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The Continuum of Symbolic Violence: How Sexting Education Neglects Image-Based Sexual Abuse, Dismisses Perpetrators’ Responsibility, and Violates Rights to Sexual Autonomy*

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Abstract:
In the last decade there has been an increased interest in (young) people’s sexting behaviour from academia, media and other institutions which lead to the emergence of sexting safety campaigns. Sexting campaigns are often built around notions of dangers when images are shared without the consent of the person depicted. This feminist case study will critically assess the discourses of three UK educational campaigns (Exposed, Sexting, Just Send It) to demonstrate how these campaigns are currently (re)producing symbolic violence through victim-blaming and are thus legitimising violence against women; the seriousness of image-based sexual abuse is neglected through the penalisation of sexual expression of particularly young women; the dominance of heteronormative depictions of female survivors and male perpetrators obfuscates abuse as an experience across all social groups; and survivors are consistently held accountable for their own victimisation while perpetrators are excused for violating their partners trust and integrity. However, by neutralising and denying responsibility, educational work dismisses 1) that image-based sexual abuse is still as a form of gender-based violence and therefore, breaches the survivor’s rights to dignity and bodily/sexual autonomy, and 2) young people’s rights to explore sexuality – through digital means or not – in a safe environment.

Key words:
image-based sexual abuse; sexting education; digital gender-based violence; victim-blaming; violence against women and girls

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1. Introduction

New technologies open new possibilities for advancements of social life such as the expansion of social circles through social media, online dating, sharing experiences/advice regarding sexuality on online forums, and so forth. People's sexting behaviour has been of particular interest for many scholars across the globe. Sexting refers to the sharing of intimate images or videos. This is usually done among consenting intimate partners (Cooper et al., 2016; Dekker and Thula Koops, 2017; Drouin et al., 2017) and can have benefits for relationship and sexual satisfaction (Parker et al., 2013). Yet, new technologies have also created new vulnerabilities and forms of sexual violations which are rapidly evolving and have yet to be understood. In this light, young people's sexting behaviour has been of particular concern due to their perceived higher vulnerability and the negative consequences associated with it if images are shared beyond the original intent. For example, in a US study among 352 undergraduate students, 62% of participants engaged in sexting (Drouin, Coupe and Temple, 2017). Of these, about 50% reported positive experiences and being comfortable with sexting especially among committed partners whilst 11% reported negative experiences such as relationship detriments, regret, and trauma. In an Australian study among secondary school students (n=2114), about half the students had previously engaged in some form of sexting (Patrick et al., 2015). Whilst around 26% had sent a sexually explicit image or video of themselves, 13.9% of adolescent men and 5.3% of adolescent women had sent a sexually explicit image or video of someone else without the consent of the person depicted. In a study among German young adults aged 20-30 (n=1848), 26.8% of women and 16.8% of men reported having send intimate images to someone (Dekker and Thula Koops, 2017). Of those engaged in sexting, 2% had their image forwarded without consent. In a Swedish study among adolescents (n=1653), 20-32% had received and 4-16% had sent a sext with an indication of girls having more negative experiences than boys (Burén and Lunde, 2018).

Following a ‘postfeminist moral panic’ (Ringrose, 2013) around young people’s vulnerabilities and sexing practices, educational sexting campaigns emerged. However, these campaigns often focus on the emotional impact on survivors and their social field if explicit photos go viral (Henry and Powell, 2014; Crofts et al., 2015), and are built upon “anxiety about the risk [of] new technologies” (Crofts et al., 2015) with the underlying assumption that all sexting will inevitably lead to exploitation. They further commonly dismiss other actors who distribute images without consent of the person depicted (Henry and Powell, 2014; Albury and Crawford, 2012; Crofts et al., 2015). For example, the 2010 Australian sexting safety campaign Megan’s Story, narrates around “a foolish young woman who ‘thought she knew’ (but should have known better) and was victimized as an inevitable result of her own actions” (Albury and Crawford, 2012, p.465). This perpetuates the notion that women’s failed risk-assessment leads to their victimisation. However, risk assessment does not only go against most sexual assault cases which occur in intimate relationships, but it further “makes the perpetrators of sexual violence and coercion invisible” (Powell and Henry, 2014b) whilst reinforcing a sexual double standard in which (young) women are punished (more harshly) for expressing or exploring their sexual autonomy.

