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Understanding and Combatting Youth Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse

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ABSTRACT

This report presents findings from qualitative and quantitative research on digital image-sharing practices with 480 young people aged 12 to 18 years (336 in the survey and 144 in focus groups) from across the UK. Although our study examined a wide range of digital sexual behaviours, we found that non-consensual image-sharing practices were particularly pervasive, and consequently normalised and accepted among youth. Through our discussion of young people's everyday experiences we demonstrate how non-consensual image-sharing practices constitute forms of image based sexual harassment and abuse. We introduce the term image-based sexual harassment (IBSH) to describe unwanted sexual images (e.g. cyberflashing or unsolicited dick pics) and unwanted solicitation for sexual images (e.g. pressured sexting), and image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) to describe the non-consensual recording, distribution, and/or threat of distribution of sexual images (e.g. revenge porn). Our central aim is to improve the support available for young people by helping parents, teachers, and policymakers to identify and respond to diverse young people's experiences with image-based sexual harassment and abuse.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Many researchers emphasise how ‘sexting’—i.e. the consensual exchange of sexual images—can be a form of sexual expression and intimacy formation for teens (Burkett, 2015; O’Sullivan, 2014; Villacampa, 2017). Distinct from these consensual digital practices, image-based sexual harassment and abuse describes a subset of non-consensual and harmful online behaviours that constitute as digital sexual violence and require immediate intervention:

(1) Image-based sexual harassment (IBSH)

Image-based sexual harassment describes two forms of digital sexual violence: (a) unwanted sexual images (e.g. cyberflashing or unsolicited dick pics), and (b) unwanted solicitation for sexual images (McGlynn and Johnson, 2020). We define ‘images’ broadly to encompass all forms of visual content, such as photographs, videos, live videos, chats, etc.

(2) Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA)

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) refers to the non-consensual recording, distribution, and/or threat of distribution of nude or sexual images. Although sometimes referred to as ‘revenge porn’ in popular culture, this term fails to account for the many different contexts in which IBSA can take place.

While these different forms of digital sexual violence are ‘new’ to the extent that technology enables them (boyd, 2014), these practices are connected to the same unequal, hierarchical gender relations as traditional forms of sexual violence (Henry and Powell, 2015; Powell and Henry, 2017). These forms of digital sexual violence most often involve the harassment and abuse of women and girls (Dodge & Spencer, 2018; Powell, 2010). Unfortunately, these practices are becoming increasingly common as 47% of women aged 18 to 24 years reported receiving an unsolicited dick pic in a recent poll (YouGov, 2018), and 9% of girls in Plan UK’s study (2020) were asked to send intimate images of themselves and/or received unwanted images during the first UK lockdown period in early 2020 alone.

THE STUDY

Our combined qualitative and quantitative research responds to gaps in our understanding of image-based sexual harassment and abuse, as distinct from the abstract category of ‘sexting’. We conducted focus group interviews with 144 diverse young people (aged 12 to 18) across seven schools. The majority of participants were under 15 years-old, creating a unique data set with children under the age of sexual consent (16) and under the legal sexting age (18). The focus groups were structured as part of Sharing Networked Images Practices (SNIP) mApping workshops that explored how young people create images for social media sharing, and also the sexual content that they receive via social media apps. For our quantitative method, we administered an online survey to 336 young people. Survey questions explored their experiences with a range of image-sharing practices, including their experiences of receiving unwanted sexual images, unwanted solicitation for sexual images and image-based sexual abuse.

