Jessica Ringrose, Rosalind Gill, Sonia Livingstone, Laura Harvey

A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting': a report prepared for the NSPCC

Report

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND 'SEXTING'

A report prepared for the NSPCC

Jessica Ringrose (Institute of Education, London)
Rosalind Gill (King's College, London)
Sonia Livingstone (London School of Economics)
Laura Harvey (Open University)

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Background

Sexting has been conventionally defined as 'exchange of sexual messages or images' (Livingstone et al., 2011) and 'the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images' (Lenhart, 2009) through mobile phones and/or the internet. The legal interest has been in under-aged sexually explicit images which are a form of child pornography. Quantitative research on sexting has found rates as wide as 15% to 40% among young people, depending on age and the way what is understood as sexting is measured. However, quantitative research alone cannot offer in-depth understandings about the nature or complexity of technologically mediated sexual expression or activity via mobile or online media. Many teenagers do not even use the term 'sexting' indicating a gap between adult discourse and young people's experiences.

The study

The purpose of this small scale qualitative research was to respond to and enhance our understandings of the complex nature of sexting and the role of mobile technologies within peer teen networks. It was designed as a pilot study – to investigate a phenomenon whose nature, scale and dimensions were unknown. Thus the research itself also was small in scale and exploratory in nature and also culturally and geographically specific.

We conducted focus group interviews with 35 young people years 8 and 10 in two inner city London schools. At the focus groups we asked participants to friend us on Facebook, with a research Facebook profile. We then mapped some of their activities online and returned for 22 individual interviews with selected case study young people. We also interviewed key teachers and staff at the schools.

While we believe that the findings that emerged are far from unique to the two year groups studied in two schools, considerable caution is needed before making any generalisations to other groups. This also underscores the urgent need for expanding the research with a broader scoped study (outlined in policy recommendations).

Listening to young people

Given the paucity of prior research to guide us, the study was designed to listen to young people's views and experiences rather than to test any particular conceptions of sexting. Unlike those who would restrict sexting to particular technologies (e.g. mobile phones; Lenhart, 2009) or practices (notably, the peer exchange of illegal images; Wolak and Finkelhor, 2011), we aimed to scope the nature of the range of practices that young teenagers are experiencing in order to gain insight into their own understandings. Thus we began with an open mind, being ourselves undecided at the outset as to whether 'sexting' is a coherent phenomenon that constitutes 'a problem' for which policy intervention is required.

However, the findings did reveal some problems as experienced by young people, and we have sought to distinguish this from the headline panics in the popular press. We uncovered a great diversity of experiences, which contradicts any easy assumptions about sexting as a singular phenomenon. Nor can it simply be described in absolute terms – wanted vs. unwanted sexual activity, deliberate vs. accidental exposure – for much of young people's engagement with sexual messages and images lies in the ambiguous and grey zone. Few teenagers wish to be excluded from the sexual banter, gossip, discussion or, indeed, from the flirtatious and dating activity endemic to youth culture. But to take part is to be under pressure – to look right, perform, compete, judge and be judged. Much of young people's talk, therefore, reflects an experience that is pressurised yet voluntary – they choose to participate but they cannot choose to say 'no'. We also argue that because sexting is not just an individual practice but also a group, networked phenomenon, its effects are not limited to the actors engaged in some specific practice but permeates and influences the entire teen network in multiple ways.

Top messages from the evidence

1. **Threat from peers**. For young people, the primary technology-related threat is not the 'stranger danger' hyped by the mass media but technology-mediated sexual pressure from their peers. For example, rarely did children express to us any concern about inappropriate sexual approaches from strangers (and when they did, they seemed able quickly to brush off the approach as from a 'weirdo', 'pervert' or 'paedo'). Rather, the problems posed by sexting come from their peers – indeed, from their 'friends' in their social networks, thus rendering much commonplace advice (about being careful who you contact, or keeping your profile private) beside the point. The success of e-safety campaigns is evident in teenagers' awareness of practices to reduce online risk from strangers, and it is time to shift the focus towards reducing risk from known peers. This poses a challenge for school-based awareness strategies as a class is likely to contain varieties of victim, abuser and bystander simultaneously. Also challenging is the ever-widening circles of peers, more or less known, enabled by technology**.**

2. **Sexting is often coercive**. Sexting does not refer to a single activity but rather to a range of activities which may be motivated by sexual pleasure but are often coercive, linked to harassment, bullying and even violence. There is no easy line to be drawn between sexting and bullying, for instance, and much may be learned from anti-cyberbullying initiatives to address the problem of sexting. To achieve this, teachers, parents and other adults must be willing to discuss sexual matters and sexual bullying and cyberbullying with teenagers, including as part of existing anti-bullying initiatives.

3. **Girls most adversely affected**. Sexting is not a gender-neutral practice; it is shaped by the gender dynamics of the peer group in which, primarily, boys harass girls, and it is exacerbated by the gendered norms of popular culture, family and school that fail to recognise the problem or to support girls. We found considerable evidence of an age-old double standard, by which sexually active boys are to be admired and 'rated', while sexually active girls are denigrated and despised as 'sluts'. This creates gender specific risks where girls are unable to openly speak about sexual activities and practices, while boys are at risk of peer exclusion if they do not brag about sexual experiences. It is important that safety initiatives provide gender sensitive support for girls without treating sexting as a girl-only or girl-initiated problem; the role, responsibility and experiences of boys in relation to sexting also deserve more research and practical attention.

4. **Technology amplifies the problem**. Technology is not neutral either: the specific features or affordances of mobile phones, social networking sites and other communication technologies facilitate the objectification of girls via the creation, exchange, collection, ranking and display of images. Technology providers should do more to provide easy-to-use, age-appropriate tools by which children and young people can avoid, reduce or seek redress for distress resulting from the creation, circulation and display of unwanted sexual images and text.

5. **Sexting reveals wider sexual pressures**. Although the extent of sexting cannot be determined from a small-scale qualitative study, most children interviewed were familiar with the practices referred to as sexting; while some had experienced or knew of others who had experienced sexting, also important was the finding that most felt in some ways oppressed by perceived sexual pressure – to perform, judge and be judged – from peers. Such pressures may vary by context, but the specificity of sexualisation pressures – e.g. expectations on appearance (being very thin, having large breasts or big muscles) or actions (viewing porn, tripping and touching up, performing blow jobs, sending images of own body parts) – should be discussed in order to undermine the culture of silence that further harms youth, especially girls.

6. **Ever younger children affected**. It is striking that although the year 10 teenagers interviewed were more sexually aware and experienced, with many stories to tell regarding their own/their peers' sexual and sexting activities, they also appeared more mature in their resilience and ability to cope. The year 8 children were more worried, confused and, in some cases, upset by the sexual and sexting pressures they face, and their very youth meant that parents, teachers and others did not support them sufficiently. It is unknown whether sexting affects still younger children but we recommend that research and policy initiatives are developed to look at primary children and transitions into secondary school.

7. **Sexting practices are culturally specific.** New technologies enable public displays of identity, which bring with them pleasures but also pressures to perform particular idealised forms of femininities and masculinities which are culturally, class and 'race' specific. Young people are also, however, managing globalised consumer oriented cultures of consumption, which present challenges and pressures to have the 'right' types of embodiment, commodities, and status symbols. Sexting for girls can involve being subject to oppressive, racialised beauty norms and hierarchies around feminine appearance and body ideals. Boys must negotiate competitive masculinity, where status can be generated in new ways via technology (such as soliciting, collecting and distributing peer-produced sexualised images of girls' bodies, which operate as a form of commodity or currency). It follows resources need to link sexting practices to an analysis of wider sexist gender relations and commercial culture, but also address the locally specific peer based forms that sexting takes.

8. **More support and resources vital**. To overcome the culture of silence, adult embarrassment, and a paralysing uncertainty over changing sexual norms, the adults who variously provide for youth – teachers, parents, industry, commerce and others – should develop an explicit discourse that recognises, critiques and redresses the gendered sexual pressures on youth. Sexting may only reveal the tip of the iceberg in terms of these unequal and often coercive sexual pressures, but they also make such pressures visible, available for discussion and so potentially open to resolution.

INTRODUCTION

Children are positioned in popular and policy debates as in the vanguard of new media developments. Their experiences seem to encapsulate society's hopes for education, creativity and participation in and through new media, as well as its fears regarding the risks and harms associated with technological change. Exacerbating public anxieties is the sense that policymakers are periodically wrong-footed by unexpected developments – the unanticipated popularity of text messaging, the apparent takeover of online communication by social networking, emerging new services (Twitter, blogging, Formspring, Tumblr, Chatroulette and more). The rapid adoption of these among children and youth has required policy makers, teachers, regulators, parents and industry to scramble to keep up if they are to maximise benefits and minimise harms. One such practice is 'sexting', and certainly it has unsettled parents, teachers and policy makers.

Sexting may refer to sexually explicit content communicated via text messages, smart phones, or visual and web 2.0 activities such as social networking sites. It has been defined as the 'exchange of sexual messages or images' (Livingstone et al., 2011) and 'the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images' (Lenhart, 2009) through mobile phones and/or the internet. Sexting relates to a range of practices where sexually explicit materials are circulated, giving rise to widespread public and policy concern over 'risks' and dangers these practices pose to young people (Livingstone and Helsper, 2009; Ringrose and Erickson Barajas, 2011). Sexting has legal implications for minors who have been charged in both the UK and USA with the production of sexually explicit materials (Arcabascio, 2010; Sacco, Argudin, Maguire, & Tallon, 2010). There are also issues of 'stranger' danger and 'grooming' with adults sending minors sexual materials (Livingstone et al., 2011), and peer issues of sexual cyberbullying (Koefed and Ringrose, 2011). Whether, however, sexting is really new or continuous with earlier youthful practices, how widespread it is and, most important, whether it represents a genuine harm or, perhaps, a benefit, is still barely understood.

Hence, this innovative, small-scale qualitative study combined focus groups and in-depth individual interviews with analysis of young people's social networking activity to generate rich insights into young people's sexting practices as embedded in their use of mobile internet technologies. To frame our study, we began with a critical review of the available literature. As yet, just a few studies have been conducted on 'sexting'. Some surveys have hit the headlines with reports of widespread incidence of the peer exchange of sexual messages, but these use inconsistent definitions and variable methods of sampling, resulting in more confusion than clarity. This further justified our decision to take an inductive approach, sidestepping the results of contradictory survey findings and the moral panics of media coverage of 'sexting' and the supposed sexualisation of childhood more generally.

At the heart of our project was a concern to understand from a range of differently positioned young people what 'sexting' means to them. Thus the emphasis was upon the qualitative dimensions of 'sexting' in terms of the meanings it is given by children and young people themselves. 'Sexting' is deliberately understood broadly so as to explore how sexually explicit texts and images are produced, circulated and used in peer networked activity (via mobile and internet technologies) and, further, how these practices are integrated within and shaped by young people's offline lives and experiences. Defining 'sexting' inclusively at the start of the project allowed us to stay open to the meanings offered by the

young people themselves. The result is not only a rich and insightful account of 'sexting' practices and contexts of use but also an understanding of how these relate to issues facing young people of identity and sociality, gender and sexuality, risk and harm, resilience and vulnerability. Before examining the findings, however, we offer a succinct review of the available research literature on 'sexting' and, to contextualise these findings, on the sexualisation of culture and on online risks to children.

A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH LITERATURE ON 'SEXTING'

Of the sparse body of research currently available, more is quantitative than qualitative, with surveys throwing some light on how many and which children encounter 'sexting' but revealing little about the meaning of such encounters. Particularly, no qualitative research has yet been conducted in the UK. Key findings are summarised as follows.

The EU Kids Online project conducted in home interviews with a nationally representative sample of UK children, asking about 'sexting', as part of a larger 25 country study (Livingstone et al. 2010, 2011). This found that 12% of 11–16 year olds in the UK have seen or received sexual messages online, 2% receiving them more than once a week (compared with 15% receiving them across Europe. Girls are slightly more likely to have received them than boys (14% vs. 10%), and 11–12 year olds are less likely to receive sexual messages online than the older age groups (5%, vs. 20% of 15–16 year olds), while there is little difference by social class. Posting/sending sexual messages is even less common than seeing/receiving them – 4% of 11–16 year olds say that they have done this online in the past 12 months. Overall, 3% of 11–16 year olds in the UK said they had seen other people perform sexual acts in online messages, 2% had been asked online for an image of their genitals, and 2% had been asked to talk about sexual acts with someone online. Of the 12% who had received some kind of sexual message, one quarter of those had been bothered or upset by this (more often younger children), the remainder reporting no harm from such messages. Among those (across Europe) who had been bothered by 'sexting', about four in ten blocked the person who sent the messages (40%) and/or deleted the unwanted sexual messages (38%); four in ten children did not tell anyone, however, even though they had been bothered by the experience.

Also in the UK, Cross, Richardson, and Douglas (2009) found that one in three UK teenagers had received 'sexually suggestive' messages. A non-representative UK study (Phippen, 2009) used an online survey to ask teenagers aged 11–18 about their practices in sharing 'personal images'. This found that 40% say they know friends who share sexual images (via any electronic means) and 27% say it happens regularly or all the time. Half knew of cases where sexual messages had been circulated beyond the originally intended recipient (and half of those thought the intention was to cause distress) and 30% knew someone who had been adversely affected by sexting (10% had themselves been affected; Phippen, 2009). This relatively high rate of 'sexting' may be because the sample was unrepresentative, or because children were asked to report on sexting as it affected other people ('third person effects', that the media harm others than oneself, are generally higher than self-reported harm).

In the USA, Pew Internet reported in 2009 from a nationally representative sample of US mobile phone-owners aged 12–17 years that 15 % had received sexually suggestive, nude, or near nude images of someone they knew via text messaging on their cell phone, and 4% had sent such messages (Lenhart, 2009). This occurred equally for boys and girls, but more often among older than younger teenagers. In their 2011 update (again with a nationally representative sample of 12–17 year olds, but now leaving it open whether 'sexting' occurs via phone or internet), Pew Internet found little change two years on – 2% of all teenagers have sent a 'sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo or video' of themselves to someone else, while 16% (more older than younger) have received a sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo or video of someone else they know.

'Sex Tech', commissioned by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy in 2009, found that as many as 48% of 13–19 year olds reported receiving messages online or via a cell phone in a non-probability online sample of US 13–19 year olds, and 20% reported sending or posting 'nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves'. Cox Communications (2009) found that 19% of US 13–18 year olds had exchanged 'sexually suggestive or nearly nude photos' and 9% had sent a 'nude or nearly nude' picture of themselves. An MTV/AP (2009) survey reported that 10% of their respondents aged 14–24 had sent a naked image of themselves.

Reviewing the available literature to date, Lounsbury, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2011) express concern at the variability in research quality (especially the use of unrepresentative or even convenience sampling techniques) and lack of consensus over definitions (ranging from highly inclusive to very tightly defined). It is these methodological flaws, they contend, that accounts for the wide divergence in estimates for the incidence of sexting in the literature – ranging from 15% to 40% or more. From the above, it appears that the representative surveys produce lower estimates of incidence than the convenience or online samples. It is also difficult to know if 'sexting' is under-reported because of social desirability factors (e.g. embarrassment on the part of respondents) or over-reported because of response biases (those who do it may be more likely to respond to surveys).

The definition of 'sexting' is also a concern. Lounsbury et al recommend that stricter definition focused on illegal images being exchanged by legal minors (under 18 years old) in order that the evidence directly informs legal interventions. While instead taking the position that sexting should, at this early stage in the research process, be defined more broadly, especially open to including the phenomena that concern young people themselves, we note Lounsbury et al's point that sexting may be rather less common than some of much hyped survey findings suggest. But what should be included in 'sexting' if one includes more than strictly illegal images of minors – for example, should words as well as images be included? Pew Internet included only 'sending or receiving phone messages of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photos of videos of themselves or of someone they knew on their cell phones' (2009: 4), excluding text messages without visual content or those shared by other means such as email or social networking sites. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy survey referred to 'sexually suggestive pictures/video' and written 'sexually suggestive messages', and similarly, the MTV/AP survey asked about sending and receiving 'sexual words and images'. Cox Communications focused on the sending and receiving of 'nude or nearly-nude' photographs, while EU Kids Online (2009) examined online (not mobile) 'sexual messages or images … (by which is meant) talk about having sex or images of people naked or having sex.'

Rarely too do surveys clarify who has sent sexual messages to the respondent, leaving it unclear if the sender is a known peer, an unknown peer or an adult. Given the considerable concern over possible contact afforded to young people from unknown adult predators, it is important that research explores not only the incidence but also the nature of these sexual encounters. How are contacts made and negotiated in peer groups? In the context of mass 'friending' and contact lists through Facebook and Blackberry, what are the possibilities for gendered and sexual risk in the everyday relations in the young people's immediate, *inside-known* realm of peer-to-peer relations in their social networks both on and offline (see also Ringrose and Erickson-Barajas, 2011)?

