedures I described in Chapter Three, it does mean that young people who are positioned as risky because of their race, may be affected by the public feelings in different ways, or have different ideas about the ‘good life’- these are areas that warrant further research as part of research program that further unpacks these experiences, feelings, and relations with a more diverse range of young people.

Possibilities for future research

Having identified the distinctive empirical and methodological contributions of this thesis to knowledge about young people’s intimacies, genders, and sexualities, I now briefly outline potential areas for future research that could build upon the findings of this study.

The identification and analysis of the fuckboi, and young people’s complex navigations of his behaviours, has brought forth both the ambivalence and attachment to the ongoing and regulatory role of heteronormativity. However, more needs to be known about why boys continue to participate in these behaviours. I have offered perspectives from my participants – but none admitted to engaging in these practices themselves. If the collecting and sharing of nude images of girls is a way to *do* hegemonic masculinity right (and I suggest that it is, see

also: (Ringrose et al., 2021a)), then more needs to be known about what heterosexual boys do with and about this pressure.

Building upon this work, further research with LGBTIQ+ young people is also vitally necessary. I am unaware of research that explores sexting (either consensual or non-consensual) with LGBTIQ+ young people (under 18). For example, while Tim Tam drew upon similar narratives to explain the ‘gay fuckbois’ sending and requesting of nudes, there were also striking differences, such as the fuckboi being, as Tim Tam described it, ‘in the closet’. These behaviours warrant further investigation, not in the least because to continue to ignore them also continues to ignore the violence experienced by non-heterosexual young people. This is a gap in feminist research into gender-based violence that needs to be rectified.

As I have argued, young people are learning about relationships in less formal and purposeful ways through their social media accounts and practices. While this may initially occur through happenstance, participants were able to retrospectively identify social media as a place where they critically observe, present, and learn about intimate relationships. I suggest that more needs to be known about how young people make sense of this learning – and from more diverse perspectives, that move beyond the normative bounds I have established in this study. Additionally, participants presented #relationshipgoals and #couplegoals as playing a role in shaping what practices of ‘cute’ looked like. I suggest that there is further scope for research in exploring the way young people engage with and potentially learn from the relationships of young, popular content creators/influencers on social media, and Tik Tok in particular.

Implications for education and youth research

A key argument of this thesis is that young people are generally not learning through formal curriculum and that the curriculum is somewhat overvalued as a space for intimacy pedagogy. However, I do offer some suggestions for how their experiences, expectations, and feelings

might be better reflected and engaged with in the formal school curriculum. My work has been inspired by queer and feminist approaches to relationships and sexuality education that move beyond adult-conceived ideas of intimacy. This scholarship has called for a curriculum and approach to schooling that engenders greater possibilities for queer (Allen, 2015b; Rasmussen, 2016) and critical (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2016; Quinlivan, 2018; Sanjakdar et al., 2015) pedagogies that better attend to the everyday experiences of genders, sexualities, and relationships (Allen, 2005b; Coll et al., 2018). Additionally, the findings of this study have highlighted the need to develop curriculum that is responsive to and builds upon the ways young people are *already* learning about intimacy, genders, and sexualities. This speaks to a need to displace the ‘teacher’ as *always* the expert model of pedagogy and to instead consider more reflective and ambivalent spaces of learning that prioritises young people’s diverse perspectives and desires (Coll et al., 2018; Fields, et al., 2015).

I have demonstrated a clear persistence of a sexual double standard that regulates the behaviours of girls and one that is complicated by notions of ‘choice’ and moral codes. In this context, while participants demonstrated an awareness of *ideas* of consent, they were unable to apply abstract/legal notions to real world examples. Similarly, participants were largely unable to name image-based abuse as an experience of violence (see also: Ringrose, 2021a). These findings have direct implications for the prevention of gender-based violence and consent education. In particular, it further strengthens calls from other researchers (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016) to help provide young people with the tools to better navigate consent in the context of heterosexism. Further, these findings also highlight the limits of a sex-positive approach to the curriculum (and enthusiastic consent) that do not also attend to the persistence of gendered and sexuality inequalities. Relationships and sexuality education must attempt to dismantle the oppressive structures of heterosexism and cisgenderism, through a critique of power in ways that move beyond notions of individual responsibility and choice (see also:

Keddie & Ollis, 2019). Such thinking further highlights the need to move away from a school-based curriculum that focuses on providing the ‘facts’ of sex, sexuality, or relationships, in a way that is devoid of social context (Fields, et al., 2015; Gilbert, 2018; Lesko, 2010).

Finally, in the current neoliberal University context dominated by limited funding and time constraints and with a focus on reporting and publishing outputs, it is now more imperative than ever to consider the diverse and creative ways research can privilege the perspectives and priorities of research participants. Through drawing from multiple methodological traditions, I have offered an insight into how this can be done within institutional constraints (including thesis time and length), and risk adverse contexts of school-based research.

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APPENDIX ONE: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

	Name	Age (March 2018)	Gender
1.	Amy	15	Female
2.	Dan	16	Male
3.	Bob	15	Female
4.	Arnott	15	Female
5.	Jeremiah	15	Male
6.	Tim Tam	15	Male
7.	Patrisha	16	Female
8.	Keith McIntosh	16	Female
9.	Starburst	15	Female
10.	Alice	15	Female
11.	Alex	15	Non-binary
12.	Summer	16	Female
13.	Dylan	15	Male
14.	Stacey	16	Female

APPENDIX TWO: PARENT PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT

What is a healthy relationship? Exploring how young people come to understand and experience relationships

PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT FOR PARENTS



The research project

Your child has been invited to participate in a research project that explores young people's views about personal relationships. We want to understand how young people talk about what is a 'healthy' or 'strong' relationship, and what may influence their understandings of this. It is important for us to listen to young people's perspectives on these matters and to find out what their expectations are for future relationships. This project will take place in their school during 2017, however participation in this project is not linked to school assessment or reports. This research project will be undertaken by me, Samantha Mannix, a PhD candidate at The University of Melbourne in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. My PhD is supervised by Professor Julie McLeod and Dr Cathy Vaughan. I have received approval to conduct this project by the Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Melbourne and by the Research Division of the Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Early Childhood Development. The school principal has also agreed to information about the research project being given to students enrolled at the school.

What is your child being asked to do?

Research Group Sessions

I am inviting students to participate in between six and eight research group sessions between now and the end of the year. There will be approximately 10 people in the group, and each session will run for approximately one hour, during a time that is convenient and does not interrupt their school work. Most of the time the sessions will feel like an informal conversation and the topics and activities will vary depending on what the participants share with me. To help with our discussions I might bring in some prompts from magazines, newspaper articles or songs and movies. However, it is likely we will talk about friendships, romantic relationships, what constitutes a 'healthy relationship' and what kinds of relationships young people may want in the future. With your permission, I would like to take photographs of participants' written work, as well as audio-record these sessions, to help me with note-taking and research after the sessions have finished.

Individual Interviews

I am also inviting your child to participate in up to two interviews during this time. I will conduct these interviews and they will be about 45 to 60 minutes in length, and, with your permission, they will also be audio-recorded. Most of the time, the interviews will be more like a conversation with participants responding to questions and issues that I may raise. I may also ask questions about their friendships and other close relationships; as well as views on social issues related to gender roles, social media, family life and personal relationships in the future. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions and they will also have the option of not answering any or some of the questions. They can stop the interview at any time and ask not to continue. The interview will be held at school in a private room. After the interview is finished, I will type out the audio recording for research purposes.

Are there any risks involved with this project?

It is important to know that participation in this research project, and all of the activities described above, is completely voluntary and even if your consent is given now, you are free to withdraw your child at any stage of the project: if this happens, I will not use any of the unprocessed information your child has given me. It is possible that the research project may cause the participants to think about unhappy times or events. If this happens and participants become upset, I will stop the interview or the group session immediately. Participants are free to leave the group session at any time, should they become upset. The research will only resume when and if they are happy to do so. If they would like to continue the interview at another time, a new date can be arranged. Participants are able to withdraw from the project at any time, and if they wish to, have the recording of your interview destroyed and not used in the research project. It is important

to understand that participating in this research is not part of any formal school requirements or assessment.

