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## SEXТУALLY ACTIVE: TEENAGE VIEWS ON SEXTING AND ITS INTERVENTIONS

Alex Christopher Wade  
Birmingham City University

Jerome Turner  
Birmingham City University

Annalise Weckesser  
Birmingham City University

Clara Rübner Jørgensen  
Warwick University

The digital mobile technologies used by Generation M in their social interaction affords a number of opportunities in terms of communication, creativity and connectivity. Yet their use amongst media literate children (8-18) is subject to extensive policy debate and, by extension, moral panic (Roberts et al., 2005). Accordant social anxiety is especially prevalent in sophisticated media practices such as 'sexting', where individuals send sexually explicit content (video/images/text) to one another via mobile technologies. In the UK, legislation is such that under-18s can be criminally prosecuted for sexting due to the involvement of sexually explicit images of children (Judge, 2012), thus placing the law in a paradox as it has the potential to criminalise those it is designed to protect. This position is further skewed in relation to gender by the implied responsibility placed on teenage girls to minimise the risk associated with sexting (revenge porn, sexual predation) in associated educational material (Salter et al., 2013).

The ambiguity regarding legislation and education in the inappropriate use of digital mobile technologies can lead to misrepresentation in news media, where flawed or inconsistent studies are cited, escalating perceived problems around sexting (Lounsbury, 2011). Conflicting viewpoints are commonplace, for example *The Guardian* ran three contradictory pieces concerning sexting in editorial (see Barbieri, 2009; Coslett, 2013; Wiseman, 2012), and while assumptions are made that apps such as 'Snapchat' are used inappropriately, research shows that young people use it for harmless fun (Boyd, 2014). Such confusion is compounded by a lack of distinction between alleged 'aggravated' and actual 'experimental' practice (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011). This leads to a discourse founded on imaginary interpretations of digital danger,

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rather than statements of experience from users of the technologies in question, affirming the absence of knowledge concerning 'the role of online and digital technology in relationship coercion' (Salter et al., 2013, p. 312).

The confusion raised by the imagined and real discourses around sexting provides opportunities and challenges for research and education equal to those found in digital mobile technologies, as they 'provide new modes through which such abuse may be initiated; however, they also provide important new means for education, prevention and intervention'(Salter et al. 2013, p. 312). The programmes which follow from this opportunity have been mixed, both in their execution and reception. The Child Exploitation Online Protection Centre film *Exposed* was criticised for promoting narratives which lead to victim-blaming (Hasinoff, 2013), while not providing prevalence to the technology used to distribute content. Meanwhile, with a focus on the technology, the joint Channel 4 (a UK TV channel) and Childline (a UK charity) initiative 'Zipit' installs an app which obviates and advises around the issues of sexting, garnering a nomination for a Sexual Health Award for its effectiveness.

Such initiatives reveal a real urgency for academic research into sexting, its technologies and practices. A recent study, one of the few pieces of qualitative research undertaken on sexting in the UK, commissioned by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) (Ringrose et al., 2012) investigated sexting within two schools in inner city London. Young people were identified as imagining a greater concern over the approaches of unknown others (traditional notions of 'stranger danger'), while the actual threat appeared from 'peers . . . and friends in their social network . . . which may be motivated by sexual pleasure, but are often coercive, linked to harassment, bullying and even violence' (Ringrose et al., 2012, p. 7). The report concludes with recommendations for future research with stakeholders including schools, parents, Internet Service Providers, teachers and child welfare professionals. However, the study does not provide any recommendations given directly to Children and Young People, thus implying that they are unable to inform decision-making or policymaking around issues which directly impact upon their everyday lives.

This niche between education and research, challenge and opportunity, imaginary and real, combined with a young people-centred approach, provides the starting position for the research project presented in this paper. The paper discusses the background and findings from a pilot research project on sexting undertaken with students (aged 13-14) from a West Midlands school in the UK during Spring 2015. The project explores young people's views on sexting and what they believe other young people should know about it. Reflecting the above considerations, the research does not assume any specific issues around sexting, but rather asks the young people about their perceptions of sexting; the positive and negative connotations of the practice; if and how the technology informs and enables practice; where problems – if any – lie; how they would respond if an image was inadvertently in the public domain and what they would do if they were given the opportunity to provide peer-to-peer and child-to-carer advice on the topic. The data will be collected first via small group interviews with four participants in each (split into groups of girls and boys) to enable a frank discussion on sexting and its perceived consequences. Participatory methods such as the KJ technique (Scupin, 1997) will be used for identifying group opinions and consensus. Following this, another

round of interviews will be held to identify suitable methods of peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, aimed at developing an educational tool for peers, educational staff and child welfare professionals, thereby framing the work as co-creative and providing those that practice sexting with a forum to safely discuss practices with others.

The researchers attached to the project have backgrounds in media studies, medical anthropology, education and sociology. The work also seeks to address some of the recognised problems (Lounsbury, 2011) with current research on sexting, including the tendency to sample too widely (11-18 years); the lack of consideration of (particularly girls') consensual sexting as a form of media production so that the opportunities of this form of social media may be explored and not just risks (Hasinoff, 2012), and the lack of attention to ethnicity and socio-economic status in the creation of context for the practice of sexting (Phippen, 2009). Ultimately, the project will seek to broaden debates around the validity of current advice to young people in the area of sexting and related sexual health and media usage considerations.

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