A decision to limit 'sexting' to just mobile phones or online messages may also be unduly restrictive, now that young people move freely among diverse and convergent technologies. Particularly, social networking sites combine features of websites (via online profiles and the posting of content in public) with various possibilities for private messaging and chat. Research on gender, sexuality and social

networking has indicated increased levels of sexual objectification and intensified social comparison online, through the visual representations and cultures on social networking sites (Manago et al., 2008). Research on Myspace has found a significant proportion of young people 'included pictures of revealing sexual poses (59%), partial frontal male nudity (28%), partial frontal female nudity (17%), full male nudity (2%) and full female nudity (6%)' (Pierce in Patchin and Hinduja, 2010: 201). Ringrose's (2010) UK based qualitative research explored sexual identity construction online for younger teenagers, finding that boys and girls were under new performative pressures to pose in 'sexy' and body-revealing ways through their social networking profiles, with boys posting their 'six-packs' and girls posting photos in bikinis and bras and knickers. Even though not all participants participated in posting revealing photos, for example, the peer group as a whole are affected by the developing gender norms of the online culture (see also Livingstone, 2008). Young people have to make complex decisions about what to post and what it would mean for their wider social relations at school and beyond.

To make sense of the array of sexting practices, Wolak and Finkelhor (2011) distinguish between aggravated (including criminal or abusive elements in the creation of sexual images) and experimental (youth-produced) sexting, further dividing the latter by motivation (romantic, sexual attention-seeking, other). In the Pew Internet focus groups conducted to accompany their survey, interviewees mostly discussed the latter not the former type of sexting, as supported also by qualitative (written) answers in an open-ended section of the survey. Some younger tweens/teenagers reported that sexual images are circulated in place of sexual activity, 'sexting' being seen as safer than having sex. However, whether these were boys sending pictures of themselves/or male genitalia, or girls sending pictures of themselves etc. was not clear. Further, it seemed that sexually suggestive images were being used as a form of 'relationship currency' with boys asking for them and with 'pressures' upon girls to produce/share such images. The young people also wrote about how sexting brands a girl 'slutty', gives girls a 'slut reputation', is 'gross' and 'disrespecting themselves'. It was notable that there were no similar derogatory comments about males by girls, although one boy said he wouldn't send explicit images of himself as he didn't want to be seen as a 'perv'. The distinction between acceptable and unacceptable images is also gendered – one boy commented (of girls' pictures), 'it's not a big deal if it's just a top-less photo but when it's the bottom also it's a lot more serious'. It seems, then that sending of nude pictures is viewed as a more risky practice for girls, and that more often the images are of nude or nearly nude girls rather than boys. However, the nature, range and consequences of different 'sexting scenarios' remains to be explored.

Contextualising 'sexting' in relation to other online risks

The *EU Kids Online* network (Hasebrink et al., 2009) classified online risks to children in terms of *content risks* (which position the child as recipient, generally of mass produced content though increasingly also of user-generated content), *contact risks* (in which someone contacts the child, requiring him or her to participate in some way, if unwittingly or unwillingly) and *conduct risks* where the child is an actor, generally as part of a peer to peer or networked interaction), noting further that risks may pose sexual, aggressive, value-based or commercial forms of harm. Based on this analysis, the survey revealed the incidence of risk as shown in the table below. 'Sexting' is about as common as exposure to sexual or pornographic content online, and more common than the incidence of cyberbullying – although of all the risks, cyberbullying was the one that most often upset the children who encountered it.

Summary of online risk factors shaping children's probability of experiencing harm

%	9–10	11–12	13–14	15–16	All
		Age			
Seen sexual images on websites in past 12 months	4	5	13	22	11
Have been sent nasty or hurtful messages on the internet in past 12 months	3	8	9	14	8
Seen or received sexual messages on the internet in past 12 months	n/a	5	10	20	12
Ever had contact on the internet with someone not met face to face before	13	18	24	48	28
Ever gone on to meet anyone face to face that first met on the internet	0	1	4	12	5
Have come across one or more types of potentially harmful user-generated content in past 12 months	n/a	9	24	26	20
Have experienced one or more types of misuse of personal data in past 12 months	n/a	10	12	13	12
Encountered one or more of the above	13	31	47	65	40
Acted in a nasty or hurtful way towards others on the internet in the past 12 months	1	2	3	4	2
Sent or posted a sexual message of any kind on the internet in the past 12 months	n/a	1	2	8	4
Done either of these	0	2	5	9	4

Base: All children who use the internet. Source: *EU Kids Online* (The UK Report, 2010).

However, the possible relations among these different risks has been little explored, beyond the overall finding from *EU Kids Online* that they are positively correlated – children who encounter more of one kind of risk tend to encounter more of the others (and vice versa). But we know little about what this means in practice, or whether it reflects the nature of youthful practices online (which blur the neat categories imposed by survey researchers) or the nature of the online environment itself (which increasingly converges and connects previously distinct forms of content, contact and conduct). Is there, for instance, a relation between the exchange of sexual messages and exposure to online pornography? Is there a relationship between 'sexting' and sexual bullying or cyberbullying? In addition to adult sexual predators, there is a problem of threatening or bullying sexualised encounters with peers via new digital technologies. Some research suggests that girls are more at risk of cyberbullying (Rivers and Noret, 2010), although the way this manifests in social networks is still largely unknown (Garcia-Gomez, 2011). The risk of online contacts in the peer group leading to sexual bullying both online but also offline is also something we explore in this report, suggesting that the way sexual attacks manifest in social networks, instant messaging, and mobile phones are interconnected and can influence the risk of physical attacks at school.

The relation between risk (the occurrence of something that might harm a child) and the harm itself (generally, as reported by the child) has caused considerable confusion in policy and public discussions.

It is, therefore, important clearly to distinguish the two (Livingstone, 2009). There may be good reasons to seek policy interventions to reduce risk, because without risk there is no harm. But there are also good reasons not to reduce risk – first, because such actions may unduly restrict children's online opportunities (parental supervision, banning social networking in schools, limiting time online are all strategies that reduce risk at the cost of online freedoms); and second because children cannot grow and learn in a risk-free environment. As the advocates of children's resilience are keen to point out, it is only by meeting and coping with adverse circumstances (within reason, of course) that children learn to cope and become resilient (Coleman and Hagell, 2007).

In the uncertain translation of risk into harm, many factors come into play – concerned with the child's circumstances, personality, prior history and social support as well as environmental factors to do with the peer group, school and online affordances. As developmental psychologists would put it (e.g. Schoon, 2006), the more we understand the operation of vulnerability and protective factors, the more one might seek to reduce harm without necessarily reducing risk (or opportunities). How much these factors are individual or social, how much they concern offline contexts or online practices, remains to be determined.

A further analysis of the *EU Kids Online* survey, Livingstone and Görzig (in prep.) found that children's range of online activities, including certain risky online activities, increases the likelihood of them receiving sexual messages online, but so does their range of risky offline activities, independently of age and gender. Additionally, the analysis suggested that older children encounter more 'sexting' because they use the internet more diversely, experience more offline risks and may develop more psychological difficulties and/or tendencies to sensation seeking. However, a different picture emerged when explaining how much children are upset or bothered by receiving sexual messages, pointing to several vulnerability factors. Specifically, being lower in sensation seeking and, especially, having more psychological difficulties predicted how upset children were by receiving sexual messages; younger children and girls were also more likely to be upset. For some children, it appears, 'sexting' may result from taking a riskier or sensation seeking approach to the online (and offline environment) without necessarily occasioning problems; it may be that for these children, their online activities permit them to explore their sexuality and social relations in such a way as to become more resilient (as well as offering expressive or intimate freedoms). But for some children, 'sexting' is upsetting or problematic, and these tend to be children who are already vulnerable in some way, possibly because of their life circumstances.

As may be seen from the foregoing review, although little certainty has emerged from the research already conducted, it has thrown up a productive set of questions worthy of exploration. Two further challenges may be added to the mix before we discuss the methodology chosen for the present project. Firstly, contrary to the clear line drawn by researchers and policy makers between the online and offline, qualitative research increasing shows that for children and young people, this is by no means a clear or straightforward distinction. Increasingly, youthful practices commute across online and offline borders, mixing communication from different sources and media, building a coherent experience that fuses what was once separate. Thus in the work that follows, we challenge any binary opposition between digital or analogue, or online and offline, or virtual and face-to-face (Livingstone, 2009). We will explore how the opportunities to digitize and remix communicative forms is reshaping processes of identity, sociality and sexuality (Ringrose and Erickson-Barajas, 2011). Secondly, it should be recognised that little is yet known about the specificity of young people's backgrounds in shaping experiences of 'sexting', particularly insofar as this involves more than considerations of age and gender. Thus our research explicitly locates peer groups in their socio-cultural milieus to draw out implications about race, class

and gender positionings in relation to 'sexting'. This in turn, it is hoped, will enable development of appropriate resources to support different groups of young people the better to avoid or deal with 'sexting' insofar as this is problematic for them.

Putting concerns over sexting into context – the 'sexualisation' of culture

The 'sexualisation of culture' has become a major focus of interest and concern in the last decade (e.g. McNair, 2002; Gill, 2003; McRobbie, 2004; Levy, 2005; Paasonen et al., 2007; Attwood, 2009; Durham, 2009; Levin & Kilbourne, 2009; Dines, 2010). The phrase is used to capture the growing sense that western societies have become saturated by sexual representations and discourses, with pornography increasingly influential and porous, permeating contemporary culture. Porn stars have emerged as bestselling authors and celebrities; a 'porno chic' aesthetic can be seen in music videos and advertising; and practices once associated with the sex industry e.g. lapdancing and pole dancing have become newly 'respectabilised', promoted as mainstream corporate entertainment or fitness activity. This shift speaks to something more than the idea that 'sex has become the big story' (Plummer, 1995:4) but denotes a range of different things:

> 'a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; [and the] fondness the scandals, controversies and panics around sex' (Attwood, 2006: 77).

Brian McNair (2002) has argued Western society has become a 'striptease culture' preoccupied with confession, revelation and exposure. This is connected to an ongoing breakdown or renegotiation of the boundary between public and private, which is itself the outcome of multiple, intersecting factors including the partial success of the women's and sexual liberation movements, shifts in media regulation away from censorship and towards 'an informed consumer model' (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009), and the possibilities opened up by rapid technological change. More broadly, sociologists would situate claims about 'sexualisation' within the wider canvas of developments in advanced capitalism in which relationships are taking on more fluid and 'liquid' forms (Bauman, 2003), intimacy is transforming (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), and sex is playing a more central role in 'projects of the self' (Giddens, 1993; Featherstone, 1990; 1999).

Growing concerns about 'sexualization' can be seen in the UK coalition government's renewed emphasis on child 'sexualisation' and 'commercialisation' as a key areas to be addressed (DCMS, 2010; DfE, 2010; HM Government, 2010) .The proliferation of public and policy reports includes, in the last two years in Britain alone, a Home Office report by Dr Linda Papadopoulos (Papadopoulos, 2010; see also APA, 2007), a report commissioned by the Scottish Office (Buckingham et al., 2010) and, most recently, Reg Bailey's (2011) report Let Children be Children (this building on the Byron Review, 2008, which examined ways of helping young people safely cope with increasing exposure to and use of sexually explicit materials via new media technologies). It is also seen in a plethora of popular books, about the sexualisation of girls, with titles such as *So Sexy, So Soon* or *What's happening to our Girls?* Stories about 'sexualisation' also form an increasing proportion of news items, and it is clear that the topic is given prominence by editors as a matter of major public interest.
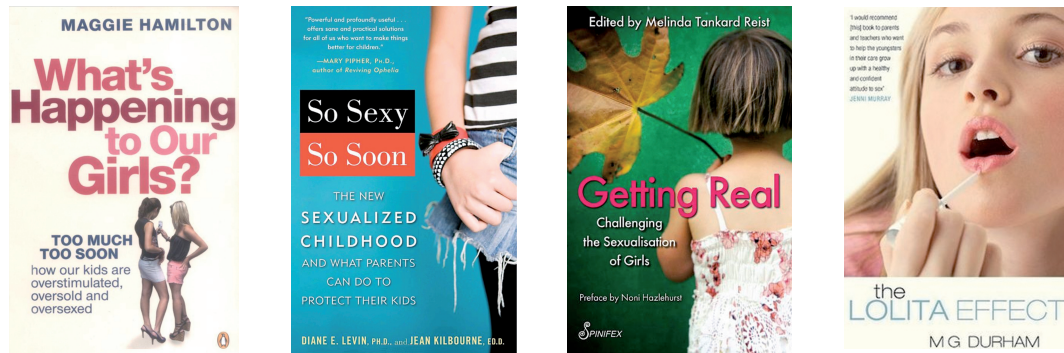
Some recent titles about the sexualisation of children (or rather girls)

There is a sense across these sources of an assumed 'weight of evidence' which includes the idea that girls are 'directly sexualised' through 'their exposure to advertising, tween magazines and television programmes, the consequences of which include 'physical, psychological and sexual harm' (Rush & La Nauze, 2006) and furthermore that there is clear 'empirical research and clinical evidence that premature sexualisation is harmful' (Papadopoulos, 2010).

However, there is a severe shortage of rigorous research on this issue. Specifically there is a lack of a robust evidence base from which to discuss children and young people's experiences of 'sexualised' culture: studies tend to generalise from adults to children. Moreover, there is no agreement over what 'sexualisation' is – and it is frequently elided with other issues e.g. body image. There is a predominant focus on girls across academic, policy and popular treatment of this issue, yet despite this there is a lack of a properly gendered analysis or one that pays attention to other structural features of identity such as class, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation or age (e.g. the differences between 9 year olds and 15 year olds). This leads to an unsatisfying situation in which the figure of the (implicitly White, middle class) 13 year old girl haunts the debates about sexualisation, yet without any analysis of structural inequalities or power relations that might explain why she is particularly at risk (see Gill, 2012).

A further set of problems with the literature on sexualisation and young people is the way it has become unhelpfully polarised between the psychological 'effects' tradition and a contrasting body of work from media and cultural studies. The psychological tradition is a quantitative tradition concerned with content analysis and experimental demonstrations of media 'effects'. It has been valuable in highlighting potential harms of sexualisation, but it employs a problematic conception of meaning and an unsophisticated understanding of media influence; it also suffers from over-reliance on laboratory based experiments with limited ecological validity, and it frequently confuses correlations with causes. By contrast, the media and cultural studies tradition is a qualitative tradition based on listening to children and young people. It restores proper respect to children, regarding them as knowing, 'savvy' and 'critical' consumers (not passive dupes) but at times tends towards the celebratory, treating data rather uncritically at face value, over-representing children as autonomous agents rather than as shaped by social structures, and it struggles to ground claims about the incidence or frequency of children's experiences.

Perhaps paradoxically, these traditions share two further problems. First, their preoccupation with conventional media (e.g. advertising, music videos) and lack of attention to young people's social media or own media production (e.g. web 2.0), which has led to a severe shortage of research on how 'sexualisation' may be embedded in or inscribed in peer-produced media. Secondly and related to this,

both traditions – and the policy reports that are based on them – have ignored practices to focus instead on products or consumption, whether this is media products or consumer items such as Playboy stationery or padded bras being marketed to pre-pubescent girls. Not only has the literature on 'sexualisation' not been concerned with 'sexting' but, more generally, the focus on consumption of products rather than on social practices has given much of the research in the field of 'sexualisation' a 'lifted out' quality, rather than understanding its significance in the daily flow, texture and lived experience of young people's lives (cf Livingstone, 2009; Ringrose & Renold, 2011; Renold & Ringrose, 2011; Jackson & Vares, 2011; Vares et al., 2011).

In this study we move beyond the limitations of both these traditions to an approach that might be called 'psycho-social-cultural' – to capture the way in which it pays attention to the different moments of 'sexualised' experience in young people's lives. The study offers a detailed, qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of 'sexting' and of the culture of mobile internet technologies more generally.

METHODOLOGY

This study has been explicitly designed to build upon previous quantitative research findings on sexting, which have found a wide range of between 15–40 percent rates of sexting among young people depending on age. Some research found an escalation in sexting with increasing age, which we wanted to explore further. The quantitative data also revealed that girls were more 'bothered' by sexual content including sexting online, an issue we wanted to investigate more closely.

Quantitative data is limited to mapping the rates and distribution of what are assumed to be 'sexting' phenomena but cannot offer in-depth understandings into what 'sexting' could actually mean or involve for the young people in question. Our qualitative research was undertaken in order to explore the nature of sexual communication among young people (both digital and in day to day school life), using 'sexting' as a conceptual starting point. We did not assume that the young people would know what 'sexting' was so we broadened our scope to map how they spoke about sexual communication in general with a focus on digital mediums. We also wanted to explore how differently positioned young people (according to gender, age and background) responded to various types of digital or sexual online content to discover what was problematic for young people and what coping strategies they may have.

Research questions

1. How is 'sexting' experienced by young people? What is the nature of the sexually explicit material being shared? If it is peer produced, how is it made, why is it sent, what are young people's responses to it? Is it consensual or coerced – and what kinds of pressures, along a spectrum, are there to participate in it?

2. How do experiences vary by different age group (year 8 and year 10) and what implications does this have for the challenges children face at different ages or the kinds of social support available to them?

3. How are experiences of 'sexting' gender differentiated? What is the gendered nature of the material, what is it depicting? How does it represent sexuality, girls and boys, masculinity and femininity? What are gendered experiences of 'harm'?

