

Sexting among Young People: Towards a Gender Sensitive Approach

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Abstract

Drawing on key theoretical debates on childhood and youth sexuality in tandem with primary data, the article builds upon and advances existing narratives regarding the tensions surrounding gender, pressure and sexting behaviours among young people. Ultimately, the article illustrates a number of gendered pressures which exist when young people engage in sexting, including a prevailing culture of sexism and exposure to a very prevalent sexual double standard. The range and diversity of gendered pressures present thus raises important questions regarding "appropriate" interventions. Consequently, the author argues for a gender sensitive approach at both policy and practice level. In doing so, the article provides new insights on the complexity of gender roles and thus presents a more nuanced understanding of sexting among young people than previous narratives have suggested.

Keywords

young people – sexting – gender roles – gendered harms – sexual agency – gender sensitive education

1 Introduction

“Sexting” is a term coined by adults to describe the production and dissemination of youth sexual messages and images.¹ Over the past few years especially, “sexting” among young people has garnered significant attention beyond academia to include debates within social policy more generally, including the nature, extent and impact of the behaviour (Lee and Crofts, 2015; McAlinden, 2018). A significant concern is the potentially severe legal ramifications for those under 18. While “sexting” is not a codified offence *per se*, the behaviour may fall under the criminal offence of ‘indecent photographs of children.’² Young people who “sext” can therefore end up with a criminal record and their name on “the sex offender register.” Yet, the law is reactive, flawed and fails to consider the complexity of sexting practices (Shariff, 2015).

The potential legal ramifications of sexting, in tandem with key tensions surrounding contemporary debates on childhood, youth sexuality, agency and gender, has resulted in sexting among young people featuring as a key concern within contemporary debates on child protection and welfare (Gillespie, 2013, 2018; Shariff, 2015). Given the limitations of the law, a core task of this article is to look beyond a purely legal analysis of sexting to incorporate some of the more intricate dimensions of the sexual behaviour. Reflecting on the author’s empirical findings, this article will focus on unpacking the relationship between sexting, gender and socio-cultural pressures. Moreover, how this relationship in turn shapes and perpetuates social and cultural norms around sexual identities and gender roles will be examined.

Although literature in this area is growing, there are inconsistencies in what motivates young people to participate in sexting. Studies have revealed a diverse range of motivations including for pleasure, to flirt, to express sexual desire (Phippen, 2012; Lippman and Campbell, 2014; Lee and Crofts, 2015; Van Ouytsel *et al.*, 2017); peer pressure, for revenge or blackmail (Ringrose *et al.*, 2013; Ashurst and McAlinden, 2015; Englander, 2015); for attention, “fun” or “as a joke” (Mitchell *et al.*, 2012: 17) and, as a symbol of trust within a relationship or to make their partner happy (Albury and Crawford, 2012). The wide range of

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- 1 Although the primary research illustrated that young people do not use the term “sexting” and are more explicit in their terminology, e.g. “nudes” or “dick pics”; sexting is a generic term used by academics and practitioners. For this reason, I will refer to sexting throughout the article.
 - 2 The criminal offence is codified under s. 1 of the Protection of Children Act 1978 (as amended by s. 45 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003) in England and Wales. In Northern Ireland, the offence is codified under section 3 of The Protection of Children (NI) Order 1978 (as amended by section 42 of The Sexual Offences (NI) Order 2008). All legislative amendments raised the age from 16 to 18 years under the definition of “children”.

motivations reinforces the complexity of the sexual behaviour and the variety of pressures young people are exposed to.

Additionally, several studies explore the complex relationship between sexting, motivation and gender. Some studies have illustrated the presence of a range of sexual and gendered pressures associated with sexting among young people including the pervasive presence of sexism and, in particular, the sexual harassment of girls (see Ringrose *et al.*, 2012; Van Ouytsel *et al.*, 2017). Notably, Ringrose and colleagues (2012: 45–50) document the predominant presence of a sexual double standard, especially within schools, which can often silence girls' experiences and/or create an atmosphere of anxiety surrounding sexual "identity" and "reputation." While progressive and sex-positive attitudes surrounding female sexuality are continuing to advance, traditional perceptions of femininity as a time of innocence still exist (Kitzinger, 1988; Coppock *et al.*, 1995). Indeed, some research continues to illustrate girls being 'stigmatised and sanctioned' for showing a positive sexuality (Schippers, 2007: 95; Meyer *et al.*, 2017).

Yet, gendered assumptions and power relations are not exclusive to females and the dangers associated with pressures to conform to ideals associated with "hegemonic masculinity" have been recognised (Papadopoulos, 2010; Setty, 2019). Interrelated to problematic presumptions surrounding gender and gender roles is the easy availability of pornography which is significantly linked to youth engagement in HSB (Harmful Sexual Behaviour) and TA-HSB (Technology Assisted Harmful Sexual Behaviour),³ particularly among young males. For example, Stanley *et al.* (2018: 2920) illustrate the relationship between the viewing of pornography among young males and the use of control and humiliation when engaging in sexual behaviours, including sexting (see also Flood, 2009). Further, Shariff (2015) and McAlinden (2018) demonstrate that engagement in HSB, including sexting behaviours, is often influenced by deeply entrenched, and indeed conflicting, social and cultural gender stereotypes and myths. This is most significant for young females who have expressed frustration that their sexuality is monitored and scrutinised to a greater extent than their male counterparts (Ringrose *et al.*, 2012).

