

“Oh you’re all children, children do silly things. You’ll be fine. Get over it!”*

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Abstract

The incidence of sexual violence towards young women and girls has been steadily increasing over the past few years, coupled with advances in technology which appear to facilitate it and place young people at risk. With increasing pressure from the media and celebrity culture to be sexualised from a young age, it is essential to examine what measures are in place to tackle the rising levels of sexual harassment amongst young people. Qualitative data was obtained from focus groups in two schools to establish the prevalence of sexual harassment experienced by girls and whether schools have adequate Relationships and Sex Education provision regarding sexual violence and unhealthy relationships. Although physical sexual harassment was not common in either school, sexual comments and name-calling were commonplace and said to be mainly from girls to other girls. The issue of self-generated images being shared through sexting has been overtaken by girls posting pictures of themselves on social media wearing little or no clothes, citing the media as an influence, and often resulting in sexual bullying by peers. The research findings corroborate existing research which calls for Relationships and Sex Education to be made compulsory in all schools across the U.K. to tackle issues of online safety, consent, the influence of the media and pornography as well as forming healthy relationships. Young people actively want schools to provide guidance and information on respect, boundaries and what actually constitutes a healthy relationship. Without these discussions in school, young people will continue to be placed at risk of experiencing sexual harassment as either a victim or a perpetrator.

*Quote taken from a participant in the study

Introduction

The focus of the research was initially on young people’s views (11-18 years old for the purpose of the research) and their experiences of “sexting”, which is the taking or sharing of sexual images or sexually worded text messages via a mobile phone or over the internet, including on social networking sites like Facebook, Myspace or Snapchat (Lee & Crofts 2015; Ringrose et al, 2012). It is an important area of study due to the negative consequences that can result from taking part in sexting namely the potential for world-wide distribution of a photo once uploaded onto social media sites, committing an offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and possessing a digital footprint that could jeopardise future employment. However, as a review of the literature on sexting progressed, it became apparent that sexting was just part of a complex range of interlinked issues facing young people, for example, a sexualised culture, peer pressure and sexual violence towards women.

With important research in this area being published more recently for example, “Basically...Porn is Everywhere” (Horvath et al, 2013), as well as the “Girls’ Attitudes” (Girlguiding 2015) annual survey and the launch of the Women and Equalities Committee 2016 inquiry into Sexual Harassment in schools, the everyday pressures faced by young

people, and in particular young women, are fast becoming a focus in parliament and within organisations such as End Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAW) and *Everyday Sexism*, which aim to improve the lives of young women through effective Relationships and Sex Education in schools. Further research and evidence has been requested by parliament to support the inquiry with a view to informing policy and implementing education programs to help schools address sexual violence against women directly. The inquiry recognises the use of online pornography amongst young people and seeks to understand not only how this impacts on levels of sexual violence in school, but also to investigate what schools can do to tackle its impact. Therefore this research is a response to the inquiry's request for further exploration of issues of sexual harassment, peer pressure and whether schools are addressing these issues.

A high level of sexual violence towards young women and girls has been reported across several studies and by key campaign groups, notably the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Schools 2016. The exacerbation of sexual harassment through new technology also features highly with studies on sexting and online activity examining the role that coercion plays in the lives of young people. A common recommendation in the literature is that studies should ask young people about their actual practices of sexting, rather than just their perceptions of it (Lee & Crofts, 2015) particularly as the age of those involved in sexting is getting younger (Mc Alinden 2014). Existing knowledge is limited by the lack of qualitative studies based on the experiences of young people themselves (Lee & Crofts, 2015) in order to establish whether sexting is more a tool for sexual harassment than harmless fun. In addition, few differences are made between the sexting activities of boys compared to girls (Phippen 2012), which would help to clarify whether sexting has a different purpose according to gender.

Central to the literature is young people's request for discussions in school around sexting and relationships (Ringrose 2012; Phippen 2012). Yet, recent studies indicate that four years later this request has still not been met (Women and Equalities Committee 2016; Martellozo et al, 2016; EVAW 2016). In fact, research reveals a worrying picture of the Relationship and Sex Education provision in schools in the U.K. with pupils reporting that they receive little or no education in this area. As a result, young people do not know the law relating to sexting and are therefore unaware of the potential consequences in taking part (Fixers 2016). Furthermore, some argue that this would not deter them anyway (Eraker 2010; Arcabascio 2010). Parents are also unaware of the legislation. *Sexting and Young People: A Parent's View* (2016) highlighted that many parents didn't know that it was illegal for a child to take and send indecent images of themselves. Although 73% of parents believed sexting to be harmful, 60% haven't discussed the consequences of sexting with their children (NSPCC 2016). Therefore, children either turn to their peer groups for help and advice, or find their own solutions instead (Currie 1991). With an obvious lack of support from parents, guidance needs to be provided around sexting and relationships through another source.