4. How does the cultural background of the young people and local sexual cultures shape the 'sexting' phenomena under study?

5. How do the young people cope with 'sexting' experiences in terms of harm, risk, and vulnerability? How does it relate to other aspects of their lives, including bullying, and other sexual activity?

Research design

The study set out as an exploratory inquiry into differently positioned young people's experiences of 'sexting' in the UK. We selected a sample of two schools that would enable research with a broad range of students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. We gained access to two London schools, School One in North London and School Two in South London. Over 50% of the students at both schools are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Both schools serve mixed socioeconomic status (SES)

populations, though School One has a higher proportion of students eligible for free school meals. Both schools are located in geographical areas associated with gang activity and crime. While the two schools had similar Ofsted attainment and SES levels, their approaches to e-safety were quite different. School Two had recently implemented e-safety software that enabled monitoring of student computer activity, while School One did not actively monitor students' computer use. The different approaches to e-safety provided a point of comparison, while working with two schools with similar contexts of socioeconomic deprivation and high numbers of students from minority ethnic backgrounds enabled us to explore sexting scenarios in depth with a larger sample of students from a mix of cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. The next stage of research in this area will need to capture the experiences of more privileged young people, as well as young people living in more suburban and rural locations.

As noted above, existing quantitative research has suggested that young people experience 'sexting' differently across age cohorts from ages 11–16. Our research aimed to explore the meaning behind these statistics with younger and older students at our sample schools. Given the relatively low reported rates of sexting in recent data for the youngest age cohort (11–12) we decided to sample our students from year 8 (12–13) and year 10 (14–15) to develop an exploratory sense of the differences in young people's experiences over this relatively short period of physical, psychological and social change.

Table 1: Sample

	School			
	School One		School Two	
	Year 8	Year 10	Year 8	Year 10
Gender				
Male	4	4	5	5
Female	4	3	5	5
Ethnicity				
Black and minority ethnic	6	5	8	4
White	2	2	2	6
Total	8	7	10	10

Semi structured focus group interviews with students

We interviewed 35 young people in single sex focus groups of 2–5 people to explore their experiences of sexual content online in a group context.

There were differences in the sampling methods used to compose the focus groups at each school site. We asked schools to select a diverse sample of students in years 8 and 10 based on their knowledge of the student population. Students at School Two were selected from those who volunteered to take part in the study. In order to be eligible to take part, students were required to have experience of using online or mobile technologies.

Students at School One were selected to take part by the heads of year 8 and 10, based on their knowledge of the student population at the school. This meant that our sample included a wide range of students

from different cultural, ethnic, religious and SES backgrounds that reflected the diverse nature of our sample schools.

Parents/guardians of participants were informed of the research and gave permission for their child's participation (see Appendices 1 and 2). Both parents and students were given contact information for the research team in case they had any questions or concerns. At the beginning of each group interview we explained the aims of the study and set out the ethical guidelines and gave the young people an opportunity to ask questions about the research.

We are experienced in interviewing young people about sensitive issues and worked to create safe environments for the participants to speak in both the focus groups and individual interviews. We made our roles as social science researchers clear to the young people, explaining that we were not teachers, although they were informed of our duty to report any issues that involved harm to them or another child. We explained that their details would remain confidential and agreed with focus group participants the importance of respecting fellow participants' confidentiality about any issues raised in the research. We were mindful of participants exposure to the existing policy discourse on 'sexting' and the possibility that the young people would feel they were expected to give a particular account of their experiences that reflected this discourse, so we discussed how we were not there to judge or discipline them. Our interview schedules were designed as guides to provide initial prompts for a semi-structured, conversational interview guided by open-ended questions. The focus group and individual guides can be found in Appendix 3. Using a semi-structured approach allowed us to follow up on issues that participants considered important in relation to our key topics and clarify meaning with participants during the interviews. We were guided by the principle of 'critical respect' (Gill, 2007) taking our participants accounts seriously while maintaining an understanding of the interview encounter, and the young people's accounts as produced in a particular social and cultural context. In particular, the focus groups took place in the context of existing social relations within the school. The schools had different disciplinary techniques and surveillance. There were also specific hierarchies of popularity and peer networks which will have an impact on the way that students are able to speak in groups. The focus groups and individual interviews were carried out at the school in separate classroom or meeting space during class time.

We choose to interview boys and girls separately as existing literature has shown some differences in the ways that boys and girls are positioned in relation to sexual practices and activities at school (Allen, 2004). We felt this research design proved to be helpful in enabling us to observe gendered norms in the ways that girls and boys spoke about the topic. In particular given our findings on the pressure for young people to 'take a joke', we felt that single-sex groups created a space in which it was possible for the young people to talk about pressures they felt around issues like intimacy, flirting, dating and sexual activity. Both of our interviewers were women, so it is possible that a male interviewer would have elicited a different kind of data. Mixed groups would likely provide a different set of data again, but would be useful in further research to explore any differences in language used in conversations in mixed groups.

At the end of the focus group interviews we asked the participants if they would be comfortable making 'friends' with us on Facebook. We explained that we wanted to look at their communications and actions on the site (explained more fully below). Finally, participants were given a £10 voucher to spend on music or books.

Online ethnography

We requested to connect with our sample as 'friends' on Facebook. The majority of our participants accepted (31); two participants did not accept our request and two did not have a Facebook account. We created a research based Facebook page, with settings so that the list of our 'friends' could not see each others' posts or the list of participants. We then were able to follow public profile updates from each Facebook friend. On the basis of both focus group discussions and the online content of Facebook we selected a smaller sample of case study participants, with whom we followed up issues around sexual communication and representation on Facebook in individual interviews.

Text mapping with students

We began the research with the intention of recording texting data through a log mapping a day of SMS messaging from the case study participants. However, when we were in the field we realised that texting had been largely replaced with Blackberry Messaging, which is a digital medium that combines social networking and texting through a group network and individual contacts on your phone. Blackberry had gained in popularity due to the cheap price of messaging at five pounds per month. None of the research team had a Blackberry so we did not pursue friending the participants through BBM. Instead we had case study participants talk us through a range of BBM activities, including sending out pins to increase contacts, 'screen munching', sending and receiving naked (typically topless) and sometimes sexually explicit photos via BBM and having sexually explicit photos as default profile photos. During the fieldwork we spoke with participants about developing a mapping methodology to understand BBM use. This would be an essential next step in research on this topic given the shifting ways that technology is being used by young people.

Individual Interviews with students

Our methodology followed McClelland and Fine's (2008) 'intensity sampling' where we focused on demonstrative cases to explore the 'sexting' experiences in depth. We selected 22 participants from the focus groups to follow up with individual interviews. Interviews lasted from 40 minutes to an hour and took place in classrooms or meeting rooms. Participating in an individual interview is a very different experience to taking part in a focus group so we talked through the reasons for conducting individual interviews with participants, explaining that we wanted to explore some of the subjects raised in the focus groups and online ethnography in more depth and get to know a little more about their lives. Conducting a mix of focus groups and individual interviews allowed us to explore both the social context of 'sexting' and speak with young people about sensitive topics without their peers. The individual interviews consequently focused on the issues around sexual communication and digital technology raised in the focus groups and students' Facebook interactions online.

Triangulation

The research strategy that we adopted provided a powerful method of triangulation, since we were able to follow up the discussion from focus group interviews by tracking some of the communication on Facebook. Often online research observes participants without ever meeting or interviewing them. Our method gave us the unique opportunity to gain permission to observe participants online and talk through the interactions we observed with the participants themselves (see also Ringrose, 2010, 2011). This meant that the young people were able to reflect on their online interactions and clarify what these meant to them. This allowed us to follow up key issues emerging out of social networking profiles with chosen participants in the individual interviews. Through this multiple strategy of tracking student experience and communication we could explore various aspects of online identity with the young people. As mentioned a further method of triangulation would have been to map the Blackberry messenger communications, and this is a key area to develop in further research.

Individual interviews with teachers

We conducted individual interviews with four members of staff specialising in technology, media studies, e-safety, PSHE and one focus group interview with a behavioural support team (four members of staff) to gain insight into teachers' and staff views on sexting and recommendations for schooling policy/practices (eight teachers in total). These teacher interviews were more exploratory than the rigorous triangulated methodology of student participants, and teachers' views require further attention during a follow up stage of research.

Ethics

The primary ethical issues in this project centred on informed consent, rights to withdraw, anonymity and confidentiality. The other key issues relate to the management of disclosures, and to participants' potential discomfort (e.g. talking in an interview about an experience that was distressing). Below we set out how we dealt with all these issues. Further we wish to highlight the very experienced nature of the research team, amongst which there is considerable expertise in researching with diverse groups of young people, teachers and parents on sensitive research topics such as bullying, cyberbullying , 'sexting' and sexualisation (Koefed and Ringrose, 2011; Ringrose, 2008, 2010, 2011; Ringrose and Renold, 2011; Ringrose and Erickson Barajas, 2011; Gill et al., 2005; Gill, 2009; Vares, Gill and Jackson, 2011; Livingstone and Helsper, 2009, Livingstone and Haddon, 2009, Livingstone et al., 2011).

The Institute of Education's (IOE) research procedures are consistent with the highest standards of research practice, as well as the principles of good practice set out in the Data Protection Act (1998). All research was conducted in line with these standards, with the standards of good ethical and research practice published by the professional societies of the researchers (BSA, BERA) and with the principles of ethical research included in the ESRC Research Ethics Framework (ESRC REF). Research on minors and on sensitive topics must always be undertaken with great care, and with due diligence to the protocols covering such research. While adhering to BERA ethics guidelines on minors we also developed ethical guidelines specific to this study.

Informed consent

A discussion was undertaken with the head-teacher of each school participating in the research detailing a clear understanding of the ethical procedures to follow regarding child protection, data storage, confidentiality and informed consent. The research team obtained formal written consent at each phase of the research via written permissions from the legal guardians of all young people directly participating in the project. All parents and participants were given an information leaflet detailing what participation involved, and the research team explained this face- to-face in interviews answering all of the participants' questions. Participants were informed they could withdraw from research activities or the study at any time. Participants were assured of confidentiality and we set out ground rules about confidentiality in focus group interviews, which we followed up in individual interviews. In writing up the research all participants have been anonymised with extra care taken to avoid identifying features. Self-chosen pseudonyms have been used when possible. The participating schools have been given pseudonyms, and again care was taken to make identification of the school and neighbourhood improbable. Alongside consent forms, accessible information was produced for schools covering all of the above issues, describing the research, and outlining support services.

Disclosure

An area of particular ethical complexity with respect to this project was the management of disclosures by participants of abuse or criminal activity. There was also a risk that discussions about gendered and sexualised conflict and violence could raise discomfort. School counsellors and/or educational psychologists or behavioural support staff, were on hand, although no issues arose that we had to seek intervention around from school staff. Members of the research team had 'enhanced' Criminal Records Bureau clearance. All data has been held securely in the researchers' workplaces and only members of the research team have had access to the full data set. Data that is digitised has been password protected.

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND SEXTING: DATA ANALYSIS

This study has shown that the phenomenon understood as sexting includes far greater diversity of practices than usually understood. Sexting may include boys asking girls for photos in their bra, bikini or with naked breasts etc.; boys claiming to have such photos on their phones; girls and boys sending sexually explicit messages over the phone or internet; the negotiation of sexual propositions on digital devices; the accessing and recirculation of pornography on phones; and the use of sexually explicit photographs on Facebook or as the default picture on networks such as Blackberry Messenger. The research also suggests that sexting – as a set of practices – is far more prevalent **t**han previous assessments suggest. As mobile digital technologies come to permeate more and more aspects of young people's lives, the production, consumption and distribution of sexual communications is becoming an increasingly taken-for-granted – yet problematic – feature of the social and cultural landscapes they inhabit.

In the remainder of this report, then, our aim is to unpack the diverse practices that might be understood as 'sexting' and to understand how they are experienced by young people themselves. In order to contextualise sexting we argue that two broad framings are necessary: first, an appreciation of the importance of digital technologies–and particularly smart phones–in young people's lives; and secondly, an understanding of the significance of the wider ('sexualised' and sexist) culture in which young people are growing up. In particular, we suggest an understanding of sexting would be misrepresentative and incomplete without the rich and detailed understanding of the school context that our fieldwork has provided. By locating young people's experiences of sexting in the context of their everyday lives in school, the research has illuminated the profound impact of culture, class, race, sexuality and especially gender to the nature, practice and experience of sexting. As our analysis shows, sexting is a distinctively gendered set of practices.

Modalities of 'sexting'/ sexting scenarios

Sending sexually explicit PIN broadcasts over Blackberry messaging (BBM), also responding to and negotiating sexual messages and requests

- Asking for 'bare' photos mostly boys asking girls for photos in bra, bikini or topless
- Posting sexually explicit Blackberry pin broadcasts and messages
- Collecting bare photos (e.g. girls in bra or cleavage): several boys across both age groups claimed to have a collection, in some cases up to 30 peer produced images of teenage girls on their phone
- 'Exposing' that is sharing, posting or distributing without the senders permission, sexually revealing or compromising photos
- Screen munching: When 'sex talk', for instance promising a 'blow job' can be made public through munch screens on digital teen social networks and phones
- Posting a sexually explicit photo (peer produced or professionally produced pornography including animated images) on Facebook, Blackberry (or other peer digital network)
- Harassing others with sexually explicit images, for instance pornography on phones or by tagging other young people in the images

The remainder of the report is structured as follows. The first section considers the importance of mobile digital technologies in young people's lives, showing the ways in which they are used, lived and experienced, and highlighting the intense emotional bonds young people describe with their phones. Next we discuss the unequal gender relations, and the culture of normalised sexual violence in the two schools where fieldwork was conducted, arguing that an appreciation of gender is central to understanding the various practices of sexting. In the third section, we turn specifically to the role of technologies in mediating sexualised communication between teenagers. Here we discuss the way particular uses of new digital technologies may put pressure on girls, and subject their bodies to more intense sexual scrutiny. In section four, we highlight the meanings of sexualised images and communications for the boys and girls, through a discussion of the system or currency known as 'ratings'. The fifth section is concerned with sexting and gendered/sexualised double standards, and discusses the on-going policing of girls'– but not boys'– (sexual) reputations and the role new mobile devices play in this. We also examine girls' responses to both the physical and verbal harassment they experience from boys in and outside of the school, and to similar pressures as they are mediated through digital technologies. We reveal that girls are often articulate and cogent critics of the unfairness they experience, and are creative in their attempts to actively try to resist, but they are often trapped in situations in which they feel silenced or feel they have to treat the harassment as a joke.

Throughout the analysis we move back and forth between online and off-line worlds, since this is how young people experience their lives. Technologies are not felt as separate or an adjunct to 'real life', but rather are intimately entangled in the making and unmaking of young people's everyday lives and relationships. Interspersed in our analysis are 'text boxes' that vividly illustrate, in young people's own words, what sexting means to them. (A glossary is provided in Appendix 4 to capture the young people's lexicon and contemporary slang).

The report concludes with a brief discussion of findings, policy recommendations, and directions for future research and resources.

1. Young people and mobile internet technologies

Mobile technologies, and in particular smart phones, suffuse the everyday lives of young people, structuring and shaping their experiences. As this group of 14–15 year old girls told us, their mobiles are a constant from waking up in the morning to going to sleep at night.

> I: *So how much are you using your [mobile] phone do you think in an average day?*
>
> R: *Like all the time.*
>
> R: *I use it to wake myself up, then I use it to phone Riley or you to see where you are to meet each other in the morning, and then when I get on the way to school I will be texting people from school.*
>
> R: *Yeah and using it to get the time.*
>
> R: *Yeah to get the time. I use my phone every second of the day. If I am not using it I feel a bit weird.*
>
> R: *I use it to go to sleep with my music on.*
>
> R: *I talk on my phone all day long.*

This group discussion hints at the profound affective bonds that people have with their mobile technologies. These technologies are loved and felt to be central to life, and to young people's sense of self. Indeed, life could be unthinkable without them. As one girl put it, 'I would die without my Blackberry'. Another told us, 'I can't put the phone down … people are sending stuff every minute and you just keep looking at the phone and can't put it down' (Cherelle, year 8, School Two). Claire (year 8 School One) told us she found 'communicating on Facebook is easier than in real life'.

Smart phones with social networking capabilities like the iPhone or the BlackBerry are increasingly popular among young people. They can access the internet but do not require wifi, and, crucially they offer 'free' messaging services (such as BlackBerry Messenger – BBM – or Ping), in which everyone using the same platform can contact each other. These messaging services were used to constitute large peer-based networks of communication that appeared in many cases to be overtaking the use of conventional texting (SMS) and also becoming more used than Facebook.

Messaging such as BBM was often favoured over other possible forms of communication because – unlike Facebook – it was not monitored or surveilled by parents, teachers or uninvited family members such as older siblings or cousins. As this 13 year old girl explains:

> R: *With your Blackberry like with my phone, like my parents don't really check my phone yeah. That is why most people hide their stuff in their Blackberry. But on Facebook yeah like it is normal for your parents or your family to have Facebook, and they will check it. (Mercedes, year 8, School Two)*

One of the 15 year olds in our sample captured this even more pithily:

> R: *Facebook? No. Everyone calls Facebook Baitbook because basically Bait is like everyone can see it so it is like if someone was getting like told 'I'm going to batter you' on Facebook like they can print screen it. (Kylie, year 10, School One)*

Another noted that the 'teen' dominance of BBM also made parents think it was safer than Facebook where adults might be a threat.

The prevalence of mobile internet technologies in young people's lives was dramatically reshaping modes of communication, peer intimacy, and even romantic attachments. Talking on the phone and even texting seems to have been overtaken by messaging, as Monique (year 10, School One) explained:

> R: *But even when you are like going out yeah, and this boy phones me and he is like, 'You're nice' whatever, and then the first thing they ask for, they don't ask for your number any more they go, 'Ah you've got BB', and then they go, 'Give me your BB pin' and then from there you just talk on BB you don't talk over the phone, you just – and then when you start to get to know them you maybe give them your number … You know I have 300 minutes and 300 texts, I hardly text, like before I always used to text but now I have got BB I don't.*

And Kylie (15, School One) told us:

> R: *But like our phones play a massive part in relationships. Like phone calls until late hours. Texting, not as much because now we have got BBM. BBM is like Match.com basically, you have got everyone there and it is like – and people send broadcasts over BBM. Like there will*

be a smiley face and then next to the smiley face there will be something like 'Would you have sex with me?' 'Would you do this, would you do that?' and then by sending that broadcast, like the boy will answer it and then you will start talking to them and it is just like …

Sexting scenarios: the Blackberry messenger (BBM) broadcast

R: Like the question will be like, 'Would you have sex with me lights on/lights off. Socks on/ socks off. What position? To what song? Condom or no condom?' Stuff like that. It is like –

I: So you think that is quite common?

R: When I first got my Blackberry everyone was sending them and I was like, 'Wow'. Literally you get broadcast after broadcast after broadcast. So I started telling everyone, 'Just untick me, I'm getting annoyed'.

I: Unticking means like you are not on their group?

R: Yeah their broadcast group. (Kylie, year 10, School One)

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2. Understanding sexting: the importance of gender

One of the key findings of this research highlights the extent to which gendered power relations saturate the young people's lives. No understanding of sexting would be complete without an appreciation of the extent to which an often completely normalised sexism constitutes the context for all relationships–both on and off-line. As researchers going into the schools to meet with young people, we were distressed by the levels of sexist abuse and physical harassment–even violence–to which the girls were subject on a regular basis. More than this, we were struck by the way in which it is entirely taken for granted by both girls and boys–even when the same behaviours would be grounds for dismissal in other settings and among adults (e.g. in the workplace) or for arrest and prosecution if they happened in public space.

In order to convey the nature of the sexist culture in which young people operate, and to operationalise it, we have identified a number of different indicators that were discussed fulsomely by young people in the study. These are considered below.

Boys 'ownership' of girls' bodies

Perhaps the broadest level at which sexism operates in the young people's lives is to be found in the deeply rooted notion that girls and young women's bodies are somehow the property of boys and young men. As we shall show later, this took on vivid forms in one of the most common practices of sexting in which boys solicited, and girls sent, photographic images of themselves or parts of themselves in which a boy's name had been written in black marker pen. Significant numbers of these images were circulating in the period of this research, with some boys claiming to have up to 30 pictures of different girls on their phones. A typical example would be for a young woman to send a shot of her naked breasts, squeezed together, with the caption 'Jason owns me' scrawled prominently across part of her cleavage.

Sexting scenarios: Boys 'owning' girls' bodies

R: *Well like say I got a girlfriend I would ask her to write my name on her breast and then send it to me and then I would upload it onto Facebook or Bebo or something like that. But like some people would say who it is, but some people won't.*

I: *Oh okay. So like would you – are you going out with someone at the moment?*

R: *Yeah.*

I: *So have you got pictures of her like that?*

R: *Yeah (Kamal, year 8, School Two)*

This kind of practice only makes sense, however, because it rests upon the widely shared assumption that girls bodies are 'for' men and boys. In dating relationships boys expressed a powerful sense of propriety and entitlement over girls' bodies. A clear example comes from Kylie (year 10, School One) who told us how her boyfriend believed that he owned the rights to her body and would try to dictate what she wore:

> R: *Yeah, because like today I have come in with a skirt on. Like if you look my skirt is not even short, but because I haven't got no tights on, one of his friends is like, 'Oh look at your chick, what's she doing?' He come over to me and he is like, 'Couldn't you have worn tights?' and I was like, 'No, it's hot, why do I have to wear tights, I'm wearing shorts'. He is like, 'Let me see' and I lifted it up to show him and he is like, 'What are you doing man? Pull your skirt down' and I was like, 'But I've got shorts on there' and he was like, 'Yeah but all my boys can see' and I was like, 'I don't care, I'm wearing shorts, so in summer you are telling me I can't go out in shorts', and he was like, 'No I'm not saying that but in school man'. And he gets all moody because he is like, he doesn't want to upset me but he don't want to like stand there and let his boys say stuff about me so he gets agitated. He is like, 'If you don't do this then they can't say nothing' so he sort of gets like angry.*

Though angered by this, Kylie understands it in terms of 'protectiveness' on her boyfriend's part:

> R: *because, like, he is really protective, he don't really like letting anyone talk to me in a rude way or talk about me and stuff like that.*

She explains how this is understandable, because, as a girl in a relationship, her sexual reputation is particularly tightly policed – primarily by his friends – since it would now reflect upon him: 'They would be like, "Oh she's a little slag" and then he would end up getting angry and having a fight with one of them.'

Kylie understood – but resented – the way that her boyfriend's 'honour' partly rested on how she chose to dress. More generally, when in relationships, boys treated girls' bodies as almost a canvas on which to play out competition and rivalry with other boys. Kamal (year 8, School Two) explains:

> R: *It is like for example, my friend and my girlfriend yeah. My friend will do that (touch up) to my girlfriend yeah. My other friends would rate him for that because it is my girlfriend and I am going out with her. So obviously like I won't get angry but I will go and do the same thing to his girlfriend.*

Here the rights of or feelings of the girls involved are secondary to the meanings their bodies have for male competition or homosocial bonding- something we explore in more detail in section 4.

Harassment of girls

Girls have adapted to this form of harassment by adopting practices like wearing shorts under skirts or even refusing to wear skirts, which are understood as making one more vulnerable to touching up, as these year 8 girls discuss:

> R: Now I don't even wear a skirt because all the boys will just like discuss it. When I am playing with my friend even if you have shorts on they still stop and say, 'Ah it's looking a bit hairy down there still'. I would go like, 'Excuse me'.
>
> I: Do you mean they are talking about your legs being hairy?
>
> R: No, your down below.
>
> R: And that is why I always wear trousers.
>
> R: I always wear trousers because the wind keeps on blowing my skirt yeah and then this boy in year ten tells me, 'Why are you trying to get ready'.
>
> R: When us girls do it it is a joke yeah, we all pull up each other's skirts making sure you wearing shorts yeah. The boys try it –
>
> R: It's not funny when they do it.

Girls in year 10 also talked about this as a 'daily' experience of 'harassment'.

> R: I think a lot of boys, especially year eight and year nine are excited about female bodies and sex, so it is a big highlight.
>
> R: Last year, when we was in year nine, I had a hard time.
>
> R: Yeah, I got harassed like nearly every single day, not sexual harassment like seriously, but then they do stuff like, 'Oh look at her bum' and 'Look at her breasts'.
>
> R: Yeah, they still do shout some things out.
>
> R: Yeah, at least now they are shouting it out. Before they would like run past you and slap your bum and that.
>
> R: Yes, year nine. And they used to do that thing. Do you remember, they used to put do you remember, we were standing yeah. Say you were standing talking to your friends, a boy will come over and then they will put their leg round your front leg and then they would push you over and then they would do that –
>
> R: Yeah and you would just go flying.
>
> R: You would go flying on the floor, and then if they were really that bad they will jump on you and we used to like run from all the boys.

> R: Yeah, as soon as you see them all together, you know how we would know they were doing something, they used to whisper, they would start whispering. And you would be like, right, let's move, because they were doing something. (Focus group, year 10 girls, School One)

As this extract shows, verbal harassment could quickly transform into physical violence, such as being deliberately tripped up and pushed down as these girls describe. As we discuss below this was a common experience and usually involved a boy or boys groping or 'daggering' the girl once she was down.

Verbal abuse could also be very nasty, as Kylie (year 10, School One) describes:

> R: The boys like they don't hide nothing they will talk about it in front of you and they will talk about having sex with a girl, they will tell you everything, they will be like, 'Oh yeah she was dirty she didn't wash' like they proper don't care what they say in front of you. And it is just like giving the girl a bad name and then the really bitchy girls in my year will go back and tell her, 'Oh you're a tramp, you don't wash' and stuff like that. And it is just like, but you first have to sit there and think did he actually have sex with her?

Verbal requests for sexual acts

Verbal harassment did not just include repeated comments about girls' bodies but also being repeatedly asked to perform sexual acts on/for boys. This is one area of the young people's lives that is significantly intensified through mobile technologies such as smartphones. Girls recounted being asked for 'beats' (intercourse) or 'head' or 'blows' by 'random people' in the school and in the street. Monique (year 10, School One) explained her annoyed and mystified reaction to constantly being asked to masturbate boys or to allow them to ejaculate over her face:

> R: Boys say stuff like, 'Can I butt in your face?' and you just like, 'Can you do what?' 'What do you mean' and they are like, 'yeah, can I butt in your eye?' 'No, why would I even' Who is going to sit there in their right mind and say yeah, go ahead, ejaculate in my eye? What could that help? Like that is not even normal like seriously, but I have literally sat down with a boy and said, 'I need to literally understand what you guys get out of porn?' I have actually sat down with a boy and said 'Put it on, let's watch it yeah' (Monique, 15, School One)

Being touched up

For some girls the constant verbal harassment was less of a problem than physical abuse, such as the routine experience of being 'touched up', 'felt up' or 'groped'. This was an endemic problem for girls in both schools, something they told us happened 'all the time'.

> R: Well boys yeah like touching us up and stuff.
>
> I: Yes and does that happen a lot?
>
> R: Yeah.
>
> R: Well it practically happens every day.

> I: So they are trying to touch your boobs?
>
> R: No, no. Your bum.
>
> I: Okay more bum.
>
> R: (All talking over each other)
>
> I: Okay so they are touching your bum so that happens like daily and what do you do about that?
>
> R: Tell them to stop.
>
> R: I slap them.
>
> I: And what if they don't stop? Do you actually try to get them back?
>
> R: Yeah, we hit them back. It is like, 'How does it feel? Because you don't like it if we started touching you up, you wouldn't like it.
>
> R: I saw some boy yesterday on Facebook was trying to say he owns my bum. I saw him today and I shouted at him, and he thinks I'm joking with him. (Focus group, year 8, School Two)

One 13 year old girl (Cherelle, year 8, School Two) described how this had got worse and worse to the extent that she could not expect to walk past boys in the corridor without them touching her:

> R: 'I have to say that it has increased recently but like you walk past and like a boy will pass and they will squeeze your bum or something and like just touch your tits.'

Boys confirmed this, but played down its significance, as can be seen in the following discussion.

> I: In one of the groups people were talking about like guys touching up girls in the corridor and stuff like that, is that something that goes on quite a bit or is anyone upset about it kind of thing?
>
> R: It is not, yeah it does go on but it is not like the girls –
>
> R: It is not that the girls want them to, they just do it.
>
> R: No, they do like, they provoke them kind of thing. They go along with it and act like they are -. It is not like rape or anything.
>
> R: But some girls, you just want a reaction from them.
>
> I: How do you mean?
>
> R: Like some boys will just touch them up because they want a reaction or they want to see them get angry or stuff like that. (Focus group, year 8 boys, School One)

'Rushing'/being pushed down/ 'daggering'

Frequently, 'touching up' goes well beyond the groping of breasts, bottoms and genitals, but involves being 'rushed' or pushed down by a group of boys and enduring them 'daggering' (that is thrusting one's penis, 'dry humping' or masturbating against you from behind), usually in the school corridor. One 13 year old described the experience:

> R: *I was just afraid. It is usually the girls in my group.*
>
> I: *Can you tell me exactly what happened? You don't have to tell me the person, but just describe what happened?*
>
> R: *Like I could be with my girls and then we would just be standing anywhere in the school and then the boys will come as they are together, they just come and then touch us up, and yeah we will be like, 'Get off, get off' and they will be like 'Shut up' and stuff like this.*
>
> I: *How will they do it, will they dagger you or how exactly. Can you physically explain to me what happens?*
>
> R: *Mostly it is daggering.*
>
> I: *From behind?*
>
> R: *Yeah.*
>
> I: *Is it called the same thing if it happens from the front?*
>
> R: *Yeah.*
>
> I: *Okay.*
>
> R: *If not then your tits and yeah that's it.*
>
> I: *Okay, so how long would it happen mostly before they would like get off? Because I imagine they are probably bigger. Are they bigger than you some of them?*
>
> R: *Yeah. Well people bigger than me don't do it to me but they do it to girls in my year. And it usually goes on – it can depend on where you are. If you are in a corner and no one is around then it goes on longer. (Cherelle, 13, School Two)*

We heard many accounts like this and needed to check that we were not misinterpreting them. Could they, in any sense, be described as a type of 'play'?

> *If it is playing you are like 'Get off me'. If you're playing, you're like, 'Okay get off me' and they will let go and you will both be laughing. But when it is serious, like most of them will be all on you at the same time and like they will be on you at the same time and like you will be like, 'Get off me' and they won't get off you, and that is when it becomes serious. (Jodie, 13, School Two)*

Jodie describes a further example that illustrates how far this was from 'fun' or 'play' for the girls, and also indicates how difficult it was for girls to resist – complicating straightforward notions that failure to refuse or struggle equals 'consent'– a point that is returned to in section 5.

> R: I was standing up like this helping some boy and some boy was just sitting here and he just like grabbed me and put me on top of him and started like daggering me, like sitting down, and he is really strong, and so I was like moving and I couldn't move because he is really strong. So I just sat there and let him do it because like the more you pull away the more he is just going to like hold on to you, so I was like, he is going to stop anyway. Then all the boys were like, 'Oh you didn't even tell him to stop' and I was like 'If you tell him to stop he is just going to keep going' because he knows you are bothered about it, but if you just like let him get on with it then he will do it.

> I: So is there any part of you that thought it was kind of fun?

> R: No, I don't like it when they do that. (Jodie, year 8, School Two)

Rumours about touching and groping also circulated as a way to intimidate girls who did not want to be touched up but might not be able to fight back:

> R: They said that fingered Ashley and everything.

> R: None of that happened.

> R: But you find in schools, not just our school, but every school, you always find that there's lots of gossips and stuff.

> R: Because [inaudible 36:34] can't stick up for herself so –

> I: Why is that?

> R: She is just quiet, well she's not quiet –

> R: She is just scared of the boys.

> R: I'm not scared of them. I just don't really care about them yet. I do my best to ignore them yeah.

> I: Is that like a compliment that they say that they fingered you?

> R: No. It is nasty. And now I am bearing the name prostitute.

> R: Because she is my friend as well when they say it to me I am just like, 'How can you say that it makes me sick'. And they say, 'and my fingers were wet'. That is just wrong. (Focus group, year 8 girls, School Two)

This section has presented crucial information about the context of normalised sexism and sexual violence in which the use of mobile technologies takes place. In the next section we turn specifically to digitally mediated sexualised communication among young people and specifically to practices understood as sexting.

3. Digitally mediated sexualised communication

This section seeks to set out the multiplicity and volume of sexual communications via digital mediums. As explained Blackberry messenger had become the new communication technology of choice in both schools. Blackberry messenger has created new forms of practices for getting contacts and establishing a peer network, with new pressures around sharing and exchanging both sexual information and images.
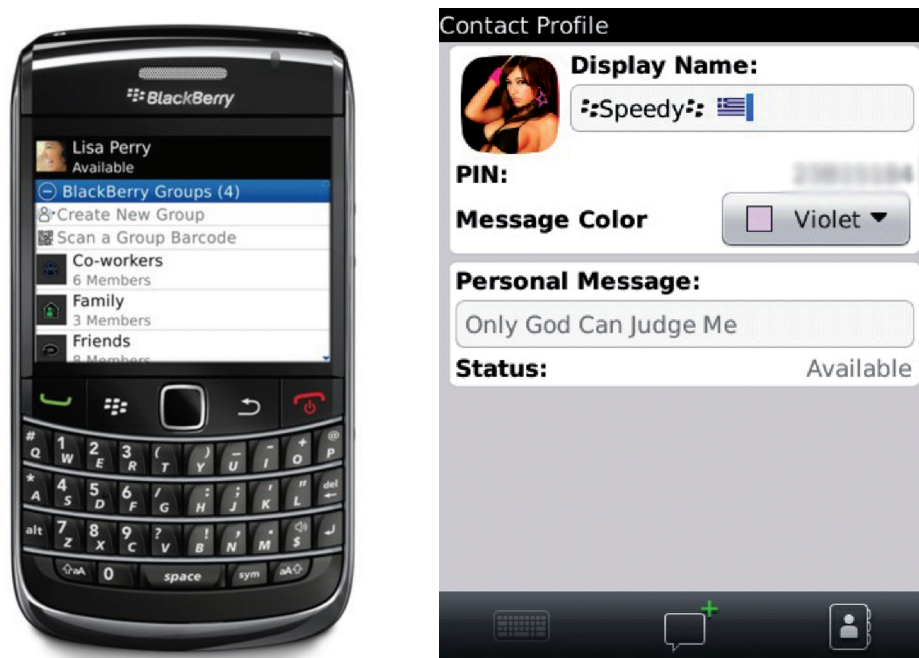
Intensified visual scrutiny of girls

Contacts are added on BlackBerry through the circulating of a pin number. When you accept the pin you take on that contact and see their profile (see above) including a default profile photo. Significant for this research is how broadcasts relate in important ways to sexualised norms of physical appearance, with particular pressure on and scrutiny of girls bodies. As Cherelle 13, explains

> I: Okay, so what did people say about you when they do a broadcast?
>
> R: They say, 'Stop what you are doing, add Mercedes, she's gifted that means pretty and stuff like that. Yeah stuff like that and 'she has good conversations'.
>
> I: Okay, is it mostly about your appearance?
>
> R: Yeah mostly about appearance when it comes to broadcasts.
>
> I: Okay so tell me exactly what they would say?
>
> R: If it is a boy and a girl told a boy to BC their pin then they will say, 'Oh she has big tits and a big bum and she's [inaudible 7:03] and if you get to know her, she's nice'.

The girls were under a great deal of visual scrutiny of their bodies, including breasts:

> R: [inaudible 1:05:39] some guy asked me for a picture of me in my bra yeah, I was like, no.
> I have a picture of me in a bikini. He was like, yeah. I was like, tough you're not getting it.
> *(Focus group, year 8 girls, School Two)*

Cherelle (year 8, School Two) in turn, told us that the demand 'can I have a picture of your tits?' was a daily occurrence. The girls related their frustration with this:

> R: I can't remember but one boy told me yeah, I asked him yeah, 'What's the first thing you see
> in a girl yeah?' and he is like, 'Oh her tits'. [Inaudible]

> R: I hate it when guys yeah, like 'What do you see in me first yeah?' they will be like your eyes or
> something and what they think really is our breasts. *(Focus group, year 8 girls, School One)*

Technologically mediated harassment of girls

Visual scrutiny, and bodily objectification was ubiquitous and was a slippery slope between consensual forms of playing that could easily veer into on-going technologically mediated harassment, such as being repeatedly asked for photos. Even when girls refused to participate in the sending of photos (as most girls in the study claimed), this did not mean they were safe from the implications of this practice and routine forms of sexism.

Many boys were forthright in describing how they asked for a 'sexy' picture of a girl to display as their default photo on BBM. Kamal explains how he has a picture of his girlfriend's cleavage/bra:

> I: Would you put it on like BB?

> R: Yeah, I have put it on BB.

> I: So do you put it as your profile picture?

> R: Yeah, my profile picture.

> I: And does anyone know who it is?

> R: No, not unless I tell them … she is in her bra.

> I: Just cleavage in her bra?

> R: Yeah just cleavage.

> I: And is that like, so with that example, did you ask her for it or did she just like send it to you?

> R: I asked her for it.

Boys also described quite casually the sense of their power to ruin a girl's reputation. As Kaja (year 10, School Two) put it ' Like if I expose the girl people will start calling her a slag, because of what she done and I'm not even going out with her.'

> **Sexting scenarios: the BBM 'default photo'**
>
> R: like every boy that I have on BBM, well not everyone but most have put nasty pictures –
>
> I: As their profile?
>
> R: Mmm.
>
> I: Okay, so like about half of the boys, so how many is that?
>
> R: Like 95%.
>
> I: Have a picture of like a blow job, what do you call it again?
>
> R: A blow job.
>
> I: So they have a picture of that or what else?
>
> R: Or of a girl naked or on top of a boy. The pictures what you will find on a dirty boy's display picture is either of him or his penis and a girl sucking it, or a girl naked or a dirty cartoon, things like that

As well as routine requests for photographs, comments about their appearance, and discussions about their sexual reputations, girls also experienced considerable pressure from boys via mobile internet technologies to perform sexual acts on/for boys. Girls discussed managing being propositioned over text and facebook for sexual services. As Skylar (year 8, School One) described:

> R: *I don't get why boys always send stuff they want to do to you or pictures of what they want to do to you.*

It is important to convey the sheer volume of requests the girls receive and the relentlessness of the pressure upon them. As 13 year old Cherelle told us, it is an everyday experience to receive messages from boys in your BBM network asking for sexual favours:

> R: *he was all like, 'Oh do you want to link?' I was like, 'Maybe' and he said, 'What would you do if we linked?' and I said, 'I dunno' and then he said, 'Oh would you give me blows, that means suck my dick?' and I was like, 'No not really' and then he said, 'Why?' and I said, 'Because I'm not like that', but he became furious … I ended up deleting him.' (Cherelle, 13, School Two).*

Similarly Claire (year 8, School One) explained, 'if they want it [a blow job] they will ask every single day until you say yes'. If you did comply there were risks (there was- for example – a lengthy discussion of a girl who was crying because there was a video being sent around of her 'sucking some guy's dick' – as discussed in a year 8 focus group).

One year 8 girl told us that if she refused to 'link up' with a guy he would invariably call her a 'sket' on BBM.

> I: *So this is on Blackberry? Somebody has called you a sket?*
>
> R: *Yeah. They do it all the time.*
>
> I: *Like boys you mean?*
>
> R: *I don't think they use the word for the definition I think they just use it because it is like there.*

> I: So why would they call you a sket just because you don't want to make friends with them?
>
> R: Yeah. (Jodie, year 8, School Two)

Cherelle further describes the pressure and the fear and distress the requests on BBM have caused her:

> R: Well, I know lots of times I've been asked and sometimes I will say 'No' and they will say, 'Okay' and they will be like nice to you and then they will ask again and then they will put pressure on you and stuff like this and I will just be like, 'I'm sorry I don't want to' and they will say 'Why' and I will say 'I just don't want to', and they will say, like 'There's nothing wrong like all you need to do is just suck on it' and I will be like, 'But I don't want to do that' and just keep going and they put the angry face on BBM and dedicate their status to you in a negative way.
>
> I: Like say what kind of thing?
>
> R: Like, 'Oh this girl is pissing me off'.
>
> …
>
> R: It is not a joke because boys get really serious because they just get really angry at the time and say, 'Do it, there's nothing to it. Oh you are pissing me off, I know where you live you know' and they will try for it in any type of way even if they don't even know you. (Cherelle, year 8, School Two)

The best way to illustrate the ubiquitous and unrelenting nature of sexualised communications on Blackberry in particular is to illustrate three BBM digital communications that happened during one focus group interview with year 8 girls at School Two in the time span of less than 1.5 hours.

Twenty minutes into the focus group one of the girls made the following announcement:

> R: Do you know what someone just sent me – 'Which girls on My Bebo are on beats?'
>
> I: Which girls on My Bebo are on beats?
>
> R: Beats, that is to everyone on my Blackberry contact list, who want to have sex basically, that is what beats means.
>
> R: Like you will find that when people say that they have a free [inaudible 44:39] people will be like requesting beats like –
>
> R: Oh do you want to come to my house.
>
> R: How can I explain this?
>
> R: People in this year group or above like, since going into year eight, they have been like beating.
>
> I: Beating?
>
> R: Yeah like having sex. That is usually like done when their mum and dad is not in the house and like it has been happening a lot now.

About fifteen minutes later one girl told me that she had received a new default profile photo on BBM of a girl's head and a boy's penis:

> R: Miss I don't know if this is real yeah, but like some boy just put a picture of a girl –[shows group a photo of a girl with open mouth in front of an erect penis]
>
> I: Is it a girl that you know? Is it from – so this just got sent to you?
>
> R: No it didn't get sent to me. It is his DP [default photo] on BBM but like I don't know if it is real but like it looks real but it could be one of his friends or something.
>
> R: Pass it round. That looks real. That is real.
>
> R: She looks White.
>
> R: Because sometimes like you will have it and it will be spreaded around … but you don't know who it is.
>
> R: If a girl does that to someone yeah the boy will take it back to their friends yeah and show it to everyone …

Finally toward the end of the interview one girl received a message about writing down the colour of their bra, which sparked a further discussion about managing interest in girls' bra size:

> R: Someone just sent me something about, yeah you have to write on your Facebook the colour of your bra.
>
> R: Oh yeah.
>
> R: Boys will say 'what's your bra like?'
>
> R: I just tell them straight, bra and boxers that's it.
>
> R: He was like to me, 'What is your size?' I was like, 'that's none of your business', even though we went out yeah. He said, 'I know Hailey's and I went, 'Oh well done', he went 'It is 36DD' or something.
>
> R: No it isn't.

The point here is that these three moments within one research interview indicate both the sheer volume of and total normalisation of sexualised communications and imagery that young people are receiving and negotiating in their day to day lives at school and beyond. This also illustrates how the digital media work together and activities on Facebook and MySpace, for instance link up with BBM.

Porn and mobile technologies

So far we have focused on peer produced images and text. The final issue we want to touch upon in this section is the use and circulation of professional or adult pornography on phones and social networking sites. Several boys talked about having porn on their phone and porn was an ordinary part of daily life for boys. Adam told us how he used to watch porn with his classmates on school computers:

> Like people just put porn on their screen, everyone would just gather round watching, the teacher would come and everyone would run away. They would leave the porn on and the teacher would just laugh. It's mad. (Adam, year 10, School One)

However, the attitude to porn was mixed – for example Kamal in year 8 said he enjoyed it while Kaja (year 10 School Two) said peer produced photos were much better to have and porn was for 'nerds' and 'virgins'. Age emerged as an important factor too in relation to attitudes to porn among the boys, with the suggestion that porn use is associated with youth and inexperience. Here is 15 year old Adam (School One) again:

> *I don't know cause I ain't done that, I aint been on porn in a while cause I used to go on that when I was young. I was excited, I was a virgin, I wanted to know what sex was like. That's where I started learning a bit from and then I just stopped watching it, cause why watch it when you can do the real deal.*

Interestingly, this opened up the possibility for disavowal of porn-use to function performatively to display sexual prowess and experience. Irina talked about how using porn could make boys seem desperate and unpopular because they cannot get a 'real girl':

> *I think when they have pornography it is just like, I think, I don't know, sometimes it puts their ratings down because like you think–some boys think you are having porn on your phone because you can't get girls, like, to beat you so you have to do it to porn and stuff like that, to yourself, and whatever. (Irina, year 10, School One)*

Girls did not talk to us about their own use of pornography, but depicted it as a male preoccupation. But we are also interested in how the use of pornography in school settings can pose a problem for girls.

Claire (13, School One) described how boys watching porn at school made her uncomfortable and felt that porn was impacting how boys wanted them to look:

> R: *Well they just show their friends, and afterwards if they like a girl, they will go like how they want her body to be like the person on the pictures.*
>
> I: *How do they say that?*
>
> R: *They just say, like 'Your body should be like hers for him'.*

Another 15 year old girl said she thought that porn was shaping boys' imaginations and sexual demands, and also that boys had no interest in girls' pleasure. She went on to explain how she thought this worked: how a form of emotional blackmail was used to get girls to do things for their boyfriends:

> *a lot of girls … think the guy is going to look at them like, 'Oh you don't love me because you haven't done this, that and the other and my friend's girlfriend's doing it'. They kind of blackmail you saying love, love, love when actually love has nothing to do with it, it is just your complete lust to get a bit excited about something that is not that great. (Monique, year 10, School One)*

4. Peer surveillance, exposure and ratings

Exposure

The sexting practices we have outlined so far all took place against a backdrop of peer surveillance. The ability of online and mobile technologies to capture, save and send pictures and screen grabs (screen munches) of messages meant that young people were acutely aware of the potentially public nature of

their private communications. We can see the significance of this if we look closely at one of the sexting practices the young people spoke with us about – exposure.

Exposure was a term used by the young people to describe the unwanted posting of private pictures or text to facebook or blackberry messaging. This encompassed all kinds of exposure – from proving that someone told a lie, to catching someone out saying something silly or taking a picture of them when they weren't expecting it ('slippin' or 'fails'), to posting descriptions or pictures of young people's sexual activities, including the cleavage shots mentioned earlier or text evidence that a girl had agreed to give 'head'). In our conversations with young people the term was mainly used to describe the exposure of sexualised content. Much of the talk about exposure presented it as a joke, though it was also discussed as a form of popularity currency (generally among boys), evidence to use against others, and revenge. The young people we spoke to explained that any exchange of sexually explicit content carried with it the possibility of exposure.

Girls suffered constant threat of exposure, even if they had done nothing. One 13 year old told us that when she refused to 'suck dick' the boy in question messaged her to say 'Oh I'm going to expose you'. As she recounted:

> R: *I was like, 'Expose me – I ain't done nothing'. The most I have done with a boy is like kissed them, that's it.*
>
> I: *So boys will threaten and expose you?*
>
> R: *Yeah, they like exposing people.*
>
> I: *Like but if you don't have any photo what are they going to expose?*
>
> R: *They will make up stories and then they will tell people and people will be like, 'Yeah I was there' and then because there is loads of them against that one person they will all believe the whole group. (Jodie, year 8, School Two)*

Boys, too, were very aware of their power to expose girls. As one 15 year old told us:

> R: *If I think a girl has got a nice body yeah, I will just flirt with her and say, 'Yeah you should write my name' or something like that yeah. But if she does trust me, if she will do it for me, she will just say at the start, 'Don't expose me'.*
>
> I: *And is she right to trust you then?*
>
> R: *Yeah.*
>
> I: *Because you are not going to expose her?*
>
> R: *No.*
>
> I: *Like but don't you have to show the pictures to get ratings?*
>
> R: *But she don't know that. My friends are not the type of people – they see the picture – but it is not like I'm going to send it to them or anything. It is not published, I'm not going to show it to the whole school. (Kaja, year 10, School Two)*

Here, Kaja claims that he would never expose a girl – despite having recounted – moments earlier in the interview – an incident in which he had done just that. He also makes a distinction between the sharing

of the photo on his phone, by physically showing friends his phone, and the digital distribution of the image in order to expose the girl; the latter, he said, he would not do. Girls, though, were understandably fearful of exposure. Both boys and girls talked about the possible impact of exposure on students' emotional wellbeing. Below a group of year 10 girls talk about what they think the effects of exposure might be.

> R: I think so. It has an impact on people mentally.
>
> I: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?
>
> R: I mean if I was the girl who got exposed I would have mental problems after that.
>
>   …
>
> R: I would cry – I could go in depression because of it, because you are going to be known, you are going to be talked about. You are going to be like seen in a different way.
>
> R: Because everyone is going to be talking about you.
>
> R: Because you are going to know that there is more rumours about you.
>
> R: Yeah, like people talk about you and stuff.
>
> R: I think people like talking about people in a bad way, more than in a good way. There is more haters – (Focus group, year 10, School Two)

A 'munch screen' is a particular form of exposure. It's called this as when the screen grab happens, a little monster munches with a sound effect over the screen. Munch screens include capturing cruel messages (often from boys) such as boys telling girls they're ugly or insulting them in other ways.

Screen munches like this would get forwarded, posted as the young person's default picture on BBM or young people would tag their friends in the picture on facebook. Screen munches that participants were posting were therefore not necessarily from conversations they had had themselves. Girls sometimes munched conversations with insults as 'evidence' that a particular boy was not to be trusted.

Sexting scenarios: Exposure: the 'munch screen'

R: There is something called munch screen and like sometimes it can get people upset and sometimes it is for a laugh. Say like you was in a conversation with someone and then if a girl said something like, 'Oh do you want me to suck your dick' or something and then he will munch that and then he will put it as his profile picture and people will see what the girl said.

Some of the boys in our focus groups and interviews took a critical stance on exposure. However, when we probed boys who took this view it seemed to be very difficult for them to see a way to publicly disagree with the practice. Peer surveillance and recording was normalised to the extent that many young people felt they had few friends they really 'trusted'. There seemed to be a certain resigned individualistic attitude in the sense that nothing they could do would change anything, so as long as it didn't effect them personally, there was no point in trying. This difficulty also arises in the context of homophobic bullying in schools, in which boys failure to perform a particular kind of macho masculinity carries with it the risk of being labelled 'gay'. This is captured in the exchange below:

> *I: What I want to know is if you guys it seems to me have this disapproving tone, but like how come nobody says to these guys, 'Oh that's kind of rubbish, why don't you delete it?'*
>
> *R: Because they will have an opinion on you.*
>
> *I: If you were to say that to them what would they say about you?*
>
> *R: If they had a picture of a girl naked and you told them 'That's wrong' they will think straight away you are gay. (Focus group, year 10 boys, School One)*

Our participants also spoke with us about exposure sites on Facebook – these are dedicated Facebook profiles that are set up to post pictures and comments about people (usually girls). Kamal (year 8 boy, School Two) describes this practice:

> *I: How does the exposure site thing work?*
>
> *R: It is just like another Facebook account but like with pictures on, like not you, but pictures of girls breasts, bums, vaginas and things like that.*
>
> *I: So pictures of girls' vaginas as well?*
>
> *R: Yeah like people will send pictures in because they want the girl to get exposed they will inbox it to the exposure profile and then they would inbox it with the comments as well.*
>
> *I: So an exposure profile is not just one girl it is like –*
>
> *R: Yeah, lots of girls.*
>
> *I: And do they get shut down?*
>
> *R: Yeah.*
>
> *I: How long do they stay up for?*
>
> *R: Oh like about three days maximum. No about a week maximum.*
>
> *I: And what happens to like – does anyone ever get in trouble for exposing someone?*
>
> *R: No, I don't think so.*
>
> *I: And like what happens to the girls if they get exposed?*
>
> *R: They get called like skets and things like that.*

While, as Kamal points out, these exposure sites are temporary, the narrative of what happens to girls when they are exposed circulates among all the students, such that it takes on a cautionary role, particularly for girls, as any picture they sent in the past could potentially end up on one of these sites.

Many boys treat exposure as a 'bit of a laugh', even whilst they can see that it causes distress. Some other boys show more sympathy and concern towards girls who are treated in this way. In some cases boys described the practice as one of attention-seeking by boys, or an attempt to gain more popularity among other boys.

Ratings

The interviews and focus groups with boys often touched on the subject of how young boys negotiated popularity at school and in their local areas. Boys presented the possibility of mugging and gang-related violence as commonplace in their local areas. While boys presented themselves as generally confident in dealing with the threat of violence in their local areas (such as knowing which areas were safe to travel through, and being protected by being 'known'), and some boys were confident to 'opt out' of systems of popularity in school, the exchange of images of girls, as well as more 'off-line' behaviours such as 'touching up' girls in the corridors, could be seen as strategies adopted by boys to perform and be 'respected' by other boys. Participants described to us a system of 'ratings', in which fighting, being involved in crime, wearing designer clothes and sharing evidence of sexual experience were all part of the performance of masculinity. Boys got ratings for being brave, having money and getting girls.

One way of getting 'ratings' was to have pictures of girls on your phone. These would be girls that the boys knew and would be bikini shots, cleavage shots or, ideally, topless pictures. One 15 year old explained to us that he has a folder of 30 such images on his phone, sent to him by girls and young women.

> I: And what are they – like what is like the purpose of keeping them all?
>
> R: I don't even know you know. I don't know, they are just on my phone. But I don't watch them unless I am showing someone.
>
> I: You don't watch them, I don't believe you. [Laughter]
>
> R: Nah, you should believe me.
>
> I: So like you have got them on your phone and so that is just so that you can say, 'I've got 30 pictures on my phone'?
>
> R: Kind of, like say other people they are like 'Oh I got this girl to do this', I will be like, 'Look at my phone'. (Kaja, year 10 School Two)

Both the boys and girls explained the different values attached to different kinds of pictures. Kylie (year 10, School One) explained this process as a kind of 'competition' for the boys to get certain girls to send sexually explicit pictures. Kaja, the year 10 boy we met earlier with 30 pictures on his phone, went on to explain that boys get higher ratings for getting a picture of a girl who would not be expected to send such a picture.

So the circulation of pictures can be understood in one sense as a form of popularity currency, particularly among boys. The risks associated with this are profoundly gendered. Girls risk being labelled a 'slag' or a 'sket', while boys risk being labelled 'gay' if they don't participate or if they challenge other boys. Given that other ways to get 'ratings', such as fighting, crime and expensive consumer items can be difficult for boys to navigate, particularly if they are not especially strong or can't afford designer clothes, it could be argued that collecting and circulating images of girls carries less risk for boys.

Similarly, some of the boys talked about the pressure to tell their friends that they've had sex. Munch screens of BBM conversations with girls and sexual pictures of girls was one way that boys could 'prove' to their peer group that they were sexually active.

5. Living with sexting: silence, resistance and resilience

As we have seen, sexting in its various forms is a distinctively gendered set of practices. In this final section of the analysis we discuss how sexting is implicated in the policing of girls' sexual reputations in a context in which a marked sexual double standard still exists. We note the fear and silence around girls' experiences, and the sense most girls had of having no one to turn to. But we also discuss some of the extraordinary creativity and ingenuity some of the girls displayed in negotiating the complex dilemmas and pressures they experienced in their everyday lives. This section focuses in particular, then, on how girls 'live with' sexting , as a part of their more general experiences of life in a sexist culture.

Sexting and sexual 'reputation': the persistence of a double standard

It is well-established in the research evidence that a strong and pervasive double standard exists in relation to girls' and boys' sexual activity. Since the 1970s, decades of research in schools consistently shows that girls who have sex, who show interest in sex, or who dress in particular ('sexy') ways are at risk of becoming labelled 'sluts' – in a way that has no parallel for boys (Cowie and Lees, 1981; Holland et al., 1992; Kitzinger, 1995; Kehily, 2002; Tolman, 2002; Lamb, 2002; Ringrose, 2008, 2012). All girls suffer from this double standard and have to self-surveill and work on protecting their sexual reputations, defending against being seen as a 'slut' or a 'sket'. In a famous research paper about this Cowie and Lees (1981) captured some of its complexities- for not only do girls have to maintain 'clean' and 'pure' sexual reputation, but they also, simultaneously, have to avoid being seen as 'frigid' or 'no fun'. In their words they were at risk of being seen either as 'slags or drags'. Today, with the circulation of 'postfeminist' notions of 'up for it', 'heterosexy' femininity (Gill, 2008; 2009), this binary has lost none of its force, presenting young women with a double-bind, in which they require energy and vigilance to project just the right kind of attractive, 'sexy, but not too sexy', image.

The sexual double standard was alive and well in the schools where we did our fieldwork. Girls displayed considerable anxiety about the possibility – or actuality – of being called 'sket' or 'slut' or 'slag'; they were aware that these epithets were dangerous to them and were also aware – as were some boys – that there were no equivalent terms for boys. Stories circulated about the extreme distress such labels could cause, even leading girls to have to leave or move school.. As Monique, (year 10, School One) puts it 'girls are slags' if they have sex, boys are 'players'.

Jodie (year 8, School Two) adds:

> *if a girl went and done this stuff to – dirty stuff with a boy they will get called a slag or a sket if the boy tells them. But if a boy does it all the boys think they are all cool because they have done stuff.*

Both boys and girls predominantly blamed girls for sending pictures, and most girls said they would not do this. Alexandra (year 10, School Two) in the extract below is typical in blaming girls for participating in 'sexting' scenarios eg for having sent photo in the first place.

> R: *I don't know. I think she took the picture, she sent it to her boyfriend and then he was just being very stupid and just showed it around to everyone. I mean I think she was stupid because why would you send your naked pictures to a boy that you have just been going out with for a week or two? (Alexandra, year 10, School Two)*

This common-sense criticism of girls who send pictures, however, misses the extraordinary pressure (discussed in previous sections) to which girls found themselves subject–pressure the researchers themselves vicariously experienced through the relentless 'pinging' of messages/demands for such photos into girls' phones! The long extracts below from Kaja (year 10, School Two) illustrate some of the contradictions and tensions around the practice of sending photos: the sexual double standard, the pressures on girls to send such pictures, the pleasures of boys who receive them, accompanied, in turn, by the instant derogation of girls who do so as 'slags'. It also captures the tenacity of the binaries between virgin/whore, girls who respect themselves/girls who are slags, girls you would date or marry/girls with whom to just have sex.

Kaja argued that girls who send pictures have no 'self-respect'. He claims that he would never ask a girl he was friends with for a picture:

> I: So like what is different with those?
>
> R: They respect theirselves.
>
> I: So do you think then the girls that are sending the pictures don't respect themselves then?
>
> R: They can't be respecting themselves if they are taking pictures of their body and whatever, naked.
>
> I: What makes you say that? Could they like looking at a picture of themselves? Because you posted a picture up of your six pack right on Facebook, what is different about it?
>
> R: That's a good question. I don't know, it's just different.
>
> I: Different because they are a girl?
>
> R: Yeah, different because they are a girl.
>
> I: So what does respecting yourself look like for a girl?
>
> R: [Embarrassed laugh] Dress appropriately, act appropriately. (Kaja, year 10, School Two)

Kaja concedes that he has posted topless 'sixpack' photos of himself on his Facebook page, highlighting the double standard in which that is ok, yet girls' behaviour is 'different because they are a girl'. When asked about a specific photo of a young woman – about which he has boasted – he elaborates further:

> I: Yeah. So like does her sending you that picture that you have got there is that like someone who doesn't respect herself do you think?
>
> R: Yeah. She don't respect herself.
>
> I: Is there a possibility that she just likes having sex?
>
> R: Yeah, yeah. She told me that she does.
>
> I: She told you that she likes having sex. So why does that mean she doesn't respect herself?
>
> R: She don't respect her body. People's, a lot of stuff, has been in her and that is just … I call any girl a slag that sends me pictures like that. Not to their face, but obviously I will know what type of girl she is.
>
> I: So, but you like getting the picture?
>
> R: Yeah.

> *I: Because you kept it right? But slag is an insult?*
>
> *R: I know.*
>
> *I: So like why would you insult something that you liked?*
>
> *R: But I'm not insulting her – I'm not telling her she is a slag, it is just in my head, like a slag, what type of person she is. (Kaja, year 10, School Two)*

It seemed worth including this extract at length for several reasons. It was typical of the reasoning young people–mainly boys but some girls as well–deployed in relation to this issue. It captures vividly the way in which the meaning of these digital communications is utterly mediated by an old sexual double standard. Girls are explicitly divided into 'types' in line with well -worn sexual dichotomies. Girls are placed under pressures (already detailed in earlier sections of this report), sometimes literally bombarded with requests to send a particular boy a 'sexy' photograph of themselves. If they finally succumb to such pressure they find themselves dubbed 'slags' and put into the category of used or dirty girl. As Kaja puts it–'I'm not being rude, yeah, but I would just have sex with her and then leave her. I wouldn't want to. I would talk to her, but I wouldn't get into a relationship with her.'

Perhaps the most visible impact of the ways in which new technologies intensify pressures on the girls around reputation is manifest in the levels of distress and anxiety girls display in attempting to manage what they experience as unrelenting pressures upon them. Less visible, but no less significant, however, is the impact this double standard has upon the development of a positive sexual subjectivity for girls and young women. Girls in this study reported a largely defensive position in relation to sex and sexuality. The relentless pressure upon them from boys–significantly increased by digital technologies–allowed them little or no space to explore or articulate their own sexual desires or wishes. On the very few occasions in which such desires were articulated, significant identity work had to be undertaken by the girls to disavow the hated position of 'slut e.g. 'I'm not a sket, but …' (Mercedes, year 10, School Two). Moreover, the very understanding of sex that circulated was one defined on heterosexual male terms and almost exclusively in terms of male pleasures–or servicing of male 'needs' – notably blow jobs or 'heads', with practices that might prioritise female enjoyment being treated with contempt or derision. Monique (year 10, School One) was alone amongst our sample in articulating a cogent critique of this.

> *I: That is what I kind of want to know about. If boys understand how to actually make the girl feel good, or if that comes into it?*
>
> *R: No, I don't think so, it is all about their pleasure. Once they have like done what they need to do it is like, whatever, for the girl …. Yeah, it is not just about the guy ejaculating and getting his excitement it is also about you, it is about both of you, not just one. Whereas they think all the pleasure is on the guy. It is like what do you get out of giving the guy a head (Monique, year 10, School One)*

As sociologists and social psychologists have argued (Fine, 1998; Allen, 2004), not only is the lack of space for girls and young women to develop a positive sexual identity of concern in and of itself, it is also of great significance in terms of more general future issues of sexual health (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009), with serious implications for young women's sense of esteem and power in relationships and thus, for example, their sense of 'entitlement' to demand use of a condom. Thus, although our focus is on young teenagers, we seek to draw attention to some of the potential future implications of what we found for young people's developing sexual relationships. Moreover, the nature of sexting culture, and the wider culture of the schools more generally, was profoundly inhospitable to anyone with a non-normative

sexual identity, with deleterious consequences for lesbian and gay young people. All these issues urgently require further research.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't

When asked what could be done about the sexual harassment they experienced, girls moved back and forth between a simple and often quite judgemental exhortation to 'just say no' if you don't like it or don't want to, to a realisation that things were often more complicated and the pressures intense. The common-sense understanding of how to treat bullies, with ideas such as 'ignore them and they'll get bored' and 'don't let them have the satisfaction of letting them know you are upset' could often work against girls, since if they followed such advice and did not scream or make a fuss during an incident of physical sexual harassment they were at risk of being depicted as 'not bothered' or even as 'liking it'–with negative consequences for their sexual reputation. Likewise, anti-bullying policies do not seem to address the ubiquity of mobile technologies in which messages could be sent repeatedly, and in which non-response (ignoring it) could lead (as we saw in section 3) to very public 'punishments'.

Silence and fatalism

Girls often told us that they would tell a teacher or tell their mum if the sexual harassment – whether on or offline – became particularly upsetting. However, we quickly learned that this was a rote and 'expected' answer that bore little relationship to the real situation. Thus further gentle probing could reveal a different story of girls who felt silenced by many fears including being seen as a 'snitch' or 'snake'

Asked how she would react to being touched up, one 13 year old told us she would:

> R: *Tell the teacher or my mum or someone.*

> I: *Really, you would really tell the teacher? Because a lot of girls have said they wouldn't tell a teacher?*

> R: *Well I wouldn't but when we had this interview and I got some booklet from the library and there was me and Skylar and Ashley was talking to a man about it and he even said that we can come and tell him and then he will sort it out and stuff …*

> I: *If you told on somebody, would you be worried about that at all?*

> R: *Yeah. I'm worried like – the hard thing is like it would be so much easier if there wasn't no such thing as 'snake' or 'grass' because I really hate it when people – it's bullying in a way. But it is not and yeah, and like most girls, they just can't say what happened because of the reactions that they will get towards them from boys, and even from more (Cherelle, year 8, School Two).*

Cherelle explained that this had been difficult for the whole of her first two years in school:

> R: *I would just go home and my mum would say, 'Did you have a good day?' and I would just say 'Yes' knowing that it wasn't okay, but there was nothing I could do about it. But what would be better if the teachers checked the cameras more often because it is mostly right in front of the cameras and this has happened from Year Seven and no one has discovered about it.*

> I: *So tell me about the last time somebody touched you up, what happened?*

> R: *Erm, the last time? Recently before the assembly, I didn't do nothing because I was just afraid. It is usually the girls in my group. (Cherelle, year 8, School Two).*

To an extraordinary degree girls tolerated constant verbal harassment and verbal, digital and physical abuse, through a kind of fatalistic attitude. We were told repeatedly that these behaviours (using pornography/ pressuring girls for topless photos/ groping them/ pushing them over and daggering them) were just 'how boys are', and there is nothing that can be done. As Claire (year 8, School One) put it, 'I think they are used to doing it, so it is kind of like stuck in their brain like to carry on doing it. So I don't think they will stop.' The only solution she could imagine was to keep boys and girls entirely separate.

Some of the girls talked about attempts by the schools to address the problems of physical and verbal harassment (although not digitally mediated forms). But the interventions were considered ineffective in a culture of silence in which girls did not tell teachers and in which boys knew that girls would not tell- as 13 year old Mercedes explains below:

> *Well we had a really big meeting one time and the girls were split from the boys and then they spoke to us about reporting it and all that and they spoke to the boys about they shouldn't do it. And even us doing it to them, that is when it kind of slowed down and they didn't do it as much and then all of that talk just goes and they start doing it again. And we had another meeting just like a few weeks ago about it, but the boys, I don't think they really care because no girls have said anything, they haven't told the teacher, so they probably know that we don't say anything (Mercedes, year 10, School Two).*

Girls' emotional labour

The girls required an enormous degree of resilience just to survive in the school context. This involved being in a state of constant vigilance about their own appearance and behaviour, and watching for boys who might hurt or humiliate them, particularly boys in groups who might push them over. As one 13 year old told us 'it happens a lot':

> R: *Yeah, like two boys have done that to me yesterday.*
>
> I: *Tell me what happened?*
>
> R: *We were coming back from the cafeteria and we were walking down and then my friends went off and I was walking by myself and then these boys saw me and then they pushed me into a corner and started touching me and I started hitting them and then – what is it called? They put me on the floor and then some teachers saw them on the CCTV and they run down, yeah. But I told them that we were fighting, nothing else.*
>
> I: *Okay, because you don't want to be seen as like a snake or whatever?*
>
> R: *Yeah.*
>
> I: *So if something happened and you actually got freaked out by it would you be able to tell anybody here?*
>
> R: *Yeah.*
>
> I: *Who would you tell?*
>
> R: *Erm*

> I: A teacher?
>
> R: Actually I wouldn't.
>
> I: You wouldn't tell anybody. Would you tell your mum?
>
> R: Yeah.
>
> I: And what would your mum do?
>
> R: Call the school probably, she would call the school.
>
> I: Okay, so she thinks the school would do something? Does she believe in the school or?
>
> R: Yeah, I think so.
>
> I: Okay, but so far you haven't really said anything?
>
> R: No. (Claire, year 8, School One)

This account again reinforces the culture of silence in which girls find themselves trapped. They know they could and perhaps even 'should' tell a teacher or a parent, but they fear being thought a 'snake' so they do not. Mostly they are left entirely alone to deal with the consequences of what happened – consequences that, as we have seen, include them being blamed for not fighting back – as if this meant they did not really object.

