

# Understanding and Combatting Youth Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse

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## **ABSTRACT**

This report presents findings from qualitative and quantitative research on digital image-sharing practices with 480 young people aged 12 to 18 years (336 in the survey and 144 in focus groups) from across the UK. Although our study examined a wide range of digital sexual behaviours, we found that non-consensual image-sharing practices were particularly pervasive, and consequently normalised and accepted among youth. Through our discussion of young people's everyday experiences we demonstrate how non-consensual image-sharing practices constitute forms of image based sexual harassment and abuse. We introduce the term image-based sexual harassment (IBSH) to describe unwanted sexual images (e.g. cyberflashing or unsolicited dick pics) and unwanted solicitation for sexual images (e.g. pressured sexting), and image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) to describe the non-consensual recording, distribution, and/or threat of distribution of sexual images (e.g. revenge porn). Our central aim is to improve the support available for young people by helping parents, teachers, and policymakers to identify and respond to diverse young people's experiences with image-based sexual harassment and abuse.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND

Many researchers emphasise how ‘sexting’—i.e. the consensual exchange of sexual images—can be a form of sexual expression and intimacy formation for teens (Burkett, 2015; O’Sullivan, 2014; Villacampa, 2017). Distinct from these consensual digital practices, image-based sexual harassment and abuse describes a subset of non-consensual and harmful online behaviours that constitute as digital sexual violence and require immediate intervention:

### (1) Image-based sexual harassment (IBSH)

Image-based sexual harassment describes two forms of digital sexual violence: (a) unwanted sexual images (e.g. cyberflashing or unsolicited dick pics), and (b) unwanted solicitation for sexual images (McGlynn and Johnson, 2020). We define ‘images’ broadly to encompass all forms of visual content, such as photographs, videos, live videos, chats, etc.

### (2) Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA)

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) refers to the non-consensual recording, distribution, and/or threat of distribution of nude or sexual images. Although sometimes referred to as ‘revenge porn’ in popular culture, this term fails to account for the many different contexts in which IBSA can take place.

While these different forms of digital sexual violence are ‘new’ to the extent that technology enables them (boyd, 2014), these practices are connected to the same unequal, hierarchical gender relations as traditional forms of sexual violence (Henry and Powell, 2015; Powell and Henry, 2017). These forms of digital sexual violence most often involve the harassment and abuse of women and girls (Dodge & Spencer, 2018; Powell, 2010). Unfortunately, these practices are becoming increasingly common as 47% of women aged 18 to 24 years reported receiving an unsolicited dick pic in a recent poll (YouGov, 2018), and 9% of girls in Plan UK’s study (2020) were asked to send intimate images of themselves and/or received unwanted images during the first UK lockdown period in early 2020 alone.

## THE STUDY

Our combined qualitative and quantitative research responds to gaps in our understanding of image-based sexual harassment and abuse, as distinct from the abstract category of ‘sexting’. We conducted focus group interviews with 144 diverse young people (aged 12 to 18) across seven schools. The majority of participants were under 15 years-old, creating a unique data set with children under the age of sexual consent (16) and under the legal sexting age (18). The focus groups were structured as part of Sharing Networked Images Practices (SNIP) mApping workshops that explored how young people create images for social media sharing, and also the sexual content that they receive via social media apps. For our quantitative method, we administered an online survey to 336 young people. Survey questions explored their experiences with a range of image-sharing practices, including their experiences of receiving unwanted sexual images, unwanted solicitation for sexual images and image-based sexual abuse.

Through documenting the digital platforms in use and how technological affordances mediate behaviour, capacities and decision making around image sharing, our research contributes a unique viewpoint to the research on digital sexual violence. Furthermore, by documenting young people's experiences of the support they received when faced with digital sexual violence, our findings have important policy and practice implications for a range of stakeholders, including schools, families and communities.

## KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Technology facilitates image-based sexual harassment and abuse**

Social media platforms create opportunities for users to engage in image-based sexual harassment and abuse, through their various technical functions-referred to as 'technological affordances' (boyd, 2014). In particular, Snapchat enables image-based sexual harassment and abuse through its quick adds, shout outs, streaks, score points and lack of identity verification measures. Instagram facilitates unwanted sexual content through its direct message and group chat features.
- 2 Image-based sexual harassment overwhelmingly impacts girls**

First, adolescent girls often reported receiving unwanted images of male genitals (i.e. cyberflashing) from unknown adult men, and known and unknown boys (same-aged peers). A large majority of girls who received such images reported feeling 'disgusted', 'embarrassed', and 'confused'.

