# Digital sexual violence and the gendered constraints on consent in youth image sharing

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Educational interventions seeking to address digital nude image sharing among young people have tended to attempt to deter the practice via two key messages. First, that taking, sharing, and storing nude images of under 18s (even of oneself) is prohibited in law; and second, that taking and sharing a nude image of oneself comes with the risk of further non-consensual sharing by the recipient and others, and subsequent emotional distress and reputational damage. We take issue with these messages because they conflate consensual and non-consensual practices and position the latter as arising from participation in image sharing, rather than as abuse (see Krieger, 2017). Scholars have made great strides in conceptualising non-consensual image sharing practices as abuse, which, they argue, is located within a context of vastly unequal gender and sexual subject relations and a continuum of normalised sexual violence that constrain the negotiation and enactment of consent in both digital and physical spaces (Henry and Powell, 2015; McGlynn and Rackley, 2018).

In this research summary, we draw upon data collected from 191 British young people aged 11 to 21 to examine sexual abuse in youth digital intimacies. The first study was conducted in 2016 and the second in 2019, and strikingly consistent results emerged over the time-period. The studies involved focus groups, individual interviews, observations as well as creative arts and participatory research methods of young people drawing and making mind maps. The research explored participants' perceptions and experiences of digital intimacies and identified three forms of digital sexual abuse: pressure and coercion (on girls) to share nudes (which we class as a form of sexual harassment), unsolicited nudes (specifically, the sending of uninvited 'dick pics' by boys to girls, currently being criminalised as cyberflashing) and non-consensual further distribution of nudes (which is classed as image based sexual abuse in law) (see Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021). The combined research findings demonstrate how gender and sexual inequality frame pressure on girls to send nudes, girls' acceptance of cyberflashing as normal, and high levels of self-blame and heightened responsibilisation of girls' (victim blaming) if their images were shared. Young people also reported having little recourse for support and help, and girls in particular experienced lasting feelings of regret and shame, indicating significant longstanding trauma (see also McGlynn and Rackley, 2017). We suggest that due to the heteronormative and sexist normalisation of abuse in contemporary digital ecologies, possibilities of consent are constrained in gender-specific ways which must be taken into account when conceptualising and educating about digital consent.

Starting with pressure on girls to send nudes to boys, it was apparent in the data that girls felt under pressure from boys to send nudes if they wanted to attract and maintain the interests of boys. We see this as part of a heteronormative economy where girls' nudes are solicited as part of a bid for boys to enter into a relationship. Some girls narrated experiences of having

been pressured by boys to send an image at an early stage of a relationship or connection being established. These pressures were sometimes directly applied by boys, while also operating at the socio-cultural level of perceived sexual scripts and relationship expectations (and obligations). Here, girls seemed to struggle with navigating their desire to please boys—that is, gain positive feelings about being complimented by boys and the promise of intimate connections and commitment—with their personal desire (or lack of desire) to share nudes and their concerns about the risk of non-consensual further distribution of the images.

> I: And how would it come about, would they request stuff from you or you would –
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> Naomi: No, like they would tend to… talk to me first. At first, I was kind of thinking, oh yeah, they actually like me, they want to have a conversation, but then I don't know like it'd turn to sexting and everything. And they'd suggest it and I wouldn't feel like I had another option. It was either that or they'd stop talking to me or something. (S School, Year 10, Interview, 2016)

Boys' nudes, meanwhile, took on a very different meaning in youth digital sexual culture. Many of the girls across both studies recounted extensive experiences of having been sent 'dick pics' by both boys and adult male strangers on social media platforms to which they did not consent nor want to receive. Some of the boys framed dick pics as an 'initiation'.

> Bond: I could send it and that person could want it, and it cuts out the all the boring work… you can get straight down to the nitty gritty... you don't have to waste your time, you both know what's going on… you're laying out on the table, *I want this, are you interested*? No? That's fine, I'll go. Yes, brilliant, let's go. (Youth club, Focus group, 2016)

Girls found it disconcerting and violating to be sent dick pics but tended to internalise the experience into narratives of personal shame and responsibility. Girls expressed high levels of resignation about the practice and none of the participants expressed it as harassment or 'cyber-flashing'.

Many girls seemed reluctant to report the images for fear of antagonising or alienating boys.

> Emily: You kind of just like go over it and forget about it, so you just don't do anything about it. I just don't really care.
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> Danni: Yeah, you don't do anything about it and then it goes away, and then you don't have to care about it or think about it.
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> Emily: Like at first, when I first started getting dick pics I'd be like disgusted, but then I just got so used to it, and every time a dick appears on my screen, I'm like, great, again. It's normal. So even when I got it from my friends it was like…lovely. (CLC1 School, Year 10 girls, 2019)

In contrast to boys sending nudes uninvited, participants in both studies discussed the risks to girls of having their images (or participation in image sharing) shared, shown or distributed without their consent. The homosocial reward available to boys, meant that non-consensual

sharing was perceived as a relatively high value, low risk activity for boys. We found that in the cases discussed in the schools, those in authority used anti-sexting resources (Ceop, Exposed, 2010, see Dobson and Ringrose, 2015), which often placed attention on the girls' supposed wrong-doing in producing a nude image rather than the abusive sharing on the part of the boys. Boys had learnt that the risk to girls would not personally affect them, and had no understanding that they were engaging in a form of image based sexual abuse:

> Dwayne: I think it's… natural 'cause like as humans we're growing up, like it's really, really, really hard to keep a secret. And if you've got a picture like that and it won't affect you personally, it will affect the person who's sent the nudes then I think there'll be more pressure to send [it on to others] it because …we're taught that if it's not affecting you, then it shouldn't really damage you and it shouldn't, you shouldn't get yourself involved with it. So, I think there definitely is pressure to share nudes. (CLC 2 School, Year 10 boys, 2019)

Girls recounted feeling a sexual double standard around image sharing that resulted in consistent victim blaming and slut shaming across the research:

> …Charlie: I think it's more problematic if a girl's image gets shared because she gets judged a lot more for it
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> Lily: Yeah, she gets shamed for doing it more…
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> Charlie: And the guy can just laugh about it, they don't care. Whereas with a girl you can tell she's really upset because she's like, everyone is gonna be calling the girl a slut. (S School, Year 10 Interview, 2016)

Given these attitudes which fail to understand image sharing without consent as abusive and then blame and shame the victim, we found poignant accounts shared by some of the girls of the lasting regret they felt for participating in image sharing (even when that participation was, at least ostensibly, consensual and pleasurable). While there were occasions in which girls described engaging in or witnessing coercive behaviours perpetrated by girls toward boys, there was little evidence of widespread distribution of boys' nudes without their consent, rather boys sent girls images without consent as a form of harassment. Moreover, the threat that girls might share images of boys in ways that would create long-lasting stigma for boys was minimal.

We suggest that these gendered power dynamics, sexual double standards and inequitable social conditions mean that girls and boys do not participate in image sharing on the same terms. While the heteronormative patterns of sexism and abuse are not new, both studies showed how they are now digitally mediated and, we would argue, intensified through technological affordances, specifically persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability of images, which mean that images take on a life beyond the initial moment of exchange and create new conditions for non-consensuality that unfold in gender specific ways (see boyd, 2012: 349). We suggest that this jettisons any abstract ideal of negotiating reciprocal consent at the individual level and underscores the urgent need to distinguish consensual and non-consensual behaviours in both sending and sharing images; and we need to understand non-consensual behaviour as forms of abuse. The data from both studies demonstrated how non-

consensual sharing is a form of abuse that acts *on* girls to shape and scaffold their participation in digital intimacies and constrains the negotiation of 'consent' (see Vera-Gray, 2016).

Moving forward, we note that the current guidance on schools-based Relationship and Sex Education in England (including the UKCCIS guidance for schools on 'youth-produced sexual imagery') specifies that digital image sharing should be discussed in terms of consent. We agree that consent in the digital sphere must be explicitly addressed in education that emphasises how and when image sharing is abusive, how abusive sharing is illegal, and how the repercussions, risks, and harms are often much more devastating for girls. To this end, we have helped in developing a school policy guide on Online Sexual Harassment with the School of Sexuality Education charity (School of Sexuality Education, 2021). The guidance focuses three types of online sexual harassment: 1. Unsolicited sexual content received online (including image based harassment and cyberflashing); 2. Image-based sexual abuse; 3. Sexual coercion, threats and intimidation online. A section on gendered harms and power uses an intersectional approach to suggest a cross curricular and whole school approach that pays attention to masculinity and homosociality and gendered patterns of online sexual harassment and abuse. The aim of the guidance is to increase digital literacy skills for young people and adults around digital sexual intimacies. We advocate for investment in gender-sensitive digital sexual literacy that gives young people the tools they need to hopefully better navigate consent in digital spaces.

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