Resume of Pilot Study ‘Teen Views on Sexting and its Interventions’

Birmingham City University and Warwick University

1. Introduction

1.1 As researchers from West Midlands’ universities with an interest in the intersection between public health, education, technology and social media we welcome this timely and expedient investigation into sexual coercion in schools. In the past year, we have undertaken qualitative research with male and female students (aged 13-15) and their views of sexting. They were chosen as this age cohort is most likely to be involved in sexting. Current literature in the area gives precedence to adult discourses over the voices those most involved in, and affected by, the phenomenon. With seed funding from the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences at Birmingham City University, we sought to find out young peoples’ views on sexting, current responses and interventions, and what kinds of interventions and supports they would like. As sexting can take the form of harassment, our findings our especially relevant to this parliamentary enquiry.

2. Executive Summary

2.1 A review of the extant literature reveals that the discourses around sexting are adult orientated and marginalise the voice of children and young people. This is especially evident given the lack of qualitative research with young people and their experiences of sexting.

2.2 Much of the evidence in the literature reveals that the discussion and discourse around sexting are conflicting and contentious. For example, current legislation around child pornography is sometimes used to prosecute young people who ‘sext,’ thus criminalising those the law is meant to protect.

2.3 This feeds into general hysteria around sexting, with little understanding of the various forms sexting can take: from healthy, sexual exploration to more harmful practices involving peer-pressure, harassment and bullying.

2.4 Changes to social media usage mean that young people are using a wider array and different platforms depending on their functionality and accessibility.

2.5 Current restrictions put in place by social media platforms are inadequate and easy to work around.

2.6 Social media platform providers should take greater responsibility for the way in which their media is employed and used. The defence that they only provide the tool and not the content is effectively baseless given their position in the current media ecology.

2.7 While both girls and boys can be ‘victims of sexting’ when it is used in a vindictive manner, girls are more likely to be adversely affected and targeted for harassment.

2.8 Not all sexting is demeaning or damaging to young people.
2.9 Face-to-face interaction, communication, between young people and those that care for them, educate them and are responsible for them is essential, particularly when so much communication is digitally mediated.

2.10 The requirement for mandatory sexual education focusing not just on biology, but also on issues related to positive relationship and communication, gender and power, and body image is manifest in the literature and our subsequent research.

3. Identified Issues

3.1 Sexting practices are shaped by gender, age, ethnicity and religion. This report focuses on the first two, as this small scale research was undertaken in a West Midlands School which was largely white in its demographic. It is hoped that further funding will allow the research team to address issues around ethnicity and religion.

3.2 For under-18s, the choice of whether to become involved in sexting is intensely divisive. Role models advocate sexting as a means of gaining social capital. However, the sharing of sexually explicit images, text or photos between and/or by under-18s is illegal. This creates a greater problem than it solves as the law criminalises the very people that it seeks to protect. To compound this, responses from individuals around children and young people (parents, teachers, youth workers, police) is uneven and inconsistent. This has fed into the media to become part of a wider moral panic and generates confusing messages: for over-18s, sexting is seen as part of the flirting and courtship process. For under-18s it is criminalising with the potential to limit further life-chances. Furthermore, there is evidence that sexting is part of a narrative of sexual experimentation, which, in some cases can result in exploitation and victimisation. For individuals who do not have the emotional robustness to deal with the consequences, this can cause mental and emotional distress, which in extreme circumstances can be tragic.

4. Methods

4.1 To ensure that the young people were as comfortable as possible, the researchers met with the young people in school in small friendship groups (3-4 participants). These groups were matched to the gender of the researcher e.g. a male researcher with a male cohort. There were three separate meetings between the researchers and the participants, with the final meeting bringing all of the groups together to find the best solutions. This research was overseen by the Faculty Academic Ethics Committee in the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences at Birmingham City University.