Such non-consensual sharing of such intimate images is referred to as image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) (McGlynn and Rackley, 2017; Powell et al., 2019; Maddocks, 2018; Dekeseredy and Schwartz, 2016). IBSA is a continuum of emotional, symbolic, and structure violence (Henry and Powell, 2015a; Stroud, 2014; Bates, 2017; Patton, 2015) and part of the continuum of sexual abuse (Kelly, 1988). Symbolic violence is “violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002: 167 emphasis removed; see also Bourdieu, 1977). Neither dominant nor dominated actor are conscious about its existence, making its distribution natural and inevitable (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002; Lawler, 2011). This includes, for example “gender relations in which both men and
women agree that women are weaker, less intelligent, more unreliable, and so forth” (Lawler, 2011, p.1422) or manifested sexist attitudes about sexual violence which perpetuate rape culture and sexual double standards (Lawler, 2011; Powell and Henry, 2014b) – particularly for women – in which survivors are disbelieved and/or held accountable for their own victimisation (Bates, 2017). This is further supported by male peer support theory in which “the decision to be violent to women and others is affected by gender, class, and race/ethnic relations that structure the resources available to accomplish what men feel provides their masculine identities” (Dekeseredy and Schwartz, 2016: 3–4). Therefore, abusing women is learned behaviour of “[h]egemonic or dominant masculine discourses and practices” (Dekeseredy and Schwartz 2016: 4, see also Connell, 2005) rooted within patriarchal power structures which systematically reinforce the exclusion and oppression of women (Connell, 2005; Renzetti, 2013) and in turn normalise sexual violence – including IBSA – as part of a woman’s identity (Bates, 2017).

Media discourse can strengthen or weaken attitudes and can therefore challenge victim-blaming or be complicit in its proliferation: Survivors often face victim-blaming and slut-shaming in the aftermath by print and online media (Henry and Powell, 2015a); stories are promoted and exacerbated through social media (Sills et al., 2016); survivors are framed as naïve (Henry and Powell, 2015b); and websites dedicated to ‘revenge porn’ engage in derogatory comments and put blame on the person portrayed (Md, 2014). Violations lose geographical boundaries opening the space for (re)victimizing survivors not only from within their own social circle but from unlimited sources online (Henry and Powell, 2015a). This can range from online (sexual) harassment including rape and death threats to online and even offline stalking. Victim-blaming leads to psychological harms ranging from anxiety and trust issues to posttraumatic stress disorder and in worst cases even suicide (Bates, 2017). For example, Amanda Todd – a 15-year-old Canadian girl – was coerced by a stranger to reveal her breasts on webcam. A year later, the photo was published on Facebook which led to her receiving severe (sexual) harassment and torment in school and online. Through a YouTube video, she expressed her devastation and eventually took her own life in 2012 (Cooper, 2016; EIGE, 2017; Lee and Crofts, 2015). This shows that victim-blaming is a central aspect of sexual violence as it minimises the act, marginalises survivors in their experience, and takes responsibilities away from the perpetrator.

Sexual violence prevails because of “(1) victim-blaming […] and (2) taken-for-granted features of everyday heterosexuality that normalize and naturalize male sexual aggression and female sexual passivity” (Henry and Powell, 2015b, p.936). This research will explore such patterns within UK sexting campaigns and shine light on the continuum of symbolic violence by applying a critical look to the prevalence of rape myths and victim-blaming discourses embedded in language and presentation. In turn, this will demonstrate how preventative educational measures in contraire comply and reinforce old traditions and stereotypes and thus perpetuate the very problem they seek to prevent.