In keeping with this literature, this article considers the key social factors influencing gendered notions between children and young people within Northern Ireland (NI), including the influence of popular culture and limited sex education programmes. Most notably, NI is a very conservative society and there are considerable social and cultural limitations placed on the sexual agency of women and young girls (see Ellison, 2017). Consequently, this article

3 TA-HSB describes harmful sexual behaviours children and young people engage in on-line.

will reinforce the very real gendered harms which can manifest as a result of the perpetuating gendered discourse surrounding sex and sexuality, particularly within NI, and its influence on sexting practices among young people.

Other scholars, however, have challenged some of the gendered rhetoric surrounding pressure and engagement in the sexual behaviour. For example, while Lee and Crofts (2015: 456) do not dispute the potential for young people to use coercive methods in association with sexting behaviours, they argue that:

The current empirical evidence does not support the notion that pressure or coercion is *the* key factor, or even *one* of the key factors, motivating girls to produce and send nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves.

Their research also challenges the gendered dimension attached to sexting by demonstrating that girls who engage in sexting are often motivated by pleasure and desire rather than feelings of pressure. In addition, Hasinoff (2015: 102) describes how sexting among young people should be positioned within the context of consent, sexual agency and a young person's capacity to make sexual choices. A notable tension thus emerges within available studies on *why* young people engage in sexting. On the one hand, some scholars place emphasis on a range of gendered and socio-cultural pressures, while others prioritise choice, capacity and youth agency. This article explores this tension within the context of sexting among young people in NI.

Drawing upon the voices of a sample of young people ($n = 15$) and professionals ($n = 28$) in NI, the author argues that the gendered discourse associated with sexting behaviours are considerably more complex and nuanced than existing research might suggest. For example, the empirical research upon which this paper is based illustrates the existence of very prevalent gendered pressures (some subtle in nature) when young people engage in sexting behaviours. While the author does not contend that pressure is an exclusive control factor in relation to sexting behaviour among young people, nor minimise the role of agency, choice and capacity, the analysis nonetheless reveals that a range of gendered pressures have a significant influence on youth sexting, particularly within NI.

Therefore, this study placed within the wider sexting debate reinforces the *diversity* and *complexity* of gender roles within the context of sexting among young people. By recognising the evolving and convoluted nature of the gendered narrative associated with sexting, this article attempts to provide greater clarity on the relationship between gender, pressure, sexting and young people. It is hoped by providing a more nuanced account of gender and

sexting behaviours, that the limits of current relationship and sex education programmes (RSE) will be recognised and the need for comprehensive gender sensitive education and prevention schemes will be underscored. Ultimately, the author will argue that RSE can be a valuable tool to help tackle the problematic and harmful gendered dimensions of sexting behaviours among young people.

Having introduced the overarching aims of the article and placed the sexting debate in context, the second section provides a brief summary of the jurisdictional focus of the research and the methods used to collect the primary data. Drawing on primary research, the next three substantive sections draw out and identify the core gendered themes which emerged from the primary research as having a significant influence on young people and sexting practices: (i) a prevailing culture of sexism especially relating to sexualisation, sexual harassment and sexual objectification; (ii) the presence of a wide range of socio-cultural pressures influencing how young people negotiate sexual identity and; (iii) the existence of a prevalent sexual double standard associated with participation in sexting practices among young people which impacts on labelling and shaming mechanisms. Building on these insights, the penultimate section draws out the broader theoretical and policy implications of advocating for a comprehensive gender sensitive education programme associated with sexting among young people in NI. The paper concludes by reinforcing some of the key risks and gendered harms associated with sexting behaviours among young people and advocating for comprehensive RSE programmes which: (i) reflect the lived experiences of young people; (ii) are “inclusive” and recognise the needs of *all* young people, including young people who identify as LGBTQ+; (iii) account for the gendered dimensions attached to sexting practices; and (iv) specifically address shifting cultural paradigms as well as encompass the more subtle harms of sexting behaviour.

2 Methodological Design

The primary research was undertaken during the course of a PhD (Agnew, 2018). The empirical data was collected between March 2015 to May 2016 and involved interviews with 28 professionals across the private and public sector and 15 young people who participated in interviews and focus groups aged between 13–17 years (nine girls and six boys). Although this article is based on a relatively small sample of youth participants – using semi-structured interviews and focus groups produced primary data which, to date, is not currently available within NI. Conducting this empirical research provided a valuable

opportunity to gain a unique insight and the perspective of those directly impacted by sexting and thus detailed the ‘view from below’ (Scraton, 2007: 10, 17).

Adults have a responsibility to listen to young people and try to discern how they conceptualise and understand certain behaviours so we can make more informed policies. Consequently, the sampling cohort was identified using “purposeful sampling”. It was important to identify participants who could provide valuable insight and demonstrate good understanding of the issues under investigation (Marshall, 1996). Indeed, the young people who participated within the primary research spoke passionately about the importance of adults listening to what they had to say and were aware that their voices are often suppressed on issues which impact their lives. For this reason, the article will focus *primarily* on the voices of young people. Professional interview commentary will be noted periodically throughout to reinforce the existence of a distinct facet of sexting behaviour or to illustrate a gap in knowledge.

The young people were not asked for their sexual orientation. The sample was therefore either (a) heterosexual; (b) included both heterosexual and LGBTQ+ participants; or (c) only included LGBTQ+ participants. Notably, the conversations among the young people were extremely heteronormative. For example, when talking about relationships the young people often referred to a “girl” and a “boy.” While this narrative does not confirm that the sample was absent of LGBTQ+ participants, the strong heteronormative dialogue throughout suggests: (i) if LGBTQ+ participants were present, they did not feel comfortable discussing these issues within an LGBTQ+ context; and (ii) the young people, whether they were aware of it or not, were conforming to the dominant heteronormative discourse associated with sex and sexuality (see Rolston *et al.*, 2005). This is not surprising considering the continuing existence of a very prevalent stigma attached to LGBTQ+ identities, particularly within NI (discussed further below). Consequently, to challenge stereotypes and myths associated with LGBTQ+ identities, the author argues that education programmes *must* include positive discussions on the plurality of sexualities.

Interviews and focus groups with the professionals and young people lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. All discussions were electronically recorded, and transcriptions were scrutinised to identify any prevalent themes (using thematic analysis), highlight any issues of concern and note any key similarities and/or differences. The empirical study was planned and conducted carefully and adhered to the rigorous ethical framework established within the author’s university. The jurisdictional focus of the primary research was NI. While this region is a unique

research site,⁴ specifically in relation to debates on female sexual agency, the gendered discourse examined below informs the wider sexting debate and highlights how gender stereotypes and power dimensions are significantly influencing young relationships and youth participation in sexting behaviours.

3 Sexualisation, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Objectification

In order to fully understand the gendered culture surrounding sexting among young people, it is important to consider the existing and broader tensions around the feminist movement and female sexual agency. Within western culture, women and girls are perceived to be “the bearers of morality” and consequently experience intense gender socialisation where their bodies are viewed as objects to be judged (Ringrose and Renold, 2012: 334; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997: 174). The intense level of public scrutiny surrounding femininity and female sexual identity was noted by the youth participants. The female participants expressed uneasiness with the unwanted sexual attention and harassment they often receive (sometimes in public) by boys and men. Some girls spoke candidly about their experiences and it became clear how uncomfortable they felt with the normative nature of sexual harassment:

I remember one time I was like 12 and I went to a christening and I was walking home ... so I looked kinda nice but 16-year-old wee boys started cat calling me. I got very uncomfortable and just sprinted home because they were coming towards me and it was terrifying.⁵

When I was like 14 ... and one day in the summer I was wearing like a t-shirt and a pair of shorts and that time, first of all I stopped on the bridge to tie my shoe and this guy started honking his horn ... and he did this [rude gesture] at me out the window and he was like 50 ... There's a bar and I had to walk past the bar and like grown men were shouting at me.⁶

4 The 30-year conflict in NI (1968–1998), often referred to as “the Troubles”, went beyond a ‘territorial conflict’ and the social impact ‘has been far-reaching, generating a lasting impact’ (McAlister *et al.*, 2014: 297).

5 Female Focus Group (FFG): Participant A.

6 FFG: Participant C.

The moment you leave your house, you don't know who's going to say something ... if it's going to be a girl, guy, someone old, young and it's very hard to wear what you feel comfortable wearing in society.⁷

In line with existing literature, data reinforces that girls are at a higher risk of being exposed to sexually coercive and abusive behaviours (see Council of Europe, 2011). In fact, some of the female participants experienced multiple forms of sexually harassing behaviour in one day. Markedly, when trying to make sense of what happened, the girls unknowingly were placing a level of blame on themselves: 'You just want to burn that outfit.'⁸ In addition, and somewhat surprisingly, some female participants commented on how their parents further normalised their experiences by condoning and minimising the harm caused by the male(s)' behaviour, including sexual harassment from older men. For example, one female participant explained her mother's reaction to "grown men" making sexual gestures and signs to her as she walked past on the street: 'I came home and told my mummy and ... she had accepted it at this point. She said this is normal basically and it wasn't like no that shouldn't happen.'⁹

The above excerpts are compelling for a number of reasons: first, primary data suggests that the "ownership" debate explored in Ringrose *et al.*'s (2012) report goes beyond peer-based forms of sexual behaviour. Dominant and ideological assumptions regarding ownership, sexual objectification and gender stereotypes are therefore influencing the cultural legitimacy of the notion that female bodies are to be viewed, scrutinised and commented on by both men and women and across all age groups (see Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Second and related, analysis raises an interesting question around the need to educate parents/guardians on challenging popular and harmful socio-cultural attitudes associated with sexual objectification. Third, the youth participants emphasise the deeply entrenched social stereotypes surrounding sexual harassment and blame culture – which is highly gendered in nature. That is, that girls are somehow to blame for their victimisation if they do not dress or behave in a particular manner thus challenging "ideal victim" status (McAlinden, 2014: 185; see also Christie, 1986; Penney, 2016). Fourth and interrelated to the previous point, it became clear that many of the female participants had experienced "appearance anxiety" and body shaming, to a greater degree than those of their male counterparts (see also Ringrose *et al.*, 2012).

7 FFG: Participant B.

8 FFG: Participant A.

9 FFG: Participant C.

Fifth and most significantly perhaps, none of the male participants commented on experiences of sexual harassment. This does not mean that none of the boys have experienced sexual harassment. Their silence, however, could mean two things: (i) it speaks to broader pressures to conform to a masculine ideal, particularly within a heteronormative context and/or (ii) they do not see themselves as victims because they do not identify with gendered victim moulds perpetuated within contemporary discourses on sexual harassment (see McAlinden, 2014). This analysis was reinforced by some of the professionals:

The boys won't come forward ... they are less likely to talk to their friends. I think there is a strong culture that keeps them quiet.¹⁰

There's still an ethos within males, "big boys don't cry." You get up, you deal with it. It doesn't impact. But it does.¹¹

The last year or so we've had a slight increase in boys being referred in, but that's a big issue in terms of highlighting it with professionals, that it happens to boys and young men too and they need to be recognising it.¹²

Despite a lack of dialogue associated with experiences of sexual harassment, the male participants did communicate a range of pressures they believed to be pivotal when young people participate in sexting, chiefly the pressure to conform to a "macho" archetype (see also Papadopoulos, 2010). By way of an example, one male participant spoke candidly about pressures to conform to a specific body image and his discomfort with contemporary overt sexualisation of the human body: 'that's how men and women are supposed to look ... it's a negative influence.'¹³ In fact, both boys and girls are struggling to negotiate their sexual image and identity in a world of contradictory messages:

A lot of boys are very self-conscious about how their body grows and adapts during puberty and I think that's a really key factor in sexting and sending images in itself ... and females as well, it's not just boys ... Everything is based on looks and what you look like and how I can show you off to my friends ... women and men.¹⁴

¹⁰ Education sector. Participant A.