There is also evidence to suggest that young people do not know who to seek help from if an image does become widely distributed. Without listening to the views of young people, this cannot be taken as read. Therefore, there is a need for qualitative research to be conducted to obtain an understanding of young people's experience of sexual harassment in schools and whether sexting is a tool used in sexual harassment. In addition, the issue of self-generated indecent images which are posted on social media will also be

investigated as to date this remains unexplored. This research aims to establish what is causing young people to post indecent images of themselves online and identify whether it is the same pressure that encourages sexting. Exploring the differences between genders should help to clarify existing differences in opinion on why young people participate in these activities and how they are supported in school to tackle issues of sexual harassment and sexting as the literature has identified that schools are best placed to provide this education which is so desperately needed. However, it would appear that schools are still failing to provide adequate Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) which actually teaches young people about consent and healthy relationships.

Methodology

The aim of the research was to gain an in-depth understanding of young people's experiences of sexual harassment in school, and in particular, their experiences of sexting and sexting behaviours in order to shed light on contested points from the literature around coercion and motivations for sexting. A qualitative approach was used to provide insight into the feelings and meanings the pupils attribute to these issues (Bell 2010). Six focus groups were conducted across two schools in Plymouth: four in year 10 and two in year 12, providing 39 participants in total, 25 boys and 14 girls. Pupils from two different age groups, year 10 and year 12 were chosen in order to identify any change in experiences and meaning that occur as young people develop in maturity. These were then separated by age and gender to facilitate discussion and to ensure participants did not feel intimidated by older peers or the opposite sex.

Data Collection Method

Comments from their peers were selected from the Women and Equalities Commission meeting at the House of Commons (2016) and read to participants as prompts for discussion. Statements were specifically chosen which contained many of the themes of the literature on sexting and sexual harassment, for example, distribution of indecent images beyond the original recipient, coercion, responsibility and legal implications. Pupils were asked for their reactions to the article which ensured that the discussion was participant-led (Thomas 2016) and with minimal direction from the facilitator. Data from the study was obtained from audio recordings of the focus group discussions which were then fully transcribed and the method of constant comparison (Thomas 2013) was used in the data analysis. This consisted of comparing and contrasting data not only from one focus group to another to look for common themes, but also comparing the data to the themes that emerged from the literature to look for concordance and differences. A process of network analysis (Bliss et al, 1983) was used to show whether common themes were interlinked in order to show the complex nature of sexting practices and sexual harassment. This form of analysis was particularly suited to this study which aimed to look at the main themes of sexting and sexual harassment and interrelated sub-themes (Thomas 2013). The group dynamics themselves were also noted, particularly any points of disagreement between participants as this indicated grey areas in what the participants class as normal or acceptable (Gilbert 2008).

Findings and Analysis

Sexting as a Tool for Harassment

Both age groups defined sexting as “dirty talk” (Y10 male), or “nudes” which are self-generated indecent images sent to another person. There was a consensus that sexting, and in particular the sharing of images, occurred more frequently in years 7, 8 and 9. As in previous research (Phippen 2012; Lee & Crofts 2015), sexting was considered to be a “normal” activity that most people took part in just for “a bit of fun” and without thinking about, or being deterred by the consequences. However, the year 10 girls said it “wasn’t fun if they don’t want to do it” but “sometimes the boy forces them”. The typical scenario they reported was:

It’s more stereotypically the boys. I think the boys will ask a girl for a picture, they’ll send it to him and then the boy will like show it round to his friends (Y12 female).

Because boys just automatically think that’s what girls are for sometimes. Like they’re just there for their bodies and not for anything else (Y10 female).

The use of coercion in sexting is a contentious theme in the literature and therefore the following prompt for discussion was used to explore whether coercion plays a major part in sexting.

“I think it’s probably because they’re pressured to do it by their partner. Their partner might say, “If you actually did love me you’d send me pictures.” And after—because they actually love the partner, but they don’t want to break up with them, so they do what they tell them to do” (Women and Equalities Committee 2016).

All focus groups saw this as a common scenario in their schools, but also agreed that it can be the other way round and that a girl could coerce a boy into sending an indecent image of himself. If pressure continued, which was normally in the form of random messages such as “I haven’t seen it in a while, I miss it” rather than overt threats, the person usually gives in and sends the image. As in Phippen (2012), coercion was also used as a precursor to a relationship where girls would be asked to send a “nude” to access a relationship with the boy requesting it and girls being turned down if they refuse.