Second, girls commonly reported receiving requests for sexual images from unknown adult men, and known and unknown boys (same-aged peers). Of those who had been asked to send nudes, girls felt more pressure to do so, compared to boys. Solicitation was often initiated through being sent an unsolicited dick pic-referred to as a 'transactional dick pic'.
- 3 Image-based sexual abuse is heavily influenced by gender norms, and an intersectional approach to contextualised harm is needed**

Boys were rewarded for sharing girls' images amongst their peers, as an indication of their masculinity status. Girls were shamed and victim-blamed for having their image shared without their consent. Further, IBSA risk and harms are not simply gendered but also, deeply classed and raced, with young people having variable access to support. Thus, we argue for a nuanced approach to understanding and contextualising digital sexual violence.
- 4 Young people rarely report image-based sexual harassment and abuse**

Young people experienced very little relevant and useful support in mitigating these online harms. Rates of reporting to either the social media platforms or to parents or school were nearly non-existent.
- 5 Need for more effective and age-appropriate digital sex education**

Reflecting on their own stories, young people offered useful insight into their experience of what works well in schools. Emphasising the value of schools focusing on the actions of perpetrators and avoiding victimblaming approaches. Recognising the value of specialist expertise, smaller group formats, with younger facilitators and a move away from whole school assemblies to convey important and sensitive messages.

## INTRODUCTION

On Saturday 17 November 2018, Professor Jessica Ringrose (UCL Institute of Education) and Amelia Jenkinson (CEO of School of Sexuality Education charity) attended the Feminism in Schools conference in south London. They were scheduled to deliver workshops on 'rape culture' at school (Ringrose and Mendes, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019) with several groups of secondary-school aged children. They had anticipated hearing concerns around online misogyny and sexism, gender double-standards and slut shaming. What they had not expected was the overriding prevalence of a specific form of image-based sexual harassment, common among millennials: the unsolicited dick pic. Across all the workshops they facilitated that day were these refrains in relation to receiving unwanted sexual images online:

*'Reporting is hard... Because it is normal!'*

*'Ignoring it is better, or using humour.'*

*'Blocking them's easier.'*

*'But even if you do block the person [they] can make up another account.'*

The young people's statements about the challenges of reporting, and the individualised strategies used to manage these online encounters, highlighted to us the enormous challenges of navigating these new forms of social media intimacy. It also hammered home how image-based sexual harassment and abuse appeared to be largely taken for granted and normalised.

Responding to these challenges, Professor Ringrose with Dr. Kaitlyn Regehr from University of Kent in collaboration with School of Sexuality Education, embarked upon a research project to explore young people's image-sharing practices, including documenting unwanted sexual images they received on social media platforms, and understandings of and responses to image-based sexual harassment. This was building upon one of the first youth sexting studies in the UK commissioned by the NSPCC and conducted by Ringrose and colleagues in 2011 and published in 2012. The aim was to map how the social media landscape and user practices had changed in the intervening decade. This report details the findings from the qualitative data collected in spring/summer of 2019 and the survey conducted in summer 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic just after the first UK national lockdown. Taken together, the research involved 480 young people from a wide range of school settings across England.

The overall scene is predictably (and depressingly) similar to that of 2011. Sexual pressure and coercion are still common features of solicitation for nudes. The age-old double standards, in which girls who send sexual images are slut-shamed, whilst boys are rewarded for possession of and sharing girls' nudes, create gender-specific pressures on youth. Rights-based, up-to-date education to address these matters is still lacking, and children feel unable to report image-based sexual harassment and abuse for fear of being victim blamed. What has changed, and will continue to do so, is the digital technology, and each change has brought with it a new manifestation of digital sexual violence. In particular, girls are increasingly experiencing cyberflashing on platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram, and this form of image-based sexual harassment is becoming widely accepted as a new norm.

This report aims to shift how young people, schools and parents conceptualise these behaviours by clearly demonstrating how non-consensual image-sharing practices are forms of image based sexual harassment and abuse. We introduce the term image-based sexual harassment to describe unwanted sexual images (e.g. cyberflashing or unsolicited dick pics) and unwanted solicitation for sexual images (e.g. pressured sexting), and image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) to describe non-consensual image-sharing practices (e.g. 'revenge porn').