¹¹ Children's Voluntary Organisation. Participant A.

¹² Children's Voluntary Organisation.

¹³ Male Focus Group (MFG): Participant C.

¹⁴ MFG: Participant A.

These are layered statements which speak to pressures around body image, satisfaction and performance among both boys and girls. The excerpt therefore broadens and provides a deeper insight on the circumstances surrounding sexting behaviours among young people in three main ways.

First, the young people (both boys and girls) position themselves as objects to be judged when they claim ‘everything is based on looks.’ They also place considerable importance on peer acceptance: ‘how I can show you off to my friends.’ What is particularly interesting is that both comments came from two male participants and therefore contradict the popular assumption that pressures around body image, objectification and sexualisation are female dominant. To be clear, the author does not dispute the existence of a gender imbalance within the context of sexting but is simply questioning the *extent* of the proposed gender disparity. Undoubtedly, the female participants within this study were extremely vocal, more so than their male counterparts, in relation to the gendered undertones regarding sexual harassment and sexual objectification.

In addition, and as explained below, some of the male participants even recognised and acknowledged the prevailing presence of a sexual double standard, particularly within the context of sexting. In spite of this, focus groups with the young people and interviews with a wide range of professionals called into question the *scope* of the gender disparity within particular contexts. That is, there is a growing evidence base which is demonstrating the wide range of pressures which are influencing *both* boys and girls to engage in more risky and harmful sexual behaviour, in particular around body image and performance (McAlinden, 2018; Speno and Aubrey, 2019; Setty, 2019). This analysis reinforces the need to recognise more fully the complex relationship between sexting, gender, pressure and the range of potential risks and harms which girls *and* boys may be exposed to. Further, it suggests that it is not enough for education programmes simply to note the risks and harms that young people must be alert to – there is a real need to promote body positivity and challenge unhealthy social norms around body image and appearance. Positive dialogue around body image would also provide further opportunities to challenge harmful behaviours associated with sexual objectification, as noted previously.

Second and interrelated to the previous point, intentions to send “sexts” among young people can originate outside the persisting heteronormative narrative which is so prevalent within existing literature. Indeed, a number of professionals demonstrated that sexting is not always done within romantic relationships or in an attempt to flirt but can also be done as (i) an attempt to seek reassurance regarding body image; (ii) to reinforce how their bodies

conform to popular ideals surrounding femininity and masculinity; and/or (iii) as a method of bullying:

It isn't always you know ... girl on boy photographs or whatever because [I] certainly have had girls ... taking pictures and selfies and sending to other girls as a comparison thing ... my boobs are bigger than yours.¹⁵

A falling out ... between same sex ... friends... [who] have maybe exchanged pictures... more so with girls, they've maybe fallen out and out of spite... one girl has posted the picture of the other on a site that's not very appropriate.¹⁶

While other scholars have noted the diversification in sexting practices, this research demonstrates that participation in peer-based forms of sexting behaviours in relation to body satisfaction in particular, may be happening at a much more prevalent rate than previous studies might suggest (see Phippen, 2012; Ringrose *et al.*, 2012; Lee *et al.*, 2013; McAlinden, 2018). Further, while peer socialisation has been well documented within the literature (see Leaper and Farkas, 2015), the focus groups reinforce the importance placed on peer acceptance and how young people heavily rely and depend on fellow peers for advice and support.

Third, the youth participants made reference to subtle pressures which can be present when images are exchanged: 'it's like prove yourself to me.'¹⁷ Accordingly, the pressure to conform to a particular gender ideal and popular social image of what it means to be a "boy" or a "girl" can instigate the creating, sending and sharing of sexual content among young people (see Ringrose *et al.*, 2012; Ringrose and Renold, 2012; Speno and Aubrey, 2019). Collectively, this brief excerpt illustrates how young people do not feel emotionally prepared to deal with adolescence and are struggling to feel comfortable with their bodies and their physical and sexual development. Lack of knowledge, in conjunction with the increasingly heightened focus within contemporary media and pop culture on the sexualisation of female and male bodies, is impacting on young people's understanding of what is "normal" sexual development (see Scraton, 1997; Salter *et al.*, 2013; Setty, 2019). This confusion is leading to some young people participating in "risky" or potentially "harmful" forms of sexual behaviour, including sexting, to seek reassurance regarding their bodies (McAlinden, 2018).

15 Education Sector. Participant D.

16 Criminal Justice Sector.

17 MFG: Participant A.

In tandem, this research strongly illustrates an association between a wide range of pressures and young people's participation in certain types of potentially harmful behaviour, including sexting. This complex relationship makes negotiating a sexual identity both on and off-line extremely difficult.