Privacy

As part of my PhD project, I will be writing articles and talking at conferences about what participants in this project share with me. When I am writing or presenting papers based on the research project, I will use a false name or pseudonym for their interview, unless specifically requested to use the real name. The use of a pseudonym is to help protect their privacy and to ensure their name and details remain anonymous. In the group sessions, all participants will be asked to keep information discussed within the group private. When participants consent to being part of this project I will also ask them to agree to respect the privacy of everyone involved. Participant names and contact details will be kept in a password-protected computer file and separate from any interview transcripts in which they will be identified by a pseudonym. The intention is to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participant responses to the fullest possible extent, within the limits of the law. However, although unlikely, because of the relatively small numbers of people involved, and because interviews could contain details that reveal who the participants or the school are, it might be possible to identify some comments as belonging to specific participants.

What are the benefits of this research?

This project will provide your child with the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences about relationships in modern times. The findings of this study may help with the development of curriculum about respectful relationships – and participation will ensure that youth perspectives are captured and listened to. I would like to highlight positive stories related to how young people engage with one another, and believe this will be beneficial to the broader community. I will be happy to share with you a short summary of my findings from the project, should you wish to receive one, you can indicate this on the consent form attached.

Agreeing to participate: If you decide that you give your consent for your child to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form to show that you understand what the project entails. Because your child is under 18, they are unable to give consent. However, as I very much value their time and input, I will also be seeking consent from all participants.

Further information: Should you require any further information, or have any concerns, please contact Samantha Mannix on 0431644684 or my supervisor Professor Julie Mcleod on 03 8344 3455.

Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne, by telephone: (03) 8344 2073, or by fax: (03) 9347 6739.

Thank you for your time.

Samantha Mannix: smannix@student.unimelb.edu.au

APPENDIX THREE: STUDENT PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT

What is a healthy relationship? Exploring how young people come to understand and experience relationships

PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT FOR STUDENTS



The research project

You are invited to participate in a research project that explores young people's views about personal relationships. It aims to find out how young people understand and experience close or romantic relationships. We also want to understand how young people talk about what is a 'healthy' or 'strong' relationship, and what may influence their understandings of this. It is important for us to listen to your perspectives on these matters, and to find out what your expectations are for future relationships. It will take place in your school but participation in this project is not linked to your school assessment or reports.

This research project will be undertaken by me, Samantha Mannix, a PhD candidate at The University of Melbourne in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. My PhD is supervised by Professor Julie McLeod and Dr Cathy Vaughan. I have received approval to conduct this project by the Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Melbourne and by the Research Division of the Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Early Childhood Development, and your school principal. The principal of your school has agreed to information about the research project being given to students enrolled at your school.

What you are being asked to do?

Research Group Sessions

I am inviting you to participate in eight research group sessions, these will take place every couple of weeks during terms 2 and 3. There will be approximately 12 people in the group, and each session will run for approximately one hour, during a time that is mutually convenient and does not interrupt your schoolwork. Most of the time the sessions will feel like an informal conversation and the topics and activities will vary depending on what you (and the group) tells me, and what your experiences are. To help with our discussions I might bring in some prompts from magazines, newspaper articles or songs and movies. However, it is likely we will talk about friendships, romantic relationships, what constitutes a 'healthy relationship' and what kinds of relationships young people may want in the future. Some activities may involve you writing things down as a group, with your permission, I would like to take photographs of this to help with my research and reporting of my findings. I would only photograph this if you are happy for me to do so, and I won't use anything that you are not happy for other people to see. With your permission, I would also like to audio-record these sessions, to help me with note-taking and research after the sessions have finished.

Individual Interviews

I am also inviting you to participate in two individual interviews during this time. I will conduct these two interviews and they will be about 45 to 60 minutes in length, and, with your permission, they will also be audio-recorded. Most of the time, the interviews will feel like a conversation with you responding to questions and issues that I may raise. I may also ask you questions about your friendships and other close relationships as well as your views on social issues related to gender roles, social media, family life and relationships in the future. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions and you will also have the option of not answering any or some of the questions. You can also stop the interview at any time and ask not to continue. The interview will be held at school or if you prefer at a location convenient for you – for example at a local library, your home, or the university – and it will be held in a private room. After the interview is finished, the audio recording will be transcribed or typed out by me.

Are there any risks involved with this project?