“Oh, I’ll be with you if you send me this picture of you” and I was like “No”. “Well then I don’t want to be with you then” (Y12 female).

As well as pressure from boys to girls to send a “nude”, there is also pressure from peer groups. With sexting going on all around them, it becomes normalised and pupils feel compelled to join in, and cited pressure to conform to peer group norms (Ringrose 2012) being as much a motivation as actually receiving an image. Pupils understanding of sexting also involved the distribution of the image beyond the intended recipient, referred to as a “leak” (Y12 female). The year 10’s assumed that if a “nude” was sent, there was “no guarantee” or “a zero percent chance” that the image would remain with the original recipient.

Gender Differences and Lad Points

There were noticeable differences between the genders regarding the role sexting plays. Although pupils said more girls sent photos of themselves than boys did, boys generally initiated sexting and did most of the image sharing. Girls reported that sexting was okay in a relationship if they could trust the other person not to share any images. In contrast, boys use sexting as a way of raising their standing amongst their peers and to “get attention” or “try their luck” supporting the findings from previous research (Phippen 2012).

You want to make yourself seem like you’re good at stuff in front of your friends (Y10 male)

As reported in Fixers (2016), a system of “lad points” was common in both schools to gain praise from male peers. If a boy posts something which amuses his friends, or receives a “nude” photo from a girl, he gains lad points to enhance his status within the group. The girls don’t have this system within their friendship groups saying it was more of a “boy thing”. Seeing a friend get praise for receiving an image, encourages others to then try their luck. This was the case across both age groups, indicating that peer pressure continues to exert a powerful influence even by year 12. This pressure was more subtle than the use of overt statements.

I think it’s not necessarily completely out there in statements like “how come you haven’t got any pictures from such and such? I think it’s more subconsciously like someone promoting themselves, like bigging themselves up and being quite arrogant about it. I think that’s when other people start thinking “well, hang on, why aren’t I doing this?” (Y12 male).

As well as scoring lad points for receiving “nudes” the year 12 girls also believed that it placed the boys in a more dominant position than the girls.

I think it’s knowing that’s what they look like underneath their clothes and they have that sort of power over a girl.

This power is not just dominance over the girl in the image; it also raises their status amongst peers. In this way, women are goods to be traded to enhance a male’s status (Dworkin 1981). According to the girls, boys showing off in front of peers often resulted in the girls receiving unsolicited “nudes” from them. There was also a difference between boys and girls in how the “nudes” are received. For boys, getting a nude of a girl would result in comments like “yeah, get in mate” and praise from male peers. The girls, however, see sexting as a private matter between two people.

Boys like think they’re all like amazing and they are like “oh yeah, look what my girl sent me guys!” and then like share round everyone and then like girls just want to keep it private, you know like yeah “he’s mine, like” (Y10 female).

Even the boys acknowledged that girls probably didn’t react to receiving a “nude” of a male in the same way saying “I don’t think they’d appreciate it”. In fact, sending an unsolicited naked photo to someone is actually classed as sexual harassment (EVAW 2016). The year 10 girls describe image sharing of boys as less common and consider it “weird”, “grim” and “not necessary at all” and don’t want to be shown “nudes” of other girls’ boyfriends. They think that this difference between boys and girls in the way images are received demonstrates that boys “don’t take relationships seriously” whereas girls do.

Revenge Porn

As described in existing studies, “nudes” mostly get shared after a relationship break-up, usually as a form of retaliation to do “anything to get them back”. This “Revenge Porn” was more common in year 10 than in year 12. In fact, many pupils said it was common for “nudes” of girlfriends to be kept as a “back up” in case the relationship ends. Then boys will have something to use to “humiliate” or “get revenge” on their ex- partner (EVAW 2016). Statements like this were common:

Don't try and mug me off or anything cos I've got something against you (Y10 male).

They can say to you “don't report it to the police or I'll send it to someone else. It's like a blackmail thing a leak as well, almost like protection for being in a relationship (Y12).

The girls echoed this by describing how they would worry more about what happens to the images they had sent following a break up, with boys using fear as a way of controlling the girls (EVAW 2016). It wasn't just the boys who use “nudes” as a way to humiliate a girl. An incident where two girls had fallen out and one of them had distributed the “nude” photo of the other girl around school was discussed. Staff at the school had been unaware of the incident, despite the images being printed out and passed around. This finding supports the link found between sexual harassment and peer bullying (Fixers 2016) and unexpectedly shows how girls can be complicit in their own harassment, or “sexual bullying” (Horvath et al, 2013).