4 Negotiating Sexual Identity: Pleasure or Pressure?

Gender and pressure associated with sexting has emerged as a popular theme within existing literature on the topic (see Salter *et al.*, 2013; Powell and Henry, 2014; McAlinden, 2018). Current research demonstrates three main sources of pressure: individual, peer group and socio-cultural (Lee and Crofts, 2015: 457).¹⁸ Comparably, within the present study, a wide range of singular but inter-related pressures in association with sexting was noted by both professionals and the young people in varying contexts. Principally, a pervasive culture of sexism, a prevalent sexual double standard and easy access to pornography were all recognised as perpetuating gendered stereotypes. Indeed, professionals and young people commented on the intensity and predominance of gendered attitudes which entrench the normality of sexting behaviours among young people. Consequently, this normative dimension of sexting can leave young people vulnerable to the harmful impacts of coercive and non-consensual sexting behaviours. Therefore, while current literature highlights that participation in sexual behaviours (including harmful sexual behaviours) is often driven by gender stereotypes (see Ringrose *et al.*, 2012; Shariff, 2015; McAlinden, 2018), this project speaks to the peculiar difficulties young people face when regulating and negotiating a sexual identity online and the nuances and complexities of gender, especially within the context of sexting.

Notably, sexting as a form of pleasure was not explicitly expressed by the females as it has been noted in other international research (see Hasinoff, 2015; Lee and Crofts, 2015). This is interesting for a number of reasons: (i) the female participants may not experience sexting as a form of pleasure, thus reinforcing the prevailing presence of a wide range of pressures to conform and participate in the sexual behaviour; or (ii) the absence of a sexual desire/interest dialogue could be directly linked to the jurisdictional focus of the research and the conservative nature of NI. That being said, the young people may have

¹⁸ Lee and Crofts (2015: 457, 458) noted three forms of pressure: individual pressure (within individual relationships), peer group pressure (influenced by geography, class, ethnicity and gender) and socio-cultural pressures (including normative pressures in association with popular culture).

been reluctant to place sexting within the context of pleasure knowing that it would challenge popular beliefs associated with female sexual agency and childhood, explored further below. This raises significant concerns around the traditional and gendered socio-cultural attitudes associated with youth sexual expression and agency, particularly within NI.

In comparison, some of the male participants *did* explore sexting as a form of pleasure: 'just messaging to another partner or person for their arousal. So, for their own arousal so they can keep a sexual rapport with each other.'¹⁹ In spite of this, within the author's research, pressure to participate in sexting was noted as one of the most prevalent reasons associated with sexting among young people. In fact, the potential for coercive methods to be used was supported by both professionals and the young people: 'the majority of cases it would be different levels of coercion'²⁰ and 'more pressure ... than wanting to.'²¹ Further, while both male and female participants noted how sexting can be used as 'a label to brand themselves as [being in] a serious relationship,'²² or be viewed as a symbol of 'trust,'²³ undertones of pressure were present in their conversations.

For example, there was an expectation among the boys to receive images as some of the male participants said: 'for guys I think it's just like well, we've done this for you now you have to do something for us'²⁴ and 'I send you this you send me, that type of thing.'²⁵ The 'give or take'²⁶ mentality resulted in a prevailing pressure felt by girls to submit to requests from boys in an attempt to maintain a relationship or because they felt they had to:

The boy will send one first and they [the girl] feel like they have to [send one back].²⁷

They don't feel like the man is going to stay with them so they'll be like I should send this to make him want me more.²⁸

19 MFG: Participant B.

20 Children's Voluntary Organisation.

21 MFG: Participant C.

22 MFG: Participant A.

23 FFG: Participant A.

24 Interview (Males): Participant B.

25 Interview (Males): Participant A.

26 Interview (Female).

27 FFG: Participant C.

28 FFG: Participant B.

Girls would be like more easily pressured into it. Boys would just send it ... girls would do it a lot more not because they wanted to do it but the pressure to do it.²⁹

While the young people described the pressures felt by both boys and girls, the research clearly illustrated gendered dimensions attached to the *types* of pressure associated with sexting behaviours. This gendered nature of pressure was also noted by professionals:

The examples ... that are springing to my mind are the boy will send an image first ... to the girl and then ask her ... encourage her, the girl, to send one back.³⁰

It's primarily the girls to the boys are sending the images because the boys are making more of the demand ... I think it's also become fashionable in the sense the boys particularly ... swap the images around like Pokémon cards.³¹

Pressures felt by girls to submit to boys' requests for images was clear within the focus groups and professional interviews and has been documented within existing research (see e.g. Ringrose *et al.*, 2012).

What was particularly interesting, however, is the subtle but prevalent pressures on boys to receive images and to conform to a certain masculine ideal. Two male participants explained: '[it is] classified as an achievement to a male'³² and males would be labelled 'stud or something.'³³ In other words, boys may be viewed more favourably by their peers when they send and receive images. This analysis reflects the broader literature on the use of sex as 'a masculine achievement' and a way for men to reinforce and 'reify' their masculinity (see Baker and Oberman, 2016: 67; Meyer *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, as Harvey and Ringrose (2015: 361) explain:

Images of girls' bodies, therefore, have the potential to form part of the digital material through which value circulates in the peer network, and through which recognition of hegemonic masculinity is negotiated by some boys.

29 FFG: Participant D.

30 Education Sector. Participant C.

31 Independent Researcher on Harmful Sexual Behaviours.

32 MFG: Participant A.

33 MFG: Participant B.

Being in possession of sexual images within a particular heteronormative context is thus seen as a powerful example of how to conform to the masculine ideal. Yet, as noted by Setty (2019: 1), it cannot be assumed that boys gain “value” from sexting practices.

