

'Sexually' Active: Teens, 'Sexting' and Gendered Double Standards in the Digital Age

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Abstract : Introduction: Digital mobile technologies afford Generation M a number of opportunities in terms of communication, creativity and connectivity in their social interactions. Yet these young people's use of such technologies is often the source of moral panic with accordant social anxiety especially prevalent in media representations of teen 'sexting,' or the sending of sexually explicit images via smartphones. Thus far, most responses to youth sexting have largely been ineffective or unjust with adult authorities sometimes blaming victims of non-consensual sexting, using child pornography laws to paradoxically criminalise those they are designed to protect, and/or advising teenagers to simply abstain from the practice. Prevention strategies are further skewed, with sex education initiatives often targeted at girls, implying that they shoulder the responsibility of minimising the risks associated with sexting (e.g. revenge porn and sexual predation). Purpose of Study: Despite increasing public interest and concern about 'teen sexting,' there remains a dearth of research with young people regarding their experiences of navigating sex and relationships in the current digital media landscape. Furthermore, young people's views on sexting are rarely solicited in the policy and educational strategies aimed at them. To address this research-policy-education gap, an interdisciplinary team of four researchers (from anthropology, media, sociology and education) have undertaken a peer-to-peer research project to co-create a sexual health intervention. Methods: In the winter of 2015-2016, the research team conducted serial group interviews with four cohorts of students (aged 13 to 15) from a secondary school in the West Midlands, UK. To facilitate open dialogue, girls and boys were interviewed separately, and each group consisted of no more than four pupils. The team employed a range of participatory techniques to elicit young people's views on sexting, its consequences, and its interventions. A final focus group session was conducted with all 14 male and female participants to explore developing a peer-to-peer 'safe sexting' education intervention. Findings: This presentation will highlight the ongoing, 'old school' sexual double standards at work within this new digital frontier. In the sharing of 'nudes' (teens' preferred term to 'sexting') via social media apps (e.g. Snapchat and WhatsApp), girls felt sharing images was inherently risky and feared being blamed and 'slut-shamed.' In contrast, boys were seen to gain in social status if they accumulated nudes of female peers. Further, if boys had nudes of themselves shared without consent, they felt they were expected to simply 'tough it out.' The presentation will also explore what forms of supports teens desire to help them in their day-to-day navigation of these digitally mediated, heteronormative performances of teen femininity and masculinity expected of them. Conclusion: This is the first research project, within UK, conducted with rather than about teens and the phenomenon of sexting. It marks a timely and important contribution to the nascent, but growing body of knowledge on gender, sexual politics and the digital mobility of sexual images created by and circulated amongst young people.

Keywords : teens, sexting, gender, sexual politics

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