2. Methodology

To systematically explore the persistence of symbolic violence in educational work, victim-blaming of IBSA survivors needs to be situated within educational examples to reflect the underlying cultural patterns and societal stance on the issue through the means of production. Therefore, this study draws its theoretical lens from critical feminist theory (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Henry and Powell, 2015b). This perspective was considered appropriate for this study because it challenges “knowledge that excludes, while seeming to include” (Hesse-Biber, 2012: 3) and is therefore “mindful of hierarchies of power and authority in the research process […] including those power differentials that lie within research practices that can reinforce the status quo, creating divisions between colonizer and colonized” (Hesse-Biber, 2012: 3–4).
Using a case study approach, the narrative of sexting campaigns is challenged by critically examining the dialogues, knowledge, and beliefs produced in these campaigns. This will deepen the understanding, provide insights on processes and complexity, and “preserve and understand the wholeness and unity” (Punch, 1998: 150). Since educational work inherits and maintains symbolic violence, they help construct reality by framing stories a particular way and consequently influence what their audience is talking about and how they talk about it (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017).

The sampling was limited to UK campaigns due to temporal restriction and originated by the author attending a workshop on ‘New Technologies and Violence Against Women’ in 2017 in which she was shown the short film Exposed. After researching further into sexting campaigns by searching for terms such as ‘UK sexting campaign’, ‘UK sexting education’ and ‘UK sexting and young people’, only two other samples were identified and situated within the UK: Sexting and Just send it.

- **Exposed** was produced in 2011 by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), in cooperation with law enforcement and academia to educate young people on “the dangers of […] sexting”\(^1\). The story follows 15year-old Dee who has a conversation with her Alter-Ego, her ‘smarter’ self, in an empty café over the consequences of sending nude pictures to her boyfriend, Si, who forwarded them to his friend. In the aftermath Dee faces severe victim-blaming and harassment through social media and on school campus.

- **Sexting** was created by the Bristol Safeguarding Children Board in 2016 in cooperation with academia.\(^2\) Sexting follows a young girl, Lola, who gets pressured into sending a nude photo to her new classmate Josh upon his request. The photos go viral as a result with Lola facing – such as Dee – victim-blaming and harassment.

- **Just send it** was created by Childnet International (2016a).\(^3\) The story follows a group of young people. Two of them, Abi and Josh, get into a relationship. Josh sends Abi a nude picture of himself and requests one of her in return. Whilst Abi resists at first, she ends up sending the picture to Josh, whose friend Brandon steals his phone to send it out further. Abi faces victim-blaming as well but is supported by her best friend and her mother. Josh and Brandon are called into the office for Pastoral Care.

The campaigns were further contextualised through supporting resources, i.e. additional contents freely available for educators. This additional information provided insight on in how far these campaigns are critically assessing the material when teaching their audience on sexting. Together, these samples are not only “a rich source of data for social research” (Punch, 1998: 190) but they also capture the “cultural and symbolic context and [the] significance of […] behaviour” (Punch, 1998: 190).

### 2.1. Analysis

Media discourse analysis was chosen as the appropriate analysis method. Discourse analysis is based on semiosis to produce and connect meanings of the social life including cultural, political, and economic practices (Fairclough, 2001). This further includes the construction of gender, traits of masculinity and femininity, and sexuality. Discourse analysis situates a text in its context and connects the text to a society’s social practices to shine light on “phenomena in culture and society, such as ideologies, power, dominance, discrimination, racism and sexism, media access of elites, or the uses and effects of the media with the audience” (Van Dijk, 1985: 5).