For example, does this mean that boys who do not receive images are marginalised and isolated? What about LGBTQ+ young people? While this was not made clear in the focus groups for this project, it seems apparent that if receiving images is viewed as an “achievement” for boys who are labelled as a “stud,” then lack of images or engagement with girls within this particular heteronormative and sexual context could result in exclusion. This analysis is supported by Ringrose *et al.* (2012: 42–13) who document young boys’ reluctance to question the sharing of sexual images among peers through fear they would be labelled “gay.” Exposure to homophobic bullying therefore impacts on how young people engage with sexting practices, thus reinforcing the heteronormative context in which sexting is primarily exercised (see also Setty, 2019). The present analysis also illustrates a significant scholarly gap, that being LGBTQ+ young people’s experiences of and exposure to sexting practices.

What this primary analysis also suggests is that narratives associated with sexting and peer acceptance, particularly among young males, are extremely complex. Indeed, the receiving of sexual images goes beyond a form of ‘popularity currency’ (Ringrose *et al.*, 2012: 41–44) or seeking ‘value’ (Setty, 2019). There are very real and prevalent heteronormative gendered power relations which lie at the heart of sexting practices among young people. Therefore, the profound and adverse impacts on *both* boys and girls to conform to particular gender roles can be extremely harmful in nature. In addition, McGlynn and Rackley (2017: 544) explain the gendered nature of harms (including pressure) and the ‘sexualised and misogynistic form’ in which they can manifest. Indeed, the harms of contemporary manifestations of manliness was noted by some of the girl participants. For example: ‘a girl is told if a wee boy is mean to you he fancies you.’³⁴ The primary research demonstrates how traditional gendered interpretations of sexual identity and expression are influencing not only how girls engage in sexting behaviours – but also how boys engage with, regulate and respond to certain sexual behaviours. Comprehensive education programmes would provide a valuable opportunity to challenge “harmful” and “unhealthy” culturally accepted norms associated with sexting, youth sexual identity and expression (see Rolston *et al.*, 2005; Powell, 2010; Schubotz, 2015).

34 FFG: Participant D.

4.1 *Negotiating Sexual Agency: A Complex Task*

While the author reinforces a need to examine more fully the extent of socio-cultural pressures which boys are exposed to, it was made very clear within the focus groups that the female participants in particular were struggling to negotiate *full* sexual agency. Indeed, the primary research mirrors other work conducted on women's negotiations of sex and sexual consent. For example, Burkett and Hamilton (2012) comment on the heteronormative context of women prioritising men's sexual pleasure within relationships. This notion was reinforced earlier when the young people spoke about sending sexts to 'make him want me more' and/or 'in some cases it's because not all people feel comfortable in their relationship.'³⁵ Gender stereotypes regarding male promiscuity and female submissiveness have led to an institutionalised 'hierarchy of sexuality' which privileges and prioritises the needs of men over the needs of women (Coppock *et al.*, 1995: 19; Stanko, 1985). It has become clear within the primary research that the "hierarchy" has become embedded within contemporary discourses and is influencing sexting practices among young people – made evident when the young girls spoke about wanting to please boys by sending sexual images.

Another focal point within the primary research was how the female body is understood, judged and evaluated within varying contexts. More specifically, the female participants were keen to dispel gender stereotypes in relation to sexual objectification and the acute sexualised representation of female identities. This is illustrated by the following exchange between some of the young people who challenge popular terminology often used to describe girls:

Participant C: There's a difference in being told 'you're pretty' and being told 'you're sexy.'

Participant D: Yeah.

Participant B: Pretty is like 'oh yay, thank you, I like being pretty and ... sexy is like 'I don't want to be looked at that way.'³⁶

This latter excerpt is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it relates to broader pressures in relation to the dual representation of women within the media. That is, women should be both submissive *and* sexually independent, innocent *and* sexy (Ringrose, 2011; Gill, 2012). Interestingly, the young people

³⁵ FFG: Participant B.

³⁶ FFG.

acknowledge that the words “pretty” and “sexy” present the young people in very different and distinct contexts. Yet, despite the girls preferring more delicate terms such as “pretty” they did not like to be infantilised by being called “baby” or “cute.” This paradoxical conversation among the young female participants is compelling. On the one hand it suggests that the young people may be reluctant to be stripped of their childhood too early and want to conform to more traditional notions of femininity – that of being virtuous, incorrupt and absent of any positive expression of sexuality (Scraton, 1997; McAlinden, 2014). Yet on the other, the girls reject being completely stripped of their developing sexual agency: ‘a wee girl is called ... baby and called like cute ... but a wee boy’s called like ... look at him he’s a man.’³⁷ Undoubtedly, the balancing exercise required makes it extremely difficult, almost impossible, for young girls to negotiate an “appropriate” sexual identity both on and off-line.

In addition, the hypersexualisation of the female body and the presentation of girls and women as “sexy” is quite prolific within media and pop culture (Papadopoulos, 2010; Ringrose and Renold, 2012). In spite of this prominent portrayal of girls and women, the young female participants illustrate powerfully that they do not gain “empowerment” or “agency” by depicting themselves as overly sexual beings (see Gill, 2009, 2012). Most notably, the girls appear to sanction and regulate their own sexual behaviour by recognising the “risks” of being viewed as “sexy.” That being, girls who present themselves as “sexy” are often exposed to peer-based shaming and/or labelling. In fact, shaming and labelling is something the young people discuss in detail when exploring the existence of a very prevalent sexual double standard which has become inherently associated with peer-based forms of sexual behaviour, including sexting.