Posting “Nudes” on Social Media

The extent to which coercion is a factor in sexting lost its significance once pupils reported how common it was for girls to willingly post images of themselves on social media with little or no clothes on. *Basically...Porn is Everywhere* (Horvath et al, 2013) discusses the pervasive nature of the sexualised culture that currently predominates and the impact it has on the behaviour of young people to celebrate the physical, and in particular, the sexual. Pupils in every focus group agreed that people were becoming more sexualised from a younger age and blamed the influence of “celebrities and social media” citing examples such as the “Kardashians and Geordie Shore” for influencing how girls dress and behave. The year 12 boys described how the girls emulate what they see on these types of programmes and how society actually “has kind of programmed them to want to do that anyway”. The year 12's also described seeing a change from when they were in year 7 and 8 and blamed bad role models both in the media and in society for the changes they had seen since first accessing Facebook. Even on posts about family birthdays there will be photos of “people with none or very little clothing on”. This would inevitably lead to sexual bullying from “keyboard warriors” (Y10) with insults such as “slut” and “slag” not just by boys, but girls as well.

Girls tend to sexualise themselves by putting photos on of really low tops, cleavage and bikinis and then it turns around and they're called all of these different things and when they posted that picture they didn't take into account what they might receive from it (Y12 female).

Every focus group described how the pressure to conform to a sexual ideal to get attention from boys was what was leading girls to post images of themselves barely dressed, or naked on Facebook, Snapchat or Instagram.

They get their tits out and let everyone see it, let the world see it.

Yeah, it's literally mostly the girls that do that (Y10 males).

Even when a girl regrets her decision to post the image and deletes it, the pupils are aware that it will probably have been shared by then and that someone will still have it. Pupils described how ever present the culture of sexualisation is.

You can see it from any sort of age, just on the telly, even if you don't have a phone or anything like that and it's everywhere around you. You can't turn it off.

I don't think we can stop those changes. I don't think we can (Y12 males).

The above statement was quite telling in that by year 12 pupils were not only more aware of external influences on their lives, but also aware that they are unable to change the situation. This is the "trap" C. Wright Mills referred to in "The Sociological Imagination" (2011) where everyday life only occurs within the restraints of a wider society. Although it is widely recognised that the sexualised society in which we live is placing children in harm's way, the revenue gained from their buying power through spending money to keep up with the latest phone, clothing trend, or lifestyle is valued over their moral development and rights to a childhood (Bakan 2011). Children have always looked up to their elders and wished they were older. This is not a new concept. However, a society where the importance is placed on being physically attractive attracts a powerful beauty industry waiting to cash in on the insecurities of those people who are made to feel "not perfect"

With easy online access and the availability of social media, young people become their own marketing, constantly striving to take the perfect "selfie" and advertise themselves as the perfect physical package. The following year 10 pupil comment exemplifies the extent to which they judge each other based on physical appearance.

Say you see a really bad photo of someone and you're like WHAT IS THAT? You like think differently of them then.

The culture of sexualisation has a major influence on peer pressure which in turn affects the behaviours and choices of young people. Year 10 boys admitted they would only date a girl if she was attractive due to the fear of being mocked by friends if she wasn't.

We don't really care about personality. Say a girl was like really nice, but if they're ugly...

You wouldn't go there.

Or of their body's not really that nice you'd stop speaking to her.

They all shared this view despite agreeing it was a very superficial determinant and that they would not dare admit it to the girls.

You don't like feeling like that, but then say you get with a girl that's not as good looking or anything you get a lot of people... taking the mick out of you and that. It's not worth it.

However, it became apparent that this harsh view towards women was also due to the huge peer pressure boys are under generally to conform to the group norms, to the extent that the year 10 boys said they would only listen to music their friends liked and buy the same clothes as their friends to avoid being ridiculed for being different. The pressure of being around each other 7 hours a day at school contributed to the pressure to conform.

Mates' opinions are like a lot of what we get up to: what you wear and what you buy and that sort of stuff. I'd rather listen to like what my mates think as well than just my own back (Y10 male).

All pupils, regardless of age or gender reported feeling under pressure to conform and be the same as everyone else. The year 10 girls talked about "body goals", in other words, aspiring to "being pretty and skinny". In the same way that the media encourages girls to strive for physical perfection, it sends the message to the boys that this is what they are entitled to in a girl which leads to dissatisfaction if the girl falls short of his expectations.

Say you were in a relationship and then their body is not like what you thought it was going to be and then the boy like might be annoyed (Y10 male).

The ability to use social media to market the perfect version of yourself also affects the relationships between young people as often the persona created online often doesn't match reality.