It is important to know that your participation in this research project, and all of the activities described above, is completely voluntary and even if you agree to be part of them now, you are free to withdraw at any stage of the project: if this happens, I will not use any of the unprocessed information you have given me. It is possible that the research project may cause you to think about unhappy times or events. If this happens and you are feeling upset, I

will stop the interview or the group session immediately, if you wish. You are free to leave the group session at any time, should you feel upset. The research will only resume when and if you are happy to do so and if you wish, you could talk to a teacher or friend at the school. If you would like to continue the interview at another time, a new date can be arranged. You are, however, free not to continue with the interview at all, and, if you wish, to have the recording of your interview destroyed and not used in the research project. It is also important to understand that participating in this research is not part of any formal school requirements or assessment.

Privacy

As part of my PhD project, I will be writing articles and talking at conferences about what all the participants in this project share with me. When I am writing or presenting papers based on the research project, I will use a false name or pseudonym for you and your interview, unless you specifically request that your real name be used. The use of a pseudonym is to help protect your privacy and for your name and details to remain anonymous. In the group sessions, all participants will be asked to keep information discussed within the group private. When participants consent to being part of this project we ask them to agree to respect the privacy of everyone involved. I will also respect this and the confidentiality of your comments. I will not report or discuss what you personally say in group sessions and interviews with teachers or students at your school, with other participants or with your parents. Your name and contact details will be kept in a password-protected computer file and separate from any interview transcripts in which you will be identified by your pseudonym. The intention is to protect your anonymity and confidentiality of your responses to the fullest possible extent, within the limits of the law. However, it is possible, because of the relatively small numbers of people involved, and because your interview could contain details that reveal who you are or the school you attended that it might be possible to identify some comments as belonging to you.

What are the benefits of this research?

This project will provide you with the opportunity to share your thoughts, feelings and experiences about relationships in modern times. The findings of this study may help with the development of curriculum about relationships – and your participation will ensure that youth perspectives are listened to. I would like to highlight positive stories related to how young people engage with one another, and this will be beneficial to the broader community. I will be happy to share with you a short summary of my findings from the project, should you wish to receive one, you can indicate this on the consent form attached.

Agreeing to participate: If you decide that you do wish to be a participant in this project, you will be asked to sign a consent form to show that you understand what you will be asked to do. Your parents will also be asked to sign a consent form agreeing to your participation, because you are under the age of eighteen.

Further information: Should you require any further information, or have any concerns, please contact Samantha Mannix on 0431644684, or my supervisor Professor Julie Mcleod on 03 8344 3455.

Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne, by telephone: (03) 8344 2073, or by fax: (03) 9347 6739.

Thank you for your time.

Samantha Mannix: smannix@student.unimelb.edu.au

APPENDIX FOUR: CONSENT FORM PARENTS

What is a healthy relationship? Exploring how young people come to understand and experience relationships

Consent Form for Parents/Guardians



Name of Participant _____

Your Name _____

Student Researcher Samantha Mannix
PhD Candidate – University of Melbourne

smannix@student.unimelb.edu.au
Ph. 0431644684

Responsible Researcher Professor Julie McLeod
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
j.mcleod@unimelb.edu.au
Ph. 03 8344 3455

- 1) I consent to my child participating in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written Plain Language Statement to keep.
- 2) I understand that my child's participation will involve a number of different activities and I agree that the researcher may use the results for the purposes outlined in the Plain Language Statement. Activities include:
 - a) **Individual Interviews:** where they will meet with the researcher to discuss a number of things related to friendship, relationships and my expectations for the future.
 - b) **Research group sessions:** where they will meet with the researcher and fellow students fortnightly for six sessions to discuss friendship, relationships and expectations for the future.
- 3) I understand that as my child is under the age of 18, I as their parent or legal guardian must provide formal consent for them to participate in this project.
- 4) I acknowledge that:
 - a. The project is for the purpose of research;
 - b. I have been informed that my child's participation is voluntary, that I can withdraw my consent for them to participate at any stage in the project and that I can agree for them to participate in only some parts of the research;
 - c. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information my child provides will be safeguarded subject to legal requirements;
 - d. The possible effects of participating in the **research** have been explained to my satisfaction;
 - e. I understand that participation in this project does not count towards academic progress;
 - f. I have been informed that with my consent **the interviews and group sessions will be audio-recorded;**
 - g. I have been informed that written work produced in group sessions may be photographed for research purposes
 - h. I have been informed that interview transcripts will be **identified by a pseudonym** or false name, unless I specifically request my child's real name to be used;
 - i. I understand research data will be securely stored at the University of Melbourne for at least 5 years after the research finishes, according to their storage rules;
 - j. That the consent form (once signed and returned) will be retained by the researcher.