The dialogues were transcribed with notes detailing the scenes’ environments. For example, an early scene in Exposed portrays “Dee in a bathrobe and her hair wrapped into a towel entering her room; She turns on some music and looks at her phone”. The transcripts were then coded following an analytical feminist framework built upon several key elements before constructing themes: the
construction of the problem, why it is problematic, for whom it is problematic; elements of social practice, the order of the dialogues/scenes and situating them in their means of production and the role of the audience; ideology and cultural elements; and contradictions, gaps, or failures within the dominant social order (Fairclough, 2001).

3. Results

Three themes were constructed on the victim-blaming narrative within sexting education campaigns: Firstly, the seriousness of IBSA is vastly neglected through the penalisation of sexual expression of particularly young women. Focusing on sexting as a ‘key mistake’ young people can make fails to address that IBSA is still a form of abuse and diminishes the harm done to survivors. Secondly, the dominance of heteronormative depictions of female survivors and male perpetrators obfuscates abuse as an experience across all social groups. This neglects the importance of paying attention to other gender/sexual identities. Thirdly, survivors are consistently held accountable for their own victimisation whilst perpetrators are excused for violating their partners’ trust and integrity. Survivors are responsible for adequately risk-assessing a situation before engaging in sexting and are penalised if they fail to do so. Yet, the perpetrator’s unawareness of consequences acts as an excuse.

3.1. Criminalising Sexual Autonomy

Sexting education frames adolescents’ expression of sexuality – especially among young women – as a taboo by labelling sexting as the ‘key mistake’ young people make. As such, through discourses fuelled by fear about the lack of control once content has been sent, sexual autonomy is criminalised whilst the seriousness of IBSA is overshadowed. For example, in Exposed, Dee’s Alter-Ego explains to Dee who is responsible for her predicament:

Alter-Ego: “As soon as you hit that button it’s out of our control. You can’t undo and you can’t go back.” (Exposed, 2011)

Dee’s Alter-Ego thus argues that Dee’s own behaviour led to her victimisation. Similarly, in Sexting the story concludes on the survivor’s responsibility to ‘think’ about consequences before engaging in sexting.

Narrator: “Think... Would you send your image on?” (Sexting, 2016)

The films thus argue that the survivors’ own behaviour and lack of risk-assessment led to their victimisation: without them creating the images they would not have been victimised. Furthermore, the teaching resources of Exposed argue that educational works are “designed to tackle the issue of young people sexting” (Exposed Guidance Notes, 2011), to teach about “the consequences of” (CEOP Command, 2011) sexting and “to prevent [the audience] from engaging in this behaviour” (Exposed Guidance Notes, 2011; see also Childnet International, 2016b). The redirecting from IBSA to the engagement in sexting diminishes a person’s sexual autonomy and further downscales the seriousness of the harm inflicted upon the survivor. This can be further seen in Exposed and Sexting when the perpetrators are confronted:

Si: “I know just ... chill out yeah.” (Exposed, 2011)

Josh: “Alright, drama queen. It’s not like everyone saw it.” (Sexting, 2016)

The survivor’s reaction is framed as exaggerated, diminishing the harm done to them. Consequently, the perpetrators’ actions are excused or unaddressed. By narrating from the survivor’s point of view it is impossible to grasp on implications for perpetrator or bystander intervention, failing to tackle the real issue at its roots.
Just send it at first seemed to defy this stigma by holding the perpetrators liable for their actions, portraying a healthy support system, and meeting the survivor with empowerment. Nevertheless, a vital element in the film’s lesson plan is to teach “about how to resist peer pressure and maintain [...] self-respect” (Childnet International, 2016b) implying that the taboo of young people engaging in sexting is still rooted in the cultural discourse as the engagement in sexting – pressured or not – indicates a person’s lowered self-respect and consequently a deviancy of sexual autonomy.

