



Selected Papers of #AoIR2020:  
The 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Virtual Event / 27-31 October 2020

# "MAY THE SHAME BE WITH YOU. ALWAYS." MITIGATING YOUNG FINNS' INTIMATE EXCHANGES ONLINE

Sanna Spišák  
Media Studies, University of Turku, Finland

## Introduction

Cultural anxiety about the impact of young people's intimate exchanges online has increased over the past 15 years. Sexual media and 'digital intimacies' (Scott et al. 2020) are routinely understood to be a source of harm and adverse outcomes (Tsaliki 2016; Spišák 2019). This paper engages with Finland's National Bureau of Investigation's *Sextortion* video campaign, the Police of Finland's public announcements on 'teen sexting' between 2017–2019 and young Finns responses to such educational efforts by using data from *Rethinking Young Finns' Practises of Mediated Intimate Exchanges* study that is a part of a more significant research project on intimacy in data-driven culture in Finland. The University of Turku ethics board has approved the research design and the uses of all the research datasets.

My research interest lies with some of the disconnections between current educational and policy discourses addressing young people's participation in digital cultures, and the lived experiences of young Finns. I am interested in developing a more rights-based approach to digital intimacies, respectful of the lived experience of young people. Therefore I direct my attention to *the productive possibilities of the practices of digital intimacies* in the everyday lives of young Finns.

I call for a focus on the political, ethical and material implications of such educational efforts and policy responses that premises on digital abstinence to critically reflect on the question of young people's (sexual) rights in digital environments. By suggesting that we should critically address the current educational efforts that are leaning towards digital abstinence, I am not saying that cultures of mediated intimacies are devoid of problematic situations. Instead, I contend that the "single story" of media determinism of digital intimacies ignores the complexity of media practices in its monolithic construction of the problem and outcome. A sole focus on harm and adverse implications of digital

Suggested Citation (APA): Spišák, S. (2020, October). "May The Shame Be With You. Always." *Mitigating Young People's Intimate Exchanges Online*. Paper presented at AoIR 2020: The 21<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Virtual Event: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

intimacies limit understanding and opportunities for a holistic take on digital platforms' relevance in young people's lives.

### **Cultural context**

Due to an Internet-intensive lifestyle, smartphone use among young Finns is exceedingly ordinary, and ubiquitous connectivity is already mundane for children in their early school years. Globally favoured social media platforms and digital publics, in general, facilitate active participation in digital intimacies. Practises such as flirting, dating, communicating and searching for information and advice about relationships and sex, and sharing nude or semi-nude selfies have stirred intense anxiety about the wellbeing of the young among caretakers, educators, policymakers and public debaters.

Public discussion of young Finns' engagement with digital intimacies have primarily focused on notions of risk and harm (Nielsen, Paasonen & Spišák 2015; Spišák 2019). Finland's National Bureau of Investigation and the Finnish Police have been particularly vocal about young people's participation in digital intimacies. For example, in 2017, the National Bureau of Investigation launched a *Sextortion* video campaign with an accompanying hashtag #SayNO. The main idea of the 10-minute long video available on YouTube is to "exercise self-control" and to "not uncover yourself". Similarly, the Police of Finland has published several public announcements, warning young Finns and their caretakers of the 'inherent risks' of sharing intimate selfies.

### **Theoretical context**

With interest in rethinking and working to dismantle deficit orientations relating to digital intimacies, I am framing my research project around questions of ethics and learning rather than risk and harm. Building research around an ethical framework that involves imagining rights and responsibilities within the intimate is an effective means of redirecting the debate towards alternative approaches on digital intimacies respectful of multiple sites and forms of agency and learning.

To contextualise the current policy responses to young people's participation of cultures of mediated intimacy, I draw on Egan and Hawke's (2010) work on the social construction of sexual "problems". To reflect on the question of young people's sexual rights in digital environments, I consider young people's social imaginary (Ricoeur 1994) of sexual rights and social media practices. Furthermore, I utilise Albury's (2017) proposals of ethical strategies that move away from gendered pedagogies of shame concerning both individual and collective expressions of sexual rights in the digital culture.

I aim to gain a 'thick' and multifaceted understanding of the phenomena. I suggest similarly to Attwood et al. (2017) that we should understand practices of digital intimacies as essential and meaningful forms of digital social capital. By this, I mean

that participating in cultures of digital intimacy potentially advances necessary emotional knowledge, intimacy skills and social benefits as part of lifespan development.

## Results and conclusion

By asking from a focus-group of young Finns aged 15–19-years-old how they and their peers experience digital intimacy and their perceptions of the benefits, possible outcomes, mitigations and solutions, I can draw a more ethical yet a complex picture of young people's engagement with digital intimacies. Young Finns critical responses to 'the official messages', such as "May the shame be with you. Always.", illuminate how they interpret educational and policy activities. Instead of solely relying on the official messages on the potential ill impact of digital intimacies, young people innovate different strategies to safeguard themselves online while exercising their right for (sexual) self-expression.

We need to consider the ways how young people contend with new digital dynamics, resulting in new tactics designed to evade or manage online visibility, privacy or surveillance (Stoilova, Nandagiri & Livingstone 2019). Additionally, I suggest that we should make defending young people's sexual rights – not just a right to protection from coercion and violence but also a right to sexual self-representation, sexual expression and a right to experience sexual pleasure – a civic duty and a collective action where young people's voices are being recognised and respected.

## References

Albury K (2017) Just because it's public doesn't mean it's any of your business: Adults' and children's sexual rights in digitally mediated spaces. *New Media & Society* 19(5): 713–725.

Attwood F, Hakim J & Winch A (2017) Mediated intimacies. *Journal of Gender Studies* 26 (3): 249–253.

Egan DR & Hawkes G (2010) *Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hasinoff A (2015) *Sexting Panic: Rethinking Criminalization, Privacy, and Consent*. University of Illinois Press.

Nielsen S, Paasonen S & Spišák S (2015) "Pervy Role-play and Such": Girls' Experiences of Sexual Messaging Online. *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning* 15 (5): 472–485.

Ricoeur P (2016) Imagination in Discourse and in Action. In Robinson G & Rundell JF (eds.) *Rethinking imagination*, pp. 118-135. London: Routledge.

Scott RH, Smith C, Formby E, Hadley A, Hallgarten L, Hoyle A, Marston C, McKee A and Tourountsis D (2020) What and how: doing good research with young people, digital intimacies, and relationships and sex education. *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*. Published online before print 17.3.2020. DOI: 10.1080/14681811.2020.1732337.

Spišák S (2019) *Porn and Norms – Pornography and normative notions of gender, love and sex in the sexual narratives of Finns on their adolescence experiences*. Turun yliopiston julkaisu – Annales Universitatis Turkuensis -sarja. Ser B – Tom. 498. Humaniora. Turku.

Stoilova M, Nandagiri R & Livingstone S (2019) Children's understanding of personal data and privacy online – a systematic evidence mapping, *Information, Communication & Society*, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2019.1657164

Tsaliki L (2016) *Children and the Politics of Sexuality. The Sexualization of Children Debate Revisited*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.