I think they both like to big up and talk up what they are and like when you meet them it's a completely different person underneath (Y10 male).

The driving force for doing this was put down to the immense pressure both boys and girls felt not just to impress the opposite sex but their friendship groups as well.

Technology as a Facilitator in Abuse

All focus groups said it was easier to make comments about someone using social media, and common to see comments on there that wouldn't be said to someone's face as you can hide behind a screen to say it. For them, by using social media instead of face to face interactions, unacceptable behaviour becomes acceptable.

You're obviously not going to go up to a girl in person and say show us your tits.

You're not going to go up to a girl and call her a "slag" or something here because everyone will know what you've said, but on social media it's so much easier just to call them it, because you don't think about it (Y10 males).

One of the focus groups questioned whether posting comments like that on social media was actually wrong. The words used indicate the view that although it's not nice to post comments like that on social media, it is not illegal and therefore acceptable.

It's not illegal to say it on there really is it? Obviously it's not like good, but it's not an offence (Y10 male).

Conclusion

Although pupils felt they learned best from experience, they also felt that it could be “a horrible way” to learn (Y12 male). The pupils all wanted to have more discussions around Relationships and Sex in school including lessons on consent, pleasure, healthy relationships, and pornography. They also wanted more information on the consequences of sexting as they believed that most young people their age were not really aware of the consequences of sending a “nude” otherwise they wouldn’t send them. “They don’t think that what they’re doing is that serious” (Y12 female). Most pupils had never been taught about the legal aspects of sending indecent images under the age of 18 which corroborates the view that most young people don’t know they are committing an offence (Fixers 2016).

I didn’t even know there were any laws (Y10 male).

Only one pupil, who incidentally had attended the RSE workshop led by Brook knew that sending or sharing an image of a person under 18 was a criminal offence.

It’s child pornography, you should never do it (Y10 male).

Pupils had clear ideas about the topics they wanted to cover in Relationships and Sex Education in schools which are consistent across existing studies (Girlguiding 2015; Fixers 2016). They want to have discussions (Fixers 2016) “on an emotional level, like relationships, not just as in the sexual stuff” (Y12 male) rather than just being presented with the material. For example, how to treat a partner with respect in a relationship, “relationship etiquette” (Y12 male), consent “not forcing them in any way” (Y10 male) and “what they like” (Y10 male), in other words pleasure. These topics extend beyond the biology of reproduction and situate sex within the framework of a relationship.

The pressures facing young people living in a sexualised society are central to our understanding of why they are sharing self-generated indecent images of themselves and the harms this exposes them to. It is not surprising that young people are copying the sexual behaviour of adults who they see using dating sites such as Tinder, where a prospective date can be dismissed by the swipe of a screen based on a snap decision about how attractive they are. The driving force for sexting and posting “nudes” online appears to be the sexualised society in which young people are growing up. Although young people argue that adults do not understand the pressures they face, there is limited research using the voice of young people to describe these pressures first-hand. This research aimed to provide young people with a chance to discuss issues like sexual harassment and sexting and also to evaluate whether their need for guidance and support in these areas was being met through their current RSE provision.

The key findings from the research were:

- Physical sexual harassment was not common in either school.
- Sexual harassment through sexual comments and name-calling, or sexual bullying in schools was commonplace, and also occurs online outside of school.
- Although boys do make sexual comments and call girls “sluts” or “slags”, it is more common for girls to use these words against each other, especially online.
- Sexting and image sharing is reported as less of an issue than posting “nudes” on social media.

- Girls posting images of themselves on social media wearing little or no clothes is an increasing phenomenon leading to sexual name-calling and abuse from peers of both genders.
- Pressure from the media and society in general were a driving force to sexual harassment and online activity, through influencing peer sexual behaviours.
- Young people are still not clear what constitutes consent.
- The majority of pupils were unsure of the legislation regarding sexting

The findings corroborate key research in the area (Women and Equalities Committee 2016; EVAW 2016; Ringrose et al, 2012; Phippen 2012) that despite young people calling for effective Relationships and Sex Education, schools are still failing to provide it. Without lessons in schools to help young people learn about healthy relationships they will be unable to identify sexual violence in a relationship, for example, issues of consent. The study also found evidence that where one-off workshops on RSE had taken place, the pupils considered the information learnt in these and did use it to inform their future decisions and opinions. Therefore, what little RSE education had been provided did actually have an impact. While there has been a recent announcement by the UK Government that RSE will become a compulsory subject in schools, what will be covered, and HOW it will be covered, is still not defined. Without effective national coordination, we fear that the experiences of the young people presented in this research will continue.

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