This report is the empirical basis of a suite of resources we have created for schools to tackle image-based sexual harassment and abuse, made possible by our academic expert and sex education charity collaborative partnership. This includes teacher training, lesson resources, comprehensive guidance and a school policy on image-based sexual harassment and abuse which has since been cited by the Department for Education in their guidance to schools on sharing nudes or semi-nudes. Meanwhile, parallel projects using the same innovative methodology are being conducted in Ireland and Canada.

We are writing this in the wake of the 'Everyone's Invited' movement hitting the headlines in March 2021, an Instagram-based campaign against sexual harassment in schools. At the time of writing, Everyone's Invited has enabled over 50,000 anonymous disclosures of sexual violence, and the naming of over 3,000 schools, colleges and universities. The survivor testimonies include experiences of image-based abuse, victim blaming and slut shaming which mirror the experiences of children detailed in this report. Now more than ever, we hope there is momentum for policy makers, parents and carers, teachers, practitioners, and technology companies to work together to tackle all forms of sexual violence.



# BACKGROUND

## RESEARCH LITERATURE

### ADOLESCENT SEXTING

Since the launch of the smartphone in 2007, over approximately the last 15 years, a wealth of interdisciplinary research on the topic of adolescents' sexual image-sharing practices has emerged internationally. Within this literature, researchers have used the term 'sexting' to describe a range of image-sharing practices, including the consensual sending and receiving of 'sexts' (i.e. sexual photos or videos), as well as non-consensual image-sharing practices (Krieger, 2017). This conflation of consensual and non-consensual image-sharing practices, or what Hasinoff deems the "erasing of consent" (2015), is the result of experts treating all adolescent sexting behaviours as harmful largely as a result of criminalisation of sexting by under 18s. By uniformly condemning all image-sharing practices, however, this 'deviancy discourse' (Döring, 2014) often overlooks the critical distinctions between diverse online gender and sexual behaviours. In particular, the private, consensual exchange of sexts can reflect adolescents' sexual expression and intimacy formation (Burkett, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2014; Villacampa, 2017). Contrastingly, the sharing of sexual images without the consent of the original sender (Johnson et al., 2018), the sending of unwanted sexual images (Burkett, 2015), or unwanted solicitation of sexual images (Drouin & Tobin, 2014a; Thomas, 2018) reflect problematic and abusive practices.

Taken together, this research highlights the importance of accounting for the many nuances of adolescents' image-sharing practices, and the diverse contexts within which they occur. The following report will consequently define 'sexting' as the consensual sending and receiving of sexts, and will treat non-consensual image-sharing practices, referred to hereafter as image-based sexual harassment and abuse, as a separate phenomenon.

### IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ABUSE

Henry and Powell (2015) introduced the term 'technology-facilitated sexual violence' (TFSV) to describe a wide array of abusive behaviours that depend on digital technologies to facilitate harm. While these different forms of digital sexual violence are 'new' to the extent that technology enables certain new affordances for committing them (boyd, 2014), these practices are connected to the same unequal, hierarchical gender relations as traditional forms of sexual violence (Dodge & Spencer, 2018; Powell, 2010). As such, these forms of digital sexual violence most often involve the harassment and abuse of women and girls (Dodge & Spencer, 2018; Powell, 2010). For the purposes of this report, we will focus on two key forms of digital sexual violence: (1) image-based harassment, and (2) image-based sexual abuse (IBSA).

## 1. Image-based sexual harassment

We have introduced the term ‘image-based sexual harassment’ to describe two forms of sexual harassment that occur within the context of digital image sharing. We define ‘images’ broadly to encompass all forms of visual content, such as photographs, videos, live videos chats, etc.

### *(a) unwanted sexual images*

Also referred to as ‘cyberflashing’ (McGlynn & Johnson, 2020), the sending of unwanted sexual images most often involves adult cisgendered men sending unsolicited images of their genitals (i.e. ‘unsolicited dick pics’) over digital technologies, such as Air Drop, social media platforms, dating platforms or video-conferencing platforms (e.g. ‘Zoom bombing’) (Marcotte et al., 2020; McGlynn & Johnson, 2020; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019). While physical ‘flashing’ is criminalised in the UK, the exposure of an offender’s penis online is not specifically addressed in UK criminal law (McGlynn & Johