Youth-Produced Sexual Images: A Victim-Centred Consensus Approach

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“Sexting” has been defined as the “self-production of sexual images” and the “creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images through mobile phones and/or the Internet”. Sexting is a form of self-generated sexually explicit content, and “the practice is remarkably varied in terms of context, meaning and intention”.
...there are also many forms of “unwanted sexting”. This refers to the non-consensual aspects of the activity, such as sharing or receiving unwanted sexually explicit photos, videos, or messages, for instance by known or unknown persons trying to make contact, put pressure on, or groom the child. Sexting can also be a form of sexual bullying, where a child is pressured to send a picture to a boyfriend/girlfriend/peer, who then distributes it to a peer network without their consent.
Typology of Sexting

• Based on 550 law enforcement cases, of two categories: ‘Aggravated’ and ‘Experimental’
• Aggravated involved criminal or abusive elements.
• Experimental incidents involved ‘romantic’ contexts or were acts of attention seeking.
  – Wolak & Finkelhor (2011)
Aggravated Sexting

Aggravated incidents involved additional criminal or abusive elements beyond the creation, sending or possession of youth-produced sexual images. These additional elements included:

- 1) **adults soliciting sexual images from minors**, other instances of minors sending images to adults, or other illegal adult involvement; or

- 2) **criminal or abusive behavior such as sexual abuse, extortion, deception or threats**; malicious conduct arising from interpersonal conflicts; or creation or sending of images without the knowledge or against the will of minors who were pictured.
Experimental Sexting

• Youth took pictures of themselves to send to established boy- or girlfriends, to create romantic interest in other youth, or for attention-seeking...

• No evidence that this behavior is normative, but appears to grow out of typical adolescent impulses to flirt, find romantic partners, experiment with sex and get attention from peers.
Challenges

• Powell & Henry (2014) suggest a need for more ‘nuanced understandings of sexting’ to distinguish between the ‘consensual and non-consensual creation and distribution of sexual images’ and to more usefully inform legal, policy and education resources.

• Whilst sexting can be a means of flirting or enhancing a sexual relationship, it can highlight potential vulnerabilities to victimisation or to participation in risky sexual practices (Cooper et al., 2016).
Online self-taken images

We examined 350 cases of children under 18 who had been identified in the UK from April 2006 to June 2013, as appearing in online sexual images which were, or could be, illegal under UK law.

There was a year-on-year increase in the number of children identified, from 2006 to 2013.

69.7% of cases were female.

• The gender of the children varied over the years - almost 2/3 were female (63.2%) in 2013 (boys were in the majority).

• Ethnicity: 93.3% were White. The next largest group was Asian at 3.3%.

• 44.3% (n = 304) were self-taken images, of which 34.4% (n = 236) of the total were taken in the context of a coercive relationship and 9.9% (n = 98) in a non-coercive relationship.

• Family members (26.1%, n = 179) constituted the next largest category of image producers.

Self-taken images in a coercive relationship

87% female
13% male

Self-taken images in a non-coercive relationship

49% female
51% male

Who took the photo and what was the likely age of the child?

The SPIRTO project aims to understand the different contexts behind the creation of self-taken sexual images and the consequences for the young people involved.

The full report will be available at: www.spirto.health.ed.ac.uk
“The connection is clear. For those who send messages with sexual contents – whether pictures or texts – the occurrence of **digital violence** is five times as high as for others. The occurrence of **physical violence** is four times as high, **psychological violence** is 3.5 times as high, and the occurrence of **sexual violence** is 2.5 times as high”.

Hellevik & Øverlien (2016)
Other Risks

Victims of coercive and non-coercive sexual images:

• Feelings of embarrassment
• Risk of bullying by peers
• In the UK, young people under the age of 18 producing and sharing of sexual images is illegal
• Criminalisation of young people
Management of Sexual Imagery


• Police Action in Response to Youth-Produced Sexual Imagery (‘Sexting’) (2016) by College of Policing in England and Wales provides guidelines to support law enforcement professionals to respond proportionately to reports of children possessing, sharing or generating indecent images of themselves or others.
Supporting Young People when Images have been Shared without their Consent
Voices of Young People

• Importance of a child-focused approach, which shows sensitivity to the social, cultural and personal needs of the child.

• Identify voices of young people in regards to questions of inequality and inclusion.

• Hear voice of young people who are often spoken for by parent or child protection agencies.

• Focus on protection rather than restriction and judgment by parents, teachers and policy makers.
Consensus-Seeking Study

Aimed to include young people in a meaningful way, by:

• Identifying **the opinions and views of young people as ‘experts’** on what constitutes an appropriate response when dealing with what starts out as non-coercive self-produced image-taking, but where images are subsequently shared without consent.