3.2. Restricted Views of Femininity and Masculinity and the Lack of Intersectionality

All survivors are women who have been exploited by their male partner. The constructions of survivor and perpetrator follow hegemonic structures of masculinity and femininity. Traditional forms of gender roles and power distribution of the subordination of women and the dominance of men are emphasised: the female survivors are positioned in a submissive, derogatory role and depicted as passive and emotional thus emphasising traditional forms of femininity. In Exposed Dee’s Alter-Ego points out her own sexual naivety:

Dee: “It was fun, alright?” Alter-Ego: “Yeah, fun and stupid.” (Exposed, 2011)

In Sexting, Lola is portrayed as unaware that Josh could take advantage of her:

Lola: “I wanted you to see it, not the whole world!” (Sexting, 2016)

Punishments for survivors are reinforced by peers and strangers for acting out of the norm resulting in labelling them as ‘sluts’ and ‘skanks’, degrading them and their sexual autonomy to social outsiders as their behaviour gets framed as something to be embarrassed about. Furthermore, women who sext voluntarily are seen as deviant. In Just send it, Abi’s friend Eve engages in sexting and normalises it as exploration of her own sexuality; however, this is dismissed by Leah, who discredits Eve’s defence:

Leah: “They [everyone] don’t [sext]. You have!” (Just send it, 2016, emphasis as acted)

This implies that a woman having sexual interests is deviant by definition resulting in the persistence of hegemonic gender relations. The overarching theme of these dynamics is that women are presumed to be sexually inexperienced. The survivor’s maturity level extends on the assumption that a higher interest in sexual activities equals the transition of young girls into womanhood, making them more (sexually) attractive and available for men. Yet, the actual engagement in sexting is not only sanctioned as deviant, but women are also objectified through their nude pictures as a virtual manifestation of traditional traits of femininity and sexual attractiveness.

Male perpetrators, meanwhile, are positioned as the powerful. They are depicted as confident, demanding men with sexual urges and in need to confirm their dominance with peers. They normalise their own behaviour with the validation of their male peer group. In Exposed, upon confrontation, Si raises his voice and declines any responsibility:

Si: “What you think I did this?” (Exposed, 2011, emphasis as acted)

In Sexting, Josh confidently forwards Lola’s picture to his friends. Upon confrontation, he brushes his behaviour off as normal, whilst simultaneously shifting the blame to his friends.

Josh: “Okay, shared it with a couple of my mates, you can’t blame me if they go and share it.” (Sexting, 2016)

Furthermore, all perpetrators are met with encouragement by their peers for forwarding the picture. For example, in Just send it, Josh is told by his friend Brandon that the nude picture is ‘hot’ and therefore has to be shared ‘to their mates’.
Gender intersects with race, class, and sexuality. Apart from Exposed’s Dee and Si, the people depicted in sexting education are predominantly white. Implications for racial and ethnic minorities are mentioned in none of the films. Furthermore, there is no indication of any LGBTI representation and no reflection on any class relations. These campaigns thus fail to engage in any form of intersectionality and consequently, perpetuate cultural ideals and institutional powers of white heterosexual dominance.

### 3.3. Blaming and Shaming Women

Sexting education exclusively narrates around female survivors’ actions. Women are responsible for adequately risk-assessing their behaviour to defy potential negative consequences and are advised to restrain from engaging in new forms of sexual expressions to avoid these consequences. If they fail to do so, they are held accountable for their own actions, and for those of their male partners and his peers. In Exposed, Dee is reasoning that Si should not have forwarded the picture but is then dismissed by her Alter-Ego:

Dee: “Si shouldn’t have gone and sent them to Jay.” Alter-Ego: “Stop blaming everyone else. You sent them first. We have to face up to it.” (Exposed, 2011, emphasis as acted)

Women are put into a position of degradation and shame. The cultural system forces them into believing the abuse was their own fault. Yet again, this distorts the perception of what the problem is, undermining the harms inflicted upon survivors whilst reinforcing the assumption that perpetrators are less accountable for a survivor’s abuse.

