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RECLAIMING DIGITAL INTIMACY FOR YOUTH: PILOTING DIGITAL SEXUAL VIOLENCE WORKSHOPS FOR UNDER-18S DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ENGLAND AND IRELAND

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Online sexual abuse and violence have become an urgent global problem for women and girls, and in particular for poor women, women of colour and LGBTQ women (Ging and Siapera, 2019). From the existing research on image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) - often referred to as 'revenge porn' or 'sexting gone wrong' - we know that women and girls are much more likely than men and boys to receive unsolicited sexual content (cyberflashing) to be pressured into sending sexual images (nudes), and to face slut-shaming and victim-blaming if their sexual images are shared non-consensually (Hasinoff 2014; Naezer and van Oosterhout 2021; Ringrose et al. 2022, Andreasen et al. 2022). Online sexual harassment and abuse is an especially urgent issue for young people, for whom digital spaces are key sites of communication, identity formation, self-expression and sexual interaction. The toxic

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dynamics that frequently underpin these complex entanglements thus pose a significant threat to ethical digital intimacy.

According to Foody et al. (2021), half of Irish teenagers have been asked to send sexually explicit pictures of themselves by text, email or on apps such as Snapchat. In this study, around 44% of all the teenagers surveyed said this happened frequently and this included 29.3% of all females sampled and 15.2% of males surveyed. Almost one-third received sexually explicit images that they didn't want and this number was much higher among girls (at 21.9%) than boys (at 7.5%). Meanwhile, a recent study conducted by Ringrose, Regehr and Whitehead (2022) in the UK found that girls aged 11-18 were bombarded with unwanted dick pics on social media platforms like Snapchat to such an extent that this has become not just normalised but even a sign of desirability or popularity among girls. Negotiating the 'ubiquitous dick pic', as they put it, has simply become a daily fact of life.

This situation became substantially more extreme during COVID-19, with rates of online abuse and harassment rising as young people have been forced to spend more and more time online. Since the beginning of the pandemic, in the UK, 25% of girls have experienced at least one form of abuse, bullying, or sexual harassment online (Plan International UK, 2020). In Ireland, a study conducted by Women's Aid found that one in five women aged between 18 and 25 have experienced intimate relationship abuse including emotional, physical and sexual abuse. In this study, half of the young women abused by a partner experiencing online abuse including having intimate images taken and shared without their consent (Women's Aid, One in Five Women Report, 2020).

During this period, usage of particular platforms (e.g. TikTok) dramatically increased. A substantial rise in screen time also impacted young people's experiences and digital intimacies in important ways. This paper reports on the findings of a cross-national study conducted in England and Ireland, which explored pedagogical interventions into the continuum of online and offline sexual violence amongst young people in schools. The respective studies used participatory workshops and focus groups as well as online surveys to explore young people's experiences of and attitudes towards online sexual abuse and harassment. The workshops address 3 types of online sexual harassment and abuse: unsolicited sexual content, image-based sexual abuse (i.e. non-consensual creation or distribution of private sexual images), and sexual coercion, intimidation, and threats. In particular, we are interested here in how different social media platforms are used to perpetuate different types of online abuse based on certain technological affordances. For example, recent research (Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021) shows that Snapchat enables image-based sexual harassment and abuse through its quick adds, shout outs, streaks, score points and lack of identity verification measures. This study also indicates that Instagram facilitates unwanted sexual content through its direct message and group chat features. In this paper, drawing on approximately 500 online surveys and 20 focus groups, we explore in more detail the platform-specific affordances associated with different types of gender-based abuse and image-sharing practices.

Our study concludes that schools are not equipped to deal with the gendered harms that arise from non-consensual image sharing because they lack sufficiently nuanced policies at the intersection of digital literacy, e-safety, and sexual harassment (Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021). Most educational interventions focus on an abstinence model, simply warning young people not to sext because of the legal and reputational risks. Interventions have typically placed both responsibility and shame on girls, locating wrongdoing at the point of consensual sharing rather than when trust is violated (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016). Our intersectional feminist research design provided valuable insights into gender and sexual inequity in contemporary youth cultures. Importantly, this participatory research offered spaces for young people to critique and challenge online gender-based and sexual online. We make a number of concrete recommendations, pointing in particular to urgent paradigm shifts in digital ethics and digital safety initiatives, with a particular focus on platform algorithms, policies and governance. Without a robust digital sexual literacy framework, young people do not have equal rights or access to ethical digital intimacy, and workable solutions must be found at the intersection of platform politics, education, and legislation.

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