5 Sexual Double Standards: Labelling and Shaming

Analysis of the primary research demonstrates that sexualisation and female sexual agency is not a simplistic issue and requires consideration of a wide range of socio-cultural, individual and peer pressures and influences. For example, the prevailing existence of a sexual double standard via the social construction of femininity *and* masculinity has translated online. Interestingly, a number of professionals noted that although young people are more accepting of sexual expression, gender still plays a significant role in how sexual behaviours are responded to:

37 FFG: Participant C.

Even though there's more permission or permissiveness, the double standards still apply.³⁸

It's always the girl that gets labelled slag, the slut, slapper. Whereas nothing ... would be very limited would be said about the guy.³⁹

This observation was also reinforced by two male youth participants who commented on the sexual double standard that exists: 'girl's labelled as she's a slut, she's a whore'⁴⁰ and 'yeah if a guy sends something it's overlooked but if a girl sends it it's not.'⁴¹ The young males are referring to, what has been introduced within existing literature as, the "digital slut" (Ringrose and Renold, 2012: 337). Interestingly, the labelling of girls was perpetuated not just by male peers but also female peers, as some of the female participants explained that any girl who participates in sexting and demonstrates a sexual awareness is automatically shamed and labelled: 'either you're a prude or a slut and there's no in-between.'⁴² This quote is significant for two reasons. It speaks to what scholars have described as "sexual rivalry" and "sexual regulation" among and between young people, particularly girls, and impacts on how they negotiate and regulate an online sexual identity (Ringrose, 2011; Ringrose and Barajas, 2011; Ringrose and Renold, 2012). Second, it reinforces the complexity of negotiating a sexual identity among young females and trying to get the balance between (i) maintaining a level of innocence but not being seen as a "prude" and (ii) being confident in expressing your sexuality but not being viewed as a "slut." In a world full of ambiguous messages surrounding sexual agency and sexuality, this is an extremely difficult task for any person to navigate, never mind a young adolescent going through a massive developmental stage physically, emotionally and psychologically.

What also became clear was the absence of context when a young person engages in sexting. It does not matter whether exploitative or coercive methods were used to engage the young female in sexting behaviours. Simply expressing one's sexuality is enough to contradict the stereotypical image of what it means to be "young" and "female." This was reinforced by one female participant who stated, 'it's an automatic ... you're a complete ho.'⁴³ Consequently, the positive

38 Independent Researcher on Harmful Sexual Behaviours.

39 Education Sector.

40 Interview (Males): Participant A.

41 Interview (Males): Participant B.

42 FFG: Participant C.

43 Interview (Female).

expression of sexuality results in her innocence being challenged, no matter the circumstances (see Coppock *et al.*, 1995). The primary research therefore reinforces the complexity surrounding the regulation of female sexuality:

The sad thing is that they'll cat call you for being sexual but they'll also make fun of you for not being sexual.⁴⁴

It's like all shame but at the same time it's all sexualised ... it's like if you do something shame on you but do this anyway.⁴⁵

The prevailing existence of this “sexual double standard” suggests that boys who participate in sexual activity, including sexting behaviours, advance in terms of social value and status whereas girls are often isolated and condemned (see also Farvid *et al.*, 2017; Setty, 2019). Indeed, the focus on a range of dangers and harms associated with premature female sexualisation relates to a popular misplaced notion that denying female sexuality will preserve a girl's innocence and purity (Jackson and Scott, 1999; Hird and Jackson, 2001).

Complex gendered dimensions attached to the behaviour are also reflected in some of the media reporting surrounding sexting. For example, a level of responsibility was placed on Amanda Todd for her victimisation, because showing her breasts on a webcam challenged traditional conceptions of victimhood and youth sexuality. The existing shaming undertones attached to females who participate in sexting was also noted by a young male participant: ‘females would be demonised more for sending pictures.’⁴⁶ Penney (2016: 721) states:

this shaming has generational and gendered overtones that manifest in the form of disdain towards youth cultures, technophobic discourse about online sociality, and moral panics regarding girls' digital sexual expression.

The case of Amanda Todd thus speaks to the broader issues surrounding gender and blame culture, while also reinforcing what McAlinden (2014: 10; 2016) has termed ‘imagined risk’ and ‘the institutional and cultural entrenchment of stereotypes surrounding the “ideal victim”... [as] young, pure, passive and blameless.’

44 FFG: Participant A.

45 FFG: Participant D.

46 MFG: Participant D.

Indeed, while young males who participate in sexting (or indeed any form of sexual behaviour) still challenge the belief that childhood is a time of purity and absent of any positive signs of sexuality (see Kitzinger 1988), they are not subjected to the same level of peer surveillance or contempt as their female peers. In fact, boys are encouraged to show positive signs of their heterosexuality, demonstrating their conformity to a popular masculine ideal (see Setty, 2019). This gendered discourse was noted by the male participants: 'he would be praised and classified much more positively than the females ... pimp or a player.'⁴⁷ Some of the female participants also explained: 'like boys are taught if you kiss you should [kiss] a girl by surprise. You know, if you're mean to a girl, you're attracted to her.'⁴⁸ This analysis reflects broader tensions around the construction of masculine identities and the confusing messages young people are receiving (see Harvey and Ringrose, 2015). Consequently, the primary research reinforces the cultural entrenchment of shaming and labelling narratives, particularly within youth sexual behaviours and practices. It also recognises the gendered pressures (some subtle in nature) inherent within shaming mechanisms used among young people.

6 The Need for Gender Sensitive Education Programmes

The primary research points to the importance of education. A number of professionals explained that education is 'absolutely crucial'⁴⁹ and 'education and prevention is really key.'⁵⁰ What also became clear was an urgent need to re-evaluate our sex education programmes: 'we need education programmes that encompass a learning and not just the passing of information.'⁵¹ In other words, RSE programmes lose meaning and relevance when they fail to address issues which reflect the lived experiences of our young people, including any potential risks and harms young people may be vulnerable to both on and off-line. Yet, as will be explored further below, initiating a gender sensitive education programme will inevitably present a number of challenges, especially within NI.