• Examining **indicators of distress and ways to facilitate disclosure** when the sharing of images causes anxiety or is associated with bullying, harassment or victimisation.

• Develop evidence-based guidelines for good practice in collaboration with work by the police.
Consensus-Seeking Study

- Anonymous, structured, controlled and iterative.
- Vignette-based questionnaire of a series of 8 questions describing an escalating sexting scenario:
  1. Identification of problems
  2. Facilitation of disclosure
  3. Involvement with parents and professionals
  4. Involvement of other third parties associated with bullying, harassment or victimisation
Vignettes

12. Your friend Shanice is seeing a new boyfriend. He’s asked her to send him some topless pictures from her mobile and she agreed. Shanice believes that her boyfriend has shown the picture to his friends at school, but she is not sure whether she is just being “paranoid”. She is asking you for your advice. What warning signs would you tell Shanice to look out for, which could mean that there is a problem?

14. Shanice told her mother that she has sent topless images to her boyfriend, which he has probably shared with his friends. Her mother asks her what she can do to help without making it more embarrassing and difficult for Shanice. What would you suggest Shanice should say to her mother?

16. Shanice noticed that a group of girls were whispering and starring at her during break-time. Shanice believes that others know about the pictures. Her concerns are confirmed when her best friend Lesley mentions that “everybody knows”. What advice would you give to Shanice to deal with the situation?

17. Because Shanice's problem turned out to be serious, the police got involved. The police officers clearly want to help Shanice. How do you think Shanice would like the situation to be dealt with? How do you think Shanice would feel at this time?
Participants

• Advertisements on online platforms, email bulletins and social media.
• Pupils at high school.
• Initially, 124 participants all of whom had self-identified as taking and sharing youth-produced sexual images.
• 45 provided full survey responses
  – 10 male, 33 female (2 unknown), aged 16-19.
• The final survey completed by 23 (51.11%) individuals.
Emerging Themes

1. What people did or said that suggests nude or semi-nude images were shared without permission
2. What the boyfriend might do or say that suggests ‘selfies’ were shared without permission
3. First steps to seeking help
4. Parent or carer doing and saying things that are supportive
5. Dealing with others
6. Professionals doing and saying things that may be supportive
7. Teachers doing and saying things that may be supportive
8. Police doing and saying things that may be supportive
1) Most participants saw the following to be important signs that selfies were shared without permission:
   ... spread rumours and gossip
   ... post insulting messages or her nude images on social media

2) Participants identified what the boyfriend might do or say that suggests selfies had been shared:
   ... avoids letting her see or use his mobile phone
   ... does not give a clear answer when asked about nude photos

3) Important first steps to seeking help by the young person included:
   ... speaks to police to report that photos were shared without permission
   ... speaks to a person they trust (a friend, youth worker) to seek help

4) Parents or carers were seen to be supportive if they:
   ... supports the young person (being reassuring and respecting privacy) and offers to resolve the problem together
   ... talks to others about the situation with the young person’s permission
5) The young person dealing with others in ways that might reduce and minimize the stressful effects of bullying and harassment included:
... does not isolate herself from others
... reports and speaks about others’ disrespectful behaviour to a trusted person (family, teacher or police)

6) What all professionals could do and say to help included:
... informs about procedures, important information and explains what is going to happen next
... tries to understand and listens to the young person, and is aware of the social context of photo sharing

7) What teachers could say or do to help included:
... speaks with boyfriend and his parents to discuss the seriousness of the situation
... does not draw attention to individual affected through preferential treatment

8) What police could say or do to help included:
... reassures that the matter is dealt with appropriately and safely
... deals with the situation appropriately, fast and with little repercussion
Limitations

• A larger data set could have produced slightly different results.
• Lack of focus on LGBT or BME.
• Not possible to differentiate between participants who have direct or indirect experiences of sexting, from those who do not have such experiences.
• Of those who may have experience, it was not possible to infer who had experience of their own images being shared non-consensually, and of these cases having escalated to law enforcement.
Key Messages

- To avoid unnecessarily criminalising children and young people.
- Only pursue a criminal justice response when aggravating circumstances require it.
- To inform appropriate victim-centred management of cases where images have been shared without permission.
- To generate new research to ensure that responses are evidence driven informed by needs and social context of a wide demography, e.g., LGBT and BME.
- To focus more on a prevention and education perspective to ensure the risks are understood and places of support are highlighted.