Through documenting the digital platforms in use and how technological affordances mediate behaviour, capacities and decision making around image sharing, our research contributes a unique viewpoint to the research on digital sexual violence. Furthermore, by documenting young people's experiences of the support they received when faced with digital sexual violence, our findings have important policy and practice implications for a range of stakeholders, including schools, families and communities.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Technology facilitates image-based sexual harassment and abuse**
 Social media platforms create opportunities for users to engage in image-based sexual harassment and abuse, through their various technical functions-referred to as 'technological affordances' (boyd, 2014). In particular, Snapchat enables image-based sexual harassment and abuse through its quick adds, shout outs, streaks, score points and lack of identity verification measures. Instagram facilitates unwanted sexual content through its direct message and group chat features.
- 2 Image-based sexual harassment overwhelmingly impacts girls**
 First, adolescent girls often reported receiving unwanted images of male genitals (i.e. cyberflashing) from unknown adult men, and known and unknown boys (same-aged peers). A large majority of girls who received such images reported feeling 'disgusted', 'embarrassed', and 'confused'.

 Second, girls commonly reported receiving requests for sexual images from unknown adult men, and known and unknown boys (same-aged peers). Of those who had been asked to send nudes, girls felt more pressure to do so, compared to boys. Solicitation was often initiated through being sent an unsolicited dick pic-referred to as a 'transactional dick pic'.
- 3 Image-based sexual abuse is heavily influenced by gender norms, and an intersectional approach to contextualised harm is needed**
 Boys were rewarded for sharing girls' images amongst their peers, as an indication of their masculinity status. Girls were shamed and victim-blamed for having their image shared without their consent. Further, IBSA risk and harms are not simply gendered but also, deeply classed and raced, with young people having variable access to support. Thus, we argue for a nuanced approach to understanding and contextualising digital sexual violence.
- 4 Young people rarely report image-based sexual harassment and abuse**
 Young people experienced very little relevant and useful support in mitigating these online harms. Rates of reporting to either the social media platforms or to parents or school were nearly non-existent.
- 5 Need for more effective and age-appropriate digital sex education**
 Reflecting on their own stories, young people offered useful insight into their experience of what works well in schools. Emphasising the value of schools focusing on the actions of perpetrators and avoiding victimblaming approaches. Recognising the value of specialist expertise, smaller group formats, with younger facilitators and a move away from whole school assemblies to convey important and sensitive messages.

SHOUT OUTS

'Shout outs' refer to the trend of teens actively increasing the visibility of their profiles to wider audiences to achieve more contacts. This is accomplished through another user posting a 'story', i.e. photos or videos shared to the users' contacts, with the intention of boosting their friends' contacts. Often this was done within the context of 'shout outs for shout outs (SFS)', where the user will receive a shout out in return.

***Sammy:** SFS which means shout for shout out. So you send a picture of yourself, like a face or something, and then you mention that person on your story, and then people add them, and then people add that, and then add, and they keep adding each other. And loads of people post your photo, with your tag, so everyone would add you. . . Once they add you then they would be able to text you, and once you do it like they can call you, text you your smartphone. (CLC1 Year 8 girls).*

STREAKS

A Snapchat 'streak' refers to the number of consecutive days that a user has sent and received a direct snap with another user. These snaps create a score between the two users that counts the number of consecutive days that they have been 'snapping'. Young people consequently associate these scores with popularity—as having high streaks with many different people is seen as indicative of having many friends, which serves to motivate their increased engagement with the platform. Girls explained how streaks motivated them to open the snaps that are sent by these unknown users, which at times were unwanted sexual images.

SCORE POINTS

Snapchat allocates each user a 'score' that is publicly displayed on their profile, and is calculated based on how many 'snaps' one sends and receives. This feature exacerbates issues of unknown users accessing young people's accounts because it creates an incentive for young people to enhance the visibility of their profile to a large network of users. Participants described actively choosing to keep their privacy settings open, accepting strangers' quick adds, and participating in shout outs and streaks in order to gain more contacts and 'views' on Snapchat and eventually increase their 'score'. Throughout the focus group discussions, it was made clear that having a high score on Snapchat was tied to popularity. As a result, many participants explained how they understood that these actions increased their vulnerability to image-based sexual harassment and abuse from 'paedophiles' and 'weird people', but they chose to do so anyway.