NI is unique as communities are in a period of transition post-conflict. This stage in the region's social and political development presents unique

47 MFG: Participant A.

48 FFG: Participant C.

49 Children's Voluntary Organisation. Participant A.

50 Criminal Justice Sector.

51 Forensic Psychologist.

challenges, in particular associated with HSB and how it is viewed and conceptualised (McAlinden, 2018). For example, McAlinden (2018: 267–68) reinforces the prevailing presence of paramilitary “policing” within Northern Irish communities which can result in young people who display HSB being subjected to violence and hostility. In addition, there is a wealth of literature which purports to the deeply entrenched culture of shame surrounding sex and sexuality discourses within the region (see Schubotz and Devine, 2014; Ellison, 2017).

As an illustration, England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland legalised same-sex marriage in 2014 and 2015 respectively. Yet, during this time, the Northern Irish Assembly continually blocked motions to progress similar laws by citing religious and moral grounds (Walker, 2018). It was only in the absence of an active Northern Irish Executive that Westminster passed legislation in October 2019 which would legalise same-sex marriage in NI from January 2020 (McGee, 2020). This reinforces the staunchly ‘conservative strain of Christian morality’ within NI and its impact on progressive policies, including within education (Rolston *et al.*, 2005: 217). The prevailing presence of conservative and traditional beliefs is reflected in how RSE is taught (or indeed not taught) in schools. By way of example, 49 per cent of young people who took part in the 2014 Young Life and Times Survey Northern Ireland revealed that Lesbian, Gay and Bi-sexual relationships was not discussed in RSE with a significant 70 per cent of young people noting that transgender relationships were also not covered (Schubotz, 2015: 15, 16).

Notably, the author’s research reinforces further how the presence of conservatism is still very much felt within the classroom and the harms that can manifest as a result:

I go to a Catholic school and all they ever taught us was aww this is how your body works. We’re not going to tell you how to handle it ... this is just how it works, and you have to deal with it.⁵²

They’re [young people] not being taught sex education properly ... they don’t know how to control their own puberty ... going through puberty as any teenager is a wild experience.⁵³

[We] just have to teach [our] selves when it comes to sex and relationships and as a result there are often misinterpretations.⁵⁴

52 FFG: Participant D.

53 MFG: Participant B.

54 MFG: Participant A.

It was clear the young people were frustrated with the lack of relevant sex education and were strongly advocating for education programmes which (i) go beyond lessons on basic human anatomy and sexual reproduction; (ii) incorporate coping strategies to deal with the physical and emotional changes that occur during puberty; and (iii) discuss healthy relationships, including healthy sexual relationships.

Failure to provide information on these important issues results in young people searching for information via other sources including through popular culture or typically in the viewing of pornography (see e.g. Faulkner, 2010). As one professional explained:

All those images that they're getting in their head, and all that they're seeing ... the attitudes, the beliefs, the values that are held about women within pornography will seep into young people's heads, particularly males.⁵⁵

This association is concerning, especially since exposure to pornography can perpetuate gendered myths and stereotypes; can depict unhealthy sexual relationships and, at times, promote harmful and abusive sexual practices (Flood, 2009; Livingstone and Mason, 2015). Notably, while some research has explored the relationship between pornography and sexting behaviours (Stanley *et al.*, 2018), given the prevalence of sexually harassing and coercive behaviours noted earlier, a deeper exploration of exposure to pornography and harmful sexting practices among young people is required. Further, research analysis reinforces the need for education programmes to recognise the negative risks associated with seeking information on-line and from ill-informed sources.

Considering all the above, limited and heteronormative RSE programmes result in young people receiving misguided and confusing messages surrounding body image, sex, sexuality and sexual agency. In addition, the interview excerpts reinforce the need to move away from traditional perceptions of childhood and youth sexuality. Yet, for effective and consistent gender sensitive education programmes to be initiated on relationships and sex, a social and cultural shift, particularly within NI, is required regarding young people, sexual agency and sexual relationships.

55 Forensic Psychologist.

7 Conclusion

This article argues for the need to respond to sexting through a gendered lens. The paper reinforces the complex role of gender and the range and diversity of gendered pressures and harms present when young people participate in sexting. As noted throughout the data analysis and academic commentary, a prevailing culture of sexism, the presence of a wide range of socio-cultural pressures and the influence of popular culture are strongly influencing how girls and boys view their body, sexual identity and worth and how they discern boundaries within personal relationships (see also Scraton, 1997; Ringrose and Barajas, 2011; McAlinden, 2018). These are issues which are especially significant when examining the gendered undertones attached to sexting among young people. This precarious dialogue only heightens the gendered harms attached to sexting behaviours among young people.

In sum, in order to address adequately the intricate and convoluted role gender plays within the context of sexting among young people, tailored gender sensitive education programmes are required. Such programmes should represent: (i) the range of gendered pressures young people are exposed to; (ii) the diversity of sexual practices young people are engaging in, including sexting; (iii) challenge the harmful social norms and skewed representations of masculinity and femininity which are dominant within youth discourses; and (iv) promote positive discussions around body image, puberty and healthy interpersonal relationships. Research also demonstrates a need to educate parent/guardians to challenge harmful and gendered attitudes associated with sexually harassing behaviour and sexual objectification and traditional discourses surrounding youth sexual agency. If mobilised successfully, the potential for young people to be exposed to peer-based coercive and exploitative sexting practices could be greatly reduced.

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