Furthermore, the unawareness of consequences puts survivors in a double standard. The introduction to the films from the resources initiates the narrative around the survivor’s ‘mistake’:

“Dee makes a common mistake […] and sends indecent photos of herself to her boyfriend Si; without thinking […] Si sends the photos to a friend” (Exposed Guidance Notes, 2011: 4)

“Through peer pressure and wanting to impress, Lola sends a sexual picture that is shared and sent further than she ever imagined” (BSBC for Professionals, 2016)

The female survivor is held accountable for their unawareness, yet the male perpetrator is excused for being equally unaware. Furthermore, men redirect the blame for their perpetration: In Exposed, Si is excusing himself because he did not upload them to a social network.

Si: “Hey! I didn’t upload them. It’s not my fault. So, what have I done?” (Exposed, 2011)

In Sexting, Josh is redirecting the narrative back onto Lola’s responsibility of sending a picture in the first place.

Josh: “Why did you send it?” (Sexting, 2016)

Consequently, the perpetrator and their actions are minimised, dismissed, and excused through the naturalisation of male peer support and sexual aggression against women.

The films fail to show any negative consequences for perpetrators. The only instance can be seen in Just send it, when Josh and Brandon walk into the school office of Pastoral Care to talk with authority figures. As the exclusive example of repercussion, this implies that getting told off by adults is the worst that could happen, reducing the seriousness and harmfulness of the offence once again.

On a positive contrary, a short exchange in Just send it between Josh and his friend Dan shows remorse on Josh’s side:
Josh: “I deleted the photo […] It just happened so fast.” […] Dan: “It was a really stupid thing to do.” (Just send it, 2016)

Whilst there is an impression the fault was with the perpetrator, the teaching material of Just send it narrates the opposite: By arguing that blame is not ‘solely on the girl’ (Childnet International, 2016b: 44) it is implied that blame might not be exclusively directed to the survivor, yet the survivor is responsible to a certain degree. This automatically diminishes the perpetrator’s responsibility and further derogates and disempowers the survivor.

4. Discussion

The criminalisation of adolescents’ sexuality, the reproduction of hegemonic gender structures, and the excuse of male perpetrators and blaming of female survivors in UK sexting education collectively contribute to the (re)construction of symbolic violence. Thus, sexting education is perpetuating and legitimising male sexual violence against women and girls.

Sexting education is narrated from female survivors’ point of view and what they could have done differently in order to avoid victimisation. Victim-blaming in the aftermath is justified because the content in question would not exist if the survivors had not taken them in the first place. As a result, these films frame survivors as complicit in experiencing violence whilst reinforcing the notion that abuse is a natural and inevitable (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002) part of a woman’s identity (Connell, 2005). In Exposed Dee is told by her ‘smarter’ self that she is to be held exclusively accountable for her victimisation as she made the ‘mistake’ and was ‘stupid’ for doing so. In Sexting Lola is shamed by her classmates the day after her photos go viral. Just send it argues that women engaging in sexting are deviant for expressing their sexual autonomy through new means. Women are taught to believe their sexual expression is the cause of their victimisation. Therefore, women’s right to sexual autonomy is undermined, yet the objectification of women’s bodies (Carter and Steiner 2004) and slurs towards them are normalised as part of a woman’s identity (Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009). In both Exposed and Sexting perpetrators’ actions to non-consensually forward their partners’ explicit images remain unaddressed. In Sexing and Just send it their actions are met with support by their male peers by objectifying the women depicted thus legitimising male sexual aggression through male peer support (Dekeseredy and Schwartz, 2016). However, focusing on survivors’ actions rather than perpetrators’ neglects the issue of breaching survivors’ trust and privacy: women might have consented to their partner seeing them naked, but not to have images sent on. Furthermore, this fails to take into account that images can be obtained without the survivor’s knowledge. In a recent study among Australian adults (n=4,274) aged 16-49, Henry, Flynn, and Powell (2019) emphasise that 10% of respondents who had never engaged in any sexting behaviour still fell victim to IBSA. “In other words, while sending sexual selfies might increase the risk that those images are misused, not sending sexual selfies is by no means a guaranteed protection” (Henry, Flynn and Powell, 2019, p.12). As a result, IBSA is implicitly denied as a form of sexual violence perpetuating the traditional rape myth – and subsequently symbolic violence – that women cannot be sexually violated by their partners (Sullivan et al., 2016).