Your Signature _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher _____ Date: _____

HREC: 1648046.1; Date: 10/11/16 Version: 1.1

Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne Victoria 3010 Australia
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APPENDIX FIVE: CONSENT FORM STUDENTS

What is a healthy relationship? Exploring how young people come to understand and experience intimate relationships

Consent Form for Students to Agree to Participate



Name of Participant _____

Student Researcher

Samantha Mannix
PhD Candidate – University of Melbourne
smannix@student.unimelb.edu.au
Ph. 0431644684

Responsible Researcher

Professor Julie McLeod
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
j.mcleod@unimelb.edu.au
Ph. 03 8344 3455

- 1) I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written Plain Language Statement to keep.
- 2) I understand that my participation will involve a number of different things, including:
 - a) **Individual Interviews:** where I will meet with the researcher to discuss a number of things related to friendship, relationships and my expectations for the future.
 - b) **Research group sessions:** where I will meet with the researcher and fellow students fortnightly for six sessions to discuss friendship, relationships and expectations for the future.
- 3) I understand that as I am under the age of 18, my parent or legal guardian needs to provide formal consent for me to participate in this project; I understand that my consent indicates my willingness to participate.
- 4) **I acknowledge that:**
 - a. The project is for the purpose of research;
 - b. I have been informed that my participation is voluntary, that I can withdraw my consent to participate at any stage in the project and that I can agree to participate in only some parts of the research;
 - c. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to legal requirements;
 - d. The possible effects of participating in the **research** have been explained to my satisfaction;
 - e. I understand that my participation in this research will not count towards my academic results;
 - f. I have been informed that with my consent **the interview and group sessions will be audio-recorded;**
 - g. I have been informed that written work produced in group sessions may be photographed for research purposes;
 - h. I have been informed that my interview transcripts will be **identified by a pseudonym** or false name, unless I specifically request my real name to be used;
 - i. I understand that that they will be securely stored at the University of Melbourne for at least 5 years after the research finishes, according to their storage rules; and will be retained by the researcher for her use;
 - j. That the consent form (once signed and returned) will be retained by the researcher.

Your Signature _____

Date: _____

Signature of Researcher _____

Date: _____

HREC: 1648046.1 Date:26/09/16; Version: 1.1

Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne Victoria 3010 Australia
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APPENDIX SIX: SCHOOL INVITATION LETTER

1st September 2017



To:

From: Samantha Mannix
PhD Candidate
Melbourne Graduate School of Education,
The University of Melbourne

Subject: Request to conduct an approved research project in your school

Dear.....

I am contacting you to seek your permission to undertake research your school. The project is called *What is a healthy relationship? Exploring how young people come to understand and experience relationships*. Ethics approval to conduct this research has been provided by the University of Melbourne, where I am a PhD candidate at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. The project has also received ethical approval from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. However, the permission of individual principals is required for me to conduct any research in their school. I am hoping to conduct research with young people to better understand their perspectives on relationships. More specifically, this research project aims to:

- gain a greater understanding of the influences and factors that shape how young people conceptualise personal relationships in contemporary youth contexts;
- understand how young people define and articulate what an 'healthy relationship' is and consequently what an 'unhealthy relationship' is

I am attaching an information sheet on the project (the Plain Language Statement which will be given to participants and their parents). This will be a relatively small-scale study conducted with up to 24 students (two groups of 12). I would like to invite students to participate in up to six fortnightly research group sessions (approximately one hour each), as well as participation in individual interviews with me (approximately one hour each). I would like to undertake the project over 2017; and the interviews and group sessions would take place at a time and location that is convenient to the school and the students.

I would be happy to talk with you on the telephone or meet with you in person to discuss the details of this project and the extent of your school and staff involvement. I will contact your school in the coming week to see if I can make an appointment to discuss this request and research project. My contact details are below.

Many thanks for your consideration of this request.

Yours sincerely,

Samantha Mannix
PhD Candidate - University of Melbourne
smannix@student.unimelb.edu.au
Ph. 0431644684
Professor Julie McLeod
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
j.mcleod@unimelb.edu.au
Ph. 03 8344 3455