5. Key Findings

- Relationships between young people can be highly mediated, but do not appear to be more or less insecure than in previous generations.
- Young people saw access to information about sexting as a ‘rights’ issue.
- Many young people did not know ‘sexting’ under the age of 18 was a criminal offence.
- Being ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’ are terms used for serious relationships and may not apply to this younger cohort (13-15).
- Terms such as ‘sexting’ tend to be reserved for adult discourse.
• ‘Nudes’ appears to be a more commonly used term.
• Platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and What’s App appear to be more commonly used than traditional social media (Facebook, Twitter).
• Social media platforms should take more responsibility for the storing and transmission of images
• Faking of identity and age on social media is normal, if not normed behaviour.
• Girls perceive themselves as victims of sexting.
• Girls do not think there are any negative connotations to boys sexting: it is part of being a young male.
• Boys appear to think that girls might sext as they are more confident in their bodies
• Adults are seen as being less likely to sext as they are more able to have physical sexual relationships
• Sexting is seen as being a replacement for the physical sexual relationships
• Some responses from authorities are seen as over-reactions e.g. with the involvement of police
• Both girls and boys are unsure of when and at what point something is public and private
• Girls and boys do think that schools can be too close to the problem
• Participants are unsure of who to turn to when things go wrong
• Participants believe parents should monitor and oversee online communication
• Participants believe parents have little knowledge or control over online communication
• Face-to-face interaction remains vitally important in young peoples’ social lives.
• Taking a blanket approach of ‘no sexting’ is unworkable and impractical
• Schools should take responsibility for educating parents.
• Distribution of images in the form of ‘revenge porn’ is too easily achieved and damaging to individuals, families and friendship groups compounded by emotional, mental and educational impact.
• Apps such as those developed by CEOP are not seen as helpful and are not likely to be accessed
• Assemblies are not the place to be lectured to by police or teachers about how wrong sexting is.
• PSHME with trusted staff in school and with peers are the best forums for discussing sexting

6. Evaluation

6.1 As with sexting itself, there are clearly contradictions in the participants’ responses. It is clear from wider research that girls are often seen as the victims of this practice, but as recent incidences have shown at all-girls schools (e.g. in Doncaster and South Yorkshire), girls can also perpetrate the problem, which generates complex problems for those who work with children.

6.2 Similarly, whilst pupils were not in favour of over-reaching school involvement, they still seemed to believe that the school should take ultimate responsibility for informing parents of any problems relating to sexting.
6.3 There appears to be an ‘arms race’ in technology: where young people will have an app that ‘hides’ the home screen, parents/carers will install tracking devices which can monitor where and what a young person is doing on their phone, suggesting that not all parents are as technologically averse as perceived.

6.4 With face-to-face interaction valued by young people, PSHME classes with teachers or youth workers who are knowledgeable and trusted is vital to establishing communication.

6.5 Taking a draconian and/or disciplinary approach may not work in the first instance, although the option should always be there, being sent to document wrongful behaviour where others can see and influence the complainant is not useful.

7 Possible Interventions

7.1 A forum for discussion, e.g. in PSHME classes, was universally welcomed

7.2 The possibility to instruct and inform parents, carers and teachers in a supportive environment, possibly in school.

7.3 The possibility to present their position and knowledge to education professionals (the young people are to present to teachers and teacher trainers on July 11th at Birmingham City University).

7.4 That parents/carers have the opportunity and the permission to have greater oversight, and where necessary a greater propensity for intervention into online practices and habits.

7.5 The possibility for the young people to generate and drive genuine policy change in the area, by consulting and advising with others in the decision-making process.

7.6 That boundaries remain important, but should not be draconian. A ‘three strikes’ rule should apply based on: Warning, Sanction and Discipline. This is contingent on the severity of the act, but would give a workable framework where the young people knew where they stood.

7.7 That there would be an opportunity for peer-to-peer support, where an individual could anonymously contact a number (e.g. text/What’s App) and receive support from a knowledgeable adult, or supervised peer.

8 Recommendations

8.1 Universal and mandatory sex education, which includes issues related to positive relationship and communication, gender and power, and body image is urgently needed.

8.2 Young people, in spite of their connected lives, still value face-to-face interaction with their peers, parents, carers and teachers. This is a positive sign and such communication should be promoted.

9 Future Scope
9.1 This research has already generated a full time PhD position who is researching relationships and digital media. Her research is at any early stage, but she hopes to look at religious, class and gender differences in co-ed, single sex and religious schools across the West Midlands region.

9.2 The research team are currently scaling up their work for full UK Research Council funding and recognition. It will include a quantitative element and will be a large scale study with the aim of driving policy across the sector in this conflicted, contradictory but urgent and vital part of sexual coercion.

9.3 It is envisaged that the teachers and pupils of the school be on the steering group committee for this, meaning young people have influence over the issues that affect them on an everyday, personal and potentially problematic level.

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About Birmingham City University and Warwick University

Birmingham City University (BCU) is a large metropolitan university with 23500 students from over countries. As the university for Birmingham, BCU prioritises work which transforms the lives and well-being of residents in and around the West Midlands. This ultimately contributes £260 million to the local economy.

Warwick University is a research intensive university based on a 290 hectare campus on the outskirts of Coventry. In the top-100 of all global published league tables, Warwick University seeks to make a difference in the globalised society, through rigorous research and excellent teaching.

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