Through heteronormative depictions of (white, middle-class) female survivor and male perpetrators sexting education fails to acknowledge abuse as an experience across all social groups. This is particularly concerning since marginalised groups tend to not only be more vulnerable but also especially targeted for gender-based and sexual violence (Powell, Scott and Henry, 2018; Henry, Flynn and Powell, 2019; Guasp, Gammon and Ellison, 2013; Sheridan, Scott and Campbell, 2019). Henry, Flynn, and Powell (2019) report that 50% of indigenous Australians, 56% of people with disability, and 36% of LGB report IBSA victimisation on at least one account. Additionally, previous research has highlighted that there is little gender difference in overall IBSA victimisation with some studies...
showing more female survivors (OeSC, 2017; Branch et al., 2017), other more male survivors (Powell and Henry, 2017; Reed, Tolman and Ward, 2016), and others indicating no significant gender difference (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015; Henry, Flynn and Powell, 2019).

Furthermore, IBSA is perpetrated by both men and women (Henry, Flynn and Powell, 2019; OeSC, 2017). Whilst perpetrators can be (ex)partners, they might also be friends, family members, or strangers with motives ranging from “coercion, blackmail, humiliation, revenge, embarrassment, sexual gratification, fun, social notoriety, and financial gain” (Henry et al., 2019, p. 566, see also Hayes and Dragiewicz, 2018; Henry and Powell, 2015b; McGlynn, Rackley, and Houghton, 2017). However, by dismissing the potential for male survivors and female perpetrators and motives going beyond wanting to impress peers, sexting education fails to acknowledge the complexity of IBSA.

These hegemonic gender structures are part of “dominant masculine discourses and practices” (Dekeseredy and Schwartz, 2016, p.4) which are “embedded not only in individual selves but also in interaction and organizational arrangements” (Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009, p.592). When all media influences how society views certain concepts coming from the broader system (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017), educational work facilitates the same. Through institutional filtering and framing, educational work is designed to remain within a narrative which fits the expectations of gender and sexuality of those in power (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017) which in the western civilisation are often heterosexual white men (Van Zoonen, 1994).

The films are designed as an early intervention programme for potential harms inflicted through technology (CEOP Command, 2011). Young people are encouraged “to explore online behaviour and [its] consequences” (Childnet International, 2016b: 1) for themselves and others. However, they do so exclusively through a risk-management approach for potential targets whilst neglecting perpetrator and bystander intervention with regard to respecting someone’s autonomy. Risk-management has the underlying assumption that all sexting will lead to exploitation. However, since a lack of engaging in sexting can still lead to victimisation, risk-management is “both inappropriate and unreasonable. In a context in which participation in online spaces [...] is an increasingly core aspect of our social lives, such advice may hinder women’s rights to full and equal participation in society as ’digital citizens’” (Henry and Powell, 2014: 93).

Despite educational efforts to implicate their target-groups viewpoints there is a persistent dissonance – given that these films are half a decade apart – between the creators and their audience. Indeed, prior research has highlighted that young people find this persistence of gender inequality and sexual double standards particularly problematic (Ringrose et al., 2013, 2012) yet education continues to acknowledge these concerns. Sexting campaigns, therefore, fail “to acknowledge that young people have the right to explore their sexual identities in a safe environment” (Powell and Henry, 2014a, p.121). The resistance of the production institutions against new adaptations of exploring sexuality through new technologies denies positive experiences such behaviour can have (Crofts et al., 2015). However, by focusing on the exploration of sexuality as the issue rather than the exploitation of a person’s trust and autonomy, the victim-blaming narrative persists (Powell and Henry, 2014a) and further supports the continuum of naturalising male sexual violence and female sexual passivity.