Coping and surviving

In order to survive, some girls called upon a range of impressive coping strategies. For some this involved simply developing the emotional resources to believe in yourself, even when everyone around you was telling lies about you. As 13 year old Jodie explains:

> R: My friend. She was going out with this boy and then they had an argument and then they broke up and then he put up, I don't know if it was her or not, I don't think it was, but he put a photo up of just like the breast bits so you couldn't see who it actually was and said it was my friend. But I don't think it was her because she's not like that. But everyone believed him and but now that was like in year seven, so now everyone has now moved on from it.
>
> I: Was that bad for her then?
>
> R: She didn't really care because she is like, 'As long as I know the truth and as long as I know it wasn't me, I don't really care what anyone else thinks' (Jodie, year 8, School Two)

For others their strategies involved defiance and resistance:

> R: If you stand there and let someone take you for a mug then that is what it is going to be like forever, so you have to like stand up for yourself. So as soon as someone does something to you you have to go back, think about it, and do something twice as worse, sort of thing. Because if you don't it is just like everyone will be like, 'Oh you're a pushover' and they take you for like basically a bit of a mug. (Kylie, year 10, School One)

A small minority displayed extraordinary ingenuity in creatively managing sexting culture in a way that allowed them to determine what they would do or not do, but also allowed the young men concerned

to save face. Jodie (year 8, School Two) describes a whole variety of strategies she employed to negotiate online sexual communications – all of which stopped short of outright refusal but nevertheless allowed her to call the shots. These included suggesting someone else (her cousin) had the relevant photo, and enlisting her help to ward off the requests:

> R: Yeah. Some boy asked me, 'Can I have a picture of you', I was like, 'My display picture' and he was like 'No I mean a special photo' and I was like, 'What special photo' and he was like, 'Like you in your bra' and I was like 'No', and I was like, 'I have one of me in my bikini' And he was like, 'can you send it anyway' and I was like, 'Kaycee's got it' because he knows my cousin. And then them two went to the same school, so I was like, 'you can ask her to send it' and then I was like, 'Kaycee delete the photo and don't send it to him'. Like when you say no to people, like you fall out with them, so I just make excuses. (Jodie, year 8, School Two)

Jodie described the risk of 'falling out' with boys if girls don't concede to sending images, which resonates strongly with the fear that Cherelle (year 8, School Two) described earlier in the report when boys threatened her when she would not send the requested image. Jodie also described pretending her phone contract does not have enough credit to send an image or saying she has a boyfriend, which was one of the only legitimate 'excuses' that boys would take as a credible reason to back off, and which underscores the risks in being 'available' for these 13 year olds:

> R: Yeah and he was like basically he was flirting with me and he was like, 'You're mad buff you know' and I was like, 'No I'm not' and he was like 'Yeah you've got a nice body shape and a pretty face' 'Now you are just gassing to yourself' which means like you are lying. And he is like 'No way [inaudible 22:10] then he is like, 'You're boom' which means you are pretty and I was like, 'No but thanks' with a kiss face and he got a hug face. He was like, 'Have you got a boyfriend babes?' I was like, 'Yeah', 'He's a lucky man to have someone as special as you' and I was like 'I'm not special' he was like, 'I think you are really special babes', and I was like, 'Oh thanks' with a hug face and he was like 'No problem' with a hug face. And then he was like, 'Oh you are so cute' and I was like, 'You are random' and he was like, 'You are really buff man' which means like pretty, and I was 'I'm not' and he was like 'You are, can you send me a picture' and then I was like, 'No I don't have any credit to send you it' and stuff and then he is like,'Yeah it's free over BBM' and I was like because I'm on contract it costs me money. And he is like, 'Okay then'. So then, yeah.
>
> I: Okay so then you do have a boyfriend now?
>
> R: No, I don't have a boyfriend.
>
> I: So you just said that to him?
>
> R: Yeah. … But when people ask me if I have a boyfriend, I know if I say no, they are going to start flirting and everything so I just say yeah anyway. (Jodie, year 8, School Two)

As researchers we were impressed by the creativity and ingenuity some girls (such as Jodie) deployed, but nevertheless want to situate this in an overall understanding of the sheer pressures girls were under, and the immense labour, care and self-management involved in simply surviving this complex, power-saturated domain of communications on and offline and inside and outside the school.

In year 8 at both schools the girls explicitly asked us to return and begin to address and challenge the daily issue of physical and online and digital sexual harassment:

> R: *We should have a meeting, like not with the boys, like separate. They should say, 'Oh how are things going'. They know that the boys do stuff, why can't they do something? (Focus group, year 8, School One)*

At School Two the year 8 girls were also adamant that more work needed to be done to start addressing these issues:

> R: *Teach people like you know what you think is the best version of trying to be a good respectful –*

> R: *And you should also get boys as well because boys will listen to other boys, because 'Ah girls are just stupid girls talking rubbish', but if it is a boy they will sit there and listen. They will pay attention.*

> R: *I think as what we should do and it might be a bit big to do it but all the Year Eight boys and all the Year Eight girls and we sit and it is like, not shouting exactly, but we have a sort of debate and then you can talk. Obviously it will get loud because that is how Year Eights are, we are loud. But just to sit there and talk about it, because I don't think anyone has actually said: 'Come on we will talk about it properly'.*

As we draw out in our conclusion and recommendations, it is imperative that we begin to address these issues of gendered and sexual inequality at school and beyond.

CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to address the paucity of qualitative empirical research on the phenomenon understood to be 'sexting'. We sought to understand how young people are negotiating new challenges presented by sexual communication via digital mediums. Our unique qualitative methodology combined interviews, focus groups and online ethnography of Facebook profiles, facilitating in-depth knowledge of young people's use of mobile internet technologies. This form of triangulation lent itself to generating in-depth data on young people's everyday experiences of digital sexual communications within the specificity of their local peer networks. Our findings revealed that the phenomenon understood as sexting includes far greater diversity of practices than previously understood. We also illustrated that sexting – as a set of practices – is also far more prevalent with wider impact than previous assessments suggest, if we consider not only individual actions but how practices permeate the wider teen networks and become normalised and taken for granted aspects of young people's lives. The report has unpacked some of these diverse practices seeking to explain how they are experienced and discussed by young people themselves.

First we argued the need for grasping the importance of digital technologies in young people's lives. Mobile digital technologies are coming to permeate more and more aspects of young people's lives, with young people suggesting they would 'die' without their phones, that phones and social networks play a 'massive part' in their relationships, and are shaping most aspects of everyday lives. We also explored the importance that Blackberry Messenger was gaining as the current mobile technology of choice within the specific London school communities under study.

Second we explored the unequal gender relations, and the culture of normalised sexual violence in the two schools. We explored sexual double standards at school where girls were having to manage daily barrages of verbal sexual harassment, including being asked at ever younger ages to perform sexual acts for boys like blow jobs. We also discussed the dynamic where girls' bodies are monitored, judged and subject to unwanted 'touching up'. This included a discussion of 'daggering' a common practice where girls were aggressively thrust at by boys from behind and frequently pushed to the floor in corridors or the playground. We explored the problematic assumption that boys should physically touch and grope girls until they were violently refuted by the girls. This set the scene for the unequal gendered and sexualised power relations in the school culture, which influences the forms of sexual communication and activity online as well as offline.

Third we explored different forms of digitally mediated sexualised communication and the ubiquitous nature of sexually explicit content in young people's lives. Given the growing popularity of the network Blackberry Messenger (BBM), used by a majority of our participants, we explored new practices such as distributing BBM pin numbers to gain new contacts through sexualised 'broadcasts' focused on girls' appearance. We also explored pressures girls are under to send boys photos of themselves naked or nearly naked, typically of their breasts, via networks like BBM. In addition to being asked for 'sexy' photos, girls discussed text and online requests to perform sexual acts such as 'blow jobs' or 'heads'. They explained this was often a daily and repeated practice and they explained the risks they ran in outright refusing such requests. Finally in this section we explored the role of pornography on their phones and online social networks. Girls discussed feelings of discomfort around porn on boys' phones at school. We also found interestingly that boys use of pornography could actually place them at risk of being un-cool or 'nerdy', and that attaining peer-produced images of naked girls was much more highly sought after practice than having professionally produced pornographic images, in the schools under study.

Fourth we explored the issues of peer surveillance, exposure and ratings. Peer surveillance is ever more common in the 'networked public' (Boyd, 2008) of young people's lives where every moment can be easily captured on camera or film and broadcast publically (Kawalski and Limber, 2007). We discussed general practices of capturing others in embarrassing situations (called 'slippin' or 'fails'), which can be 'exposed' or made public via the web or peer networks like BBM. We focused on sexualised 'exposing' practices, so for instance if a boy asks for a blow job and the girl says yes this could be captured and broadcast or posted on Facebook. This involves the function called the 'munch screen' which captures the text or image like a screen grab, and can then be sent to others. Thus we argue that sexting can include 'exposing' sexually revealing or compromising photos or 'sex talk'. We also sought to understand why collecting of 'bare' images of girls had gained such allure for boys, since across both age groups some boys claimed to have as many as 30 peer produced images of teenage girls on their phone. We came to understand that the photos operated as one of many ways through which boys could gain status and respect among their peers. Girls suggested to us it was like a 'competition' among the boys to see how many and which types of photos they could aquire. Like having money or being known as brave and hard, the photos operated as a form of photographic proof that the boys could 'get the girl(s)'. They were a form of popularity currency or a commodity to be collected, traded, shown to others and distributed, but could also be used to punish the girls in question via 'exposure'.

In the fifth and final section of the report we discussed the issues of silence, survival and resiliency in the context of the gendered and sexual double standards omnipresent in the school cultures (but also widely apparent in popular culture as suggested). We explored how girls were ridiculed and judged for sending photos, and were quickly positioned as a 'sket' or slut almost unanimously by both boys and girls in the study. This sat in direct contrast to how boys were rewarded for shows of hard bodily masculinity such as posting photos of their muscles on the their torso, chest, back and abdomen (six pack). We described an enduring binary drawn between the virgin and the whore in relationship to the digital images. Boys discussed soliciting photos from girls, which could in some instances lead to sexual activity with the girl, but described that they would not actually want to have a 'relationship' with a girl who sends a photo because she does not 'respect herself' and would be a 'slag.' Within this context girls' own sexual desires or pleasures were generally silenced, unthinkable and largely unspoken. As one particularly savvy year 10 girl told us 'its all about their pleasure … the guy'. Worryingly, we found a strong tendency towards resignation and acceptance of the sexual double standard and sexual harassment at school and a culture of silence around dealing with it, where girls, particularly the most vulnerable year 8s, felt unable to actually approach teachers or parents for fear of being called a 'snake' or 'snitch' or arousing retaliation from boys. Towards the end of the report we discussed the incredible ingenuity employed by girls to manage both physical sexual harassment and digital requests for photos and sexual services. While we were impressed by their coping strategies and resiliency we would like to conclude by highlighting that girls (particularly year 8) explicitly requested help around these issues, specifically the culture of 'touching up', which we argue requires urgent and immediate area to address as expressed in our following policy recommendations and areas for further research.

EVIDENCE BASED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS

At present there is little or no effective policy in place regarding sexting among teenagers, and so our recommendations are directed towards a range of policy actors in the hope that, in combination, a positive direction can be pursued. Given limitations on resources, it makes sense to focus our proposed interventions on already-existing policy tools – notably, the PSHE and Citizenship curriculum in secondary schools, awareness-raising campaigns among parents, the self-regulatory activities of the internet industry, and the actions of professions whose role is to safeguard children (teachers, police, clinicians, social workers, etc.). We also outline directions for future research.

Recommendations for schools

1. The PSHE and Citizenship curriculum in secondary schools should include gender and culturally sensitive materials that address the peer exchange of sexual messages, images, invitations and taunts, either together with or separately from bullying.

2. The public discourse about 'cyberbullying' is now fairly well established in secondary schools, but rarely does it recognise the link with sexualised communication or sexual harassment. For some young people, especially girls, there is no line between bullying and sexting; rather, the pressure to participate in a sexualised exchange is experienced as bullying even when it is presented as 'fun'. There is a need for more attention and resources to cope with sexual cyberbullying, or digitally mediated sexual harassment in schools.

3. Teachers' embarrassment about sexual matters is a persistent problem to be addressed, for it mirrors the embarrassment many parents feel, leaving few or no adults able to discuss with teenagers their developing sexuality or any attendant pressures and problems. Moreover, teachers must find a way to acknowledge (as presumably they are managing with bullying) that sexual harassment may not come from a stranger but rather from another child in the same class. They may, in short, be addressing both perpetrator and victim in the same lesson.

4. Young people greatly prefer such issues addressed through the viewing and discussion of up to date, realistic filmed scenarios that provoke them to think, whether through the use of humour, shock/surprise or portrayed suffering of others. Seeing another young person dealing with daily practices familiar to them, scenarios like munch screens or exposing others, or being asked for a naked photo, or for a 'blow job' by text or Facebook message, seems particularly powerful, certainly more influential than advice pages, top tips or negatively worded advice (don't do this, don't do that). However, these need to be gender sensitive and non-moralising and in particular resist blaming girls as responsible for sexual indiscretion, as is evident in some of the current UK and international film resources on sexting.

5. As it can be closely related to sexual bullying, it may be preferable for sexting to be addressed in school in single sex groups in order to free both boys and girls, separately, to discuss the issues they perceive and the pressures they face. For the boys especially, it seems highly desirable that they are encouraged to recognise (and helped to challenge) the sexual and gender double standards by which they first pressurise and then judge the girls they target for their sexual attentions, online or offline. There is also a need to explore links between sexual violence and sexism in popular culture, and discuss and critique the construction of masculinities and also femininities in culturally sensitive and specific ways.

6. Any single class or year group is likely to include young people who differ significantly in their sexual experience, making it also preferable that sexting is addressed in small groups if possible so as not to compound the perception (by making sexting more visible) that 'everyone' is experiencing it and experienced (meaning both sexting and sex).

7. One means of taking this recommendation forward would be to recommend that, in whatever part of the curriculum addresses teenagers' developing sexual identity and activity, the role played by today's technology (in expressing, negotiating, and sharing experiences) should be explicitly included. Dealing with problematic sexting, then is as much a matter for the IT teacher as it is for the sex education teacher.

8. Importantly, unlike bullying, it cannot simply be generalised that all sexting is a problem. Thus any teacher must encompass within the discussion the recognition that young people are legitimately interested in their developing sexuality; thus exploring or playing with sexual ideas or relationships should not be ignored or rejected but issues of respect, consent and reciprocity in sexual relationships, including digitial sexual communications should be discussed. When issues of power and coercion arise – in the form of peer or individual pressure, stereotyping or other hostilities (from either boys or girls, directed to either boys or girls) – then sexting may become problematic.

9. To be credible with the students, and to promote the available safety tools, it is important that those who address sexting in schools are as up to date as possible with the technology the students are actually using. Blackberry use carries different terminology, has different network capacities, and may have different options to produce images or exchange, block or delete messages than Facebook or SMS or other networks or platforms.

10. The schools we researched had different strategies for e-safety. One school operates security software to monitor and intervene into online activity. Ironically this school had more problems with sexually explicit Facebook content and the participants seemed more wary of discussing the issues with adults, whom they viewed with suspicion. There are important issues of children's rights and privacy that are in contradiction to some of the risk based protection, surveillance strategies being adopted in schools. Rather than heavy-handed surveillance systems, we recommend pedagogical resources and engagement around these issues in ways outlined below. For instance, given the newness of technologies like Blackberry messaging, sessions to address issues related to pin broadcasts and photo exchanges and pornographic images as default photos (etc.) would be helpful.

Recommendations for parents

11. Although the present study did not interview parents, we did gain some indications of whether or not young people do tell their parents of activities relating to sexting (and sex). It is commonly held that children will evade or get around anything parents try to do to keep them safe. Yet this is not necessarily the case. Some young people discussed their desire to talk to their parents, but this was often fraught with problems, related to age. One year 8 girl at School Two described her mother finding her diary and getting very upset, which she found difficult to manage. It seemed younger children had greater problems dealing with sexualised contexts with parents. Year 10 girls at School One, however, discussed, feeling more comfortable with parents than teachers. Statistical data such as the EU Kids Online survey contrasts parents' awareness of online risk with children's self-reported risk, finding that in relation to sexual risks (sexting, pornography), parents are particularly unlikely to realise what their children are experiencing (especially their daughters and younger children), while those affected are less likely to tell their parents than for nonsexual risks (e.g. bullying). Also important is that the EU Kids Online survey indicated that young people would like their parents to take more rather than less interest in their online activities, and only one in three says they tend to ignore their parents' advice regarding the internet.