5. Conclusion and Future Outlook

This feminist case study has engaged in a critical debate on the continuum of symbolic violence and the persistence of victim-blaming in sexting education. UK sexting campaigns do very little to challenge
socio-cultural structures of how IBSA is perceived. On the contrary, they reinforce traditional gender-biases and gender norms, perpetuating the very problems they ostensibly aim to reduce.

Education needs to focus on “young people to be more critical consumers of images and to think about the images that they encounter and whether it is appropriate and ethical to send them on to their peers” (Powell, 2010: 86). The issue is not the criminalization of exploring one’s sexuality but how “to be an ethical user and consumer of technologies” (Powell and Henry, 2014a: 122), how to be an ethical bystander, and how to engage in positive and healthy relationships (Powell and Henry, 2014a). This can be achieved by using the newest empirical data from a feminist view when creating new educational contents. Furthermore, social media is a key operator in feminist education to inspire critical thinking and activism as young people spend a considerate amount of time on them (Rentschler, 2014). Despite these needs, UK educational campaigns are seemingly absent from these environments.

A positive outlook is offered by Australian research which has recently brought some of these notions forward to the Australian government (Crofts et al., 2015; Powell and Henry, 2014a) resulting in a less victim-centred narrative approach to IBSA. For example, the Office of the eSafety Commissioner released a series of short monologues on Rewrite Your Story: Sam’s story frames IBSA as the issue rather than the behaviour of the survivor (eSafety, 2017a); Jarrod’s story narrates on bystander intervention on witnessing IBSA among their social circle (eSafety, 2017b). This demonstrates a more harm-aware and survivor-supportive impact of research on IBSA education. This study thus recommends developing new UK sexting education by addressing IBSA as a form of sexual violence, by using bystander and perpetrator intervention, and by helping adolescents explore their sexuality in a safe environment.

To conclude, sexting education (re)produces symbolic violence and thus feeds into the persistence of victim-blaming. A change in discourse is only possible if predominant assumptions of sexuality, neglect of seriousness of IBSA, victim-blaming, and perpetrator excuses are addressed. Empirically-informed education can mark a step forward in breaking the stigma by engaging in a feminist debate and challenging their audience to be more critical and ethical about image-consumption.

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Notes

1 Pukkafilem, 2011, CEOP, 2011: As of January 2019, the film has more than 874,000 hits combined (over 790,000 views on CEOP’s YouTube channel, as well as over 83,000 views on Pukkafilem’s YouTube channel) with an expectation to reach an even larger audience due to its use in schools as part of the curriculum.

2 Within a month the video was viewed 153 times with “an estimated reach across all social media of approximately 73,000 people” (BSBC Annual Report, 2015-16). As of January 2019, the video has been viewed over 912,000 times1. As the film is additionally freely available via Dropbox and Google Drive (BSBC: for professionals, 2017), its exact reach can only be speculated to go far beyond this number. The video is available for primary schools as well as secondary schools. However, the views on the primary version do not significantly increase this number as the main audience are young people in their teens. The video itself is not different but rather is accompanied by slightly reduced teaching material.
There is no indication of its potential reach but seeing that the video was difficult to source and cannot be found on YouTube or similar sites, its reach potentially falls far below the other two, making its impact likely less significant.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests.

References


Research Resources

Exposed, 2011:

CEOP (2011): Exposed. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ovR3FF_6us&t=1s

Pukkafilm (2011): Exposed – Education film for CEOP. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uJOXOAQ9Qo&t=1sHits


Just send it, 2016


Sexting, 2016