12. Supporting parents in keeping an open channel of communication with their children regarding sexual matters is particularly important and, as noted in relation to teachers, the challenge is to balance recognition of positive and pleasurable experiences while supporting or intervening when sexual experiences become problematic or coercive.

13. It is likely that parents are already hyper-aware that technology-enabled communication includes sexual content of various kinds. Possibly, rather than trying to invade their child's privacy (which is likely to be closely guarded), parents could ensure they discuss with their child the particular affordances of the technology (sharing with them the discovery of how to block unwanted messages, take care with privacy settings, report unwanted contacts, etc). The EU Kids Online survey also showed that parents who are themselves experienced online are more likely to have children who are skilled in protecting themselves online.

14. As at school, the provision of realistic scenarios that parents and teenagers can watch together could be used simultaneously to raise awareness among parents and encourage discussion within the family. Such scenarios would, ideally, be more common within popular soap operas, or programmes such as Channel 4's Sex Show, so that the occasion for discussion can arise 'naturally'. However, these scenarios need to unpack the gendered and sexual power dynamics in wider culture and the peer group and bring into focus the nature of how online and offline experiences are blurred and mutually inform one another around issues like sexual bullying, for instance.

15. Parental mediation of children's internet/mobile use tends to tail off during the early teens, on the assumption that young people are able to look after themselves by now. This assumption is not always warranted, as during the teenage years the degree and variety of sexual experimentation increases, and each step may bring new challenges and risks to the young person's wellbeing. The hands-off statement, 'I trust my child', so often heard can therefore be insufficiently supportive. Rather, parents need constantly to adjust and develop their approach as their children grow up and face different challenges in relation to technologically mediated communications.

16. Provided it is carefully and appropriately managed, the present government's policy is to be welcomed regarding 'active choice' (namely, that parents should exercise control at the point of sale over the filtering/safety tools installed on a computer or phone). The problem is that this policy is largely focused on websites and there are (too) few tools developed to support parents (and young people) in managing peer-to-peer content.

17. The degree to which it is considered acceptable or appropriate for parents to check children's phones or computers is highly culturally specific, and thus difficult to dictate as a generality. It would be worth exploring in future research where the norms now lie, for children of different ages. It may be that, for primary (and even early secondary-aged) students, parents should check children's social networking sites, phone contacts and so forth, also 'friending' them on Facebook, albeit that we would urge this is done with their child's understanding and consent rather than secretly. Our research and that of others has found in relation to perceived parental surveillance that young people operate multiple strategies including developing more than one profile to evade incursions on their privacy.

18. Nonetheless, it would be inappropriate for policy makers to rely too heavily on parental responsibility for their children's wellbeing. This is not because most parents refuse such responsibility but rather because, for some of the more vulnerable children most in need of support and guidance, their parents in particular may be less able or willing to help. For especially vulnerable children, therefore, or those already disadvantaged or 'at risk' in their everyday lives, the chances are both that their online activities may compound their problems and, further, that their parents may be less able to alleviate them. For the most vulnerable children especially, the responsibility for their well-being must be spread across multiple stakeholders.

Recommendations for internet service and site providers

19. Although increasingly sites and services do provide help lines, call centre services and reporting functions, children do not always find these satisfactory, and it is unclear (to them and to independent observers) that complaints, concerns or problems are swiftly and appropriately dealt with.

20. At present, industry provision is subject to self-regulation and it seems that safety provision is generally patchy. One problem is that different providers develop different strategies so that good practice is not always shared. Another is that when safety provision is changed, existing user strategies no longer apply (e.g. Facebook's privacy settings). A third is that the safety and privacy tools tend to assume adult users (consider the legal jargon of Terms and Conditions statements or privacy policies). Most important, in terms of information, is that parents and children are not clearly informed, at the point of sale or when they open the box/turn on the service, what the safety tools available to them are or how they work.

21. Much effort regarding filtering (to prevent highly sexualised images reaching children) has focused on website sites (web 1.0) rather than user-generated content or web 2.0 facilities, leaving teenagers fairly unsupported when electronic communication becomes problematic.

22. Providing 'just in time', non-patronising yet child-focused support and guidance is much needed – in short snippets as required (i.e. as appropriate to the function being used – posting or sending

photos, tagging, using mms [multi-messaging-services between phone and email], adding new contacts, etc), combined with prompt and reliable back up services (via a moderator, call centre or online advisor).

23. In addition, the industry has the capacity to commission just the kinds of up to date, professional quality films presenting thought-provoking or cautionary scenarios that teachers, parents and children would all welcome as their preferred means of recognising problematic situations and the available solutions. It is critical that these resources report on issues in non-moralising and anti-sexist ways that can help young people engage with some of the power dynamics being played out through the digital technologies in a safe environment. It is important to note that resources alone cannot address some of the most pressing implications of the findings, such as sexual bullying. Hence a multi-stakeholder approach is vital.

24. It is important that industry provision does not overestimate young people's digital literacy and safety skills: although these may appear impressive, and may exceed those of parents and teachers, this does not mean young people find online services fully comprehensible or controllable and nor have they always the skills to match them to their particular needs.

25. It is intriguing that young people are developing strategies to document problematic sexting experiences (e.g. via munch screens) so as to prevent further occurrences or seek redress. The more that internet service or site providers can do to empower users to manage their online communication the better. For example, it is important to young people that they can record and reproduce evidence of a problematic event; that they can take down or delete an inappropriate or unwelcome image (or message, or tag), and that when they report a problem, that appropriate action is taken.

Recommendations for child welfare professionals

26. The early history of sexting is of heavy-handed police intervention in the creation (by legal minors) of 'child pornography', this both criminalising rather commonplace activity that has always occurred, but not been recorded, and panicking parents and, especially, schools that illegal acts could occur on their premises and under their duty of care. One reason is that a person must be 18 to be depicted in a sexual image but the age of sexual consent is 16. Another is that the regulation was designed in a web 1.0 world (in which producers were professionals) while children live in a web 2.0 world of everyday user-generated content. Nonetheless, despite the hysteria generated by such legal action, there are indeed cases where the internet enables wider, unintended circulation of images that can distress those portrayed. While our research did not necessitate criminal action, the young people interviewed offered plenty of accounts of 'sexting gone wrong', images being circulated beyond their intended recipients.

27. It seems that, despite the embedded nature of online activities in everyday life for well over a decade, teachers, police officers and, particularly, clinicians and social workers have received too little guidance and awareness-raising of the thorough-going connections between offline and online realms. A child being sexually harassed face to face is likely to be harassed online also. A child being bullied in the playground is likely to suffer on Facebook also. A child seeing pornography in videos is likely also to see it online. In the extreme cases in which a child welfare professional is involved, inquiring about the possible implication of online/mobile technologies should now be routine. The

online environment can amplify and extend a child's offline difficulties, and the consequent images or messages can be instantly spread far and wide (or, worse, among the child's immediate social network) in a manner very difficult to take down or delete. Technologically mediated sexual (or other) harassment and bullying must, therefore, be a core part of professional training and practice with children.

28. Yet, as already argued above, despite the anxieties that the worst cases can provoke, these professionals too must recognise and allow for children's legitimate opportunities to develop and express their sexuality in privacy and dignity. Thus policy interventions must be gender and culturally sensitive, proportionate, targeted and, then, evaluated for their effectiveness.

Recommendations for future research

29. **Diversify Qualitative Strategy.** There is a need to do additional qualitative research in a range of different schools including for instance rural, suburban and Estate schools and across a wider UK geographical range beyond London.

30. **Diversify age range**. We heard reports of children effected by sexting as early as year 6 and 7 (for instance girls being asked for blow jobs by digital messaging). There is therefore a need to map younger, primary aged children's entry into digital sexual cultures. There is also a need to study an older age group to map issues of resilience among and up to year 11 students.

31. **Diversify participants.** While this study conducted exploratory interviews with teaching staff, there is a need to capture the views of teachers in more detail and also to explore the views of parents, whom as noted are a focal point in policy discussions about sexualisation

32. **Study newest smartphone technology.** Technology changes rapidly and there is a need for up to date research on newer forms (for instance Blackberry messenger) which connect up the links between older and newer practices in teen networks**.**

33. **Conduct nationally representative Quantitative Survey based on qualitative findings**. There is a need to measure sexual communication practices through the development of a survey instrument (using definitions of sexting that reflect young people's views and experiences formulated from qualitative research)

34. **Develop Resources.** There is a need to develop non-moralising resources (possibly including a short film and advertising campaign to raise awareness) based on the accumulated research findings from the qualitative and quantitative research. There is also a need for lesson plans, for teachers, peer mentoring resources for students and practical web based guidance for parents.

APPENDIX 1

'Young people and mobile technologies: Exploring opportunity, risk and safety'

June–July 2011

Information for School Students

Please will you help with my/our research?

Our names are Jessica Ringrose and Laura Harvey
We are researchers at universities.

This leaflet tells you about my/our research.
We hope the leaflet will also be useful, and we would be pleased to answer any questions you have.

Why is this research being done?
We are looking at how young people use mobile technologies (phone and internet) and issues of risk and safety. These could include how you communicate with your friends and what types of images you send and post online.

Page 2

Who will be in the project?
Groups of year 8 and year 10 at your school

What will happen during the research?
We will have one focus group which will take 45 minutes
Some participants will be asked for a follow up interview if it is convenient

What questions will be asked?
We will look at some short films about sending messages on your phone
We will talk about things you do on social networking sites
We will talk about experiences of cyberbullying
We will look at whether you have receive sexual content online or on your phone or online

What will happen to you if you take part?
We will have one focus group of 5–6 students in years 8 and 10. They will take 45 minutes
Some participants will be asked for a follow up interview if it is convenient
If you agree, I will tape record some of the sessions and type them up later. I am not looking for right or wrong answers, only for what everyone really thinks.

Page 3

Could there be problems for you if you take part?
I hope you will enjoy talking with us. Some people may feel upset when talking about some topics. If they want to stop talking, we will stop. For example is something upsetting comes up like bullying you can say you don't want to be part of the interview at that point.

If you have any problems with the project, please tell:
Jessica Ringrose: j.ringrose@ioe.ac.uk
Laura Harvey: laurajaneharvey@googlemail.com

Will doing the research help you?
I hope you will enjoy helping us. The research will mainly
collect ideas to help adults/children in future about any risks with mobile technologies.
As a thank you for participating we have £10 book vouchers for each participant

Who will know that you have been in the research?
We will not tell them or anyone else what you tell us unless I think someone might be hurt. If so, I will talk to you first about the best thing to do.

We will keep tapes and notes in a safe place, and will change all the names in my/our reports – and the name of the school and community – so that no one knows who said what.

Page 4

Do you have to take part?
You decide if you want to take part and, even if you say 'yes', you can drop out at any time or say that you don't want to answer some questions.

You can tell me that you will take part by signing the consent form.

Will you know about the research results?
I will send you a short report by November 2011

Who is funding the research?
The National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is funding this research

The project has been reviewed by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, [project no., leaflet version, date].

Thank you for reading this leaflet.

Jessica Ringrose: j.ringrose@ioe.ac.uk
Laura Harvey: laurajaneharvey@googlemail.com

APPENDIX 2

Consent form

'Young people and mobile technologies: Exploring opportunity, risk and safety'

June–July 2011

I have read the information leaflet about the research. ☐ (please tick)

I will allow the researchers to observe and interview my child ☐ (please tick)

I agree to be interviewed ☐ (please tick)

Name

Signed   date

Researcher's name

Signed   date

APPENDIX 3

Patterns of use

What social networks and sites do you use? e.g. facebook, facebook chat, myspace, twitter, games networks forums, blogs, livejournal, other online chat, skype, blogging, MSN?

How many of you have mobile phones? How many of you have Smart phones? Computers at home?

Regulation

Are you allowed to use phones at school? Are there certain times when you can use your phones (e.g. breaktime?) can you use your phone in class?

Does anyone have more than one phone to get around if its taken?

Where do you use your phone most? School, home, travelling Do you use 3G/ Wifi/ internet while out and travelling?

Do you have time limits for using computers at home/school? How much do you use computer for communicating with peers? Do parents/ teachers have a say in what sites you can access? Who gets to decide when you can use it? Do you have a computer in your room at home?

Online/offline and privacy

How many online profiles do you have? What kind of information do you include on your profile? What do you want people to think about you from your profile?

What about privacy? Are your sites private? How do you use the settings?

Have you gotten texts from anyone you don't know? Online messages/posts from people you don't know?

Do you know your online friends in person face to face? Are they from school, other groups, other friends? How do you decide whether to be friends with someone? Have you met up with people face to face after meeting online?

Dating/flirting

How do people use phones and the internet to flirt with each other? Do people flirt in public like in comments and on people's walls, in private? Texting? On chat? How do you decide?

What do you like about online flirting? What don't you like?

It is easier to approach someone you like online?

Have you ever been approached in a way you didn't like?

Content/messaging scenarios (sexual content and gender differences)

What kinds of things do you post on your wall/other people's wall, what kinds of things do you send by facebook message, what kinds of things do you send by text? How do you decide? Do other people have different ideas about what's ok or not ok to post/send/text?

Do people send each other e.g. youtube videos? What kinds of things? [prompts only: e.g. music videos, funny, violent, sexual] – do you comment on them? Do you have any examples of things you've sent or received recently? What do you think about them?

PEER CONTENT: Do you take pictures and videos of your friends? What are they of? [probe: Jokes/Pranks on other people? Why do people send them? Who are they for? Who gets to see them? Do other people ever end up seeing them who weren't supposed to? What happens then?

Are there any videos going round at the moment? – the ones that everyone's sending to everyone else?

What about naked people in photos? Videos? Etc. In previous research people have talked about issues of how people dress online, pictures of girls and boys in knickers, what is happening in your experience/opinion?

Let's talk more about 'sexy' content, in particular. What types of things have you been sent or sent yourself? Do boys and girls send and do different things?

What about pictures or videos of sex. What do you do if you are sent something? (teacher, parent?)

If something sexual has circulated, can you expand on what happened? What did you do? How did you feel? Was there things that felt good? Bad? Why?

Private messages

Have you heard of the 'sexting'? What does it mean to you? Is it just words? Pictures? Video? What could be positive about it? What could be negative?

1. One of the stories that sometimes goes around is about people sending pictures of each other over their mobile phones. So I'm going to tell you a story about someone doing that and would like to hear whether you think it sounds true to life or whether you've ever heard of something like that happening.

Someone was flirting with their boyfriend or girlfriend over text. It was a school night and they were both at their own homes getting ready to go to sleep. Then one of them decided to send a picture of themselves in their underwear. They were enjoying sending them so they sent a few more.

Do people send messages like this?

2. When they went to school the next day they found out that people were talking about them. It turned out their boyfriend or girlfriend had forwarded the pictures on to their friend, who had posted them on the internet. They had wanted the pictures to be private, but now they were out in public.

Have you ever heard about something like this happening? What happened?

Do people send and receive messages like that? Would people send them on SNS, by email, on chat, by text, on skype?

Do you think this is cyberbullying? What does cyberbullying mean to you? [probe about conflict]

Do lots of people do this? Boys and girls? What do you think about it? Is it different when boys/girls do it? What happens if you don't want to?

At the end of the project we're going to write a report. What would you like to say about these issues? What would help [prompt: Students, schools, parents?]

APPENDIX 4: GLOSSARY

Adding friends (To BBM and Facebook)

Backoff – bum (buttocks)

Bare – 'bare' – it's a slang term that means 'a lot' or excessive, but can also mean 'bare' in conventional way of naked.

Batty – bum

BBM – Blackberry Messenger

Beating/beats – sex

Bestie – best friend (can also be best male friend of girls)

Bitch fight: fighting between girls

Bocat – a boy who gives a girl cunnilingus

Boom – pretty

Broadcast – sending your pin (BBM number) out over Blackberry messenger for others to add you (done by person or friends on your behalf, with a message – i.e. Add my sexy girl Kaycee if u know her) – also called 'BC'

Buff – fit, in good shape

Chat – (private or group) online typically BBM chat through texts

Daggering – dry humped from behind (in your clothes) can be pushed onto ground/floor

Expose – to digitally send around, post to network a munch screen or photo in a way that can embarrass the target

Exposed – site where embarrassing things are exposed – sometimes specific 'exposure' facebook profile set up for this

Exposure site – web (i.e. Facebook) pages devoted to exposing girls who have sent naked pictures

FB – Facebook

Gage – steal ('he tried to gage my watch')

Give it to me – sex but usually head(s)

Grass – snitch

Head(s) – Blowjob

Inbox me – send me a FB message (privately) to select group or individual

Moist – stupid, loser (gay)

Move – attack

Peak – bad insult the worst you can get?

Peng – sexy

Ping me – send message on BBM

Ratings – status distribution system, more common for male students

Screen munch – capture the screen through print screen – to save the content

Sket – Slut

Slipping – embarrassing moments on video or photo (e.g. 'catch you slipping')

Snake – snitch

Status update – FB communication sent to whole network

Swagger – fashionably dressed with matched colours, generally designer labels like Ralph Lauren (boys)

Touching up – boys groping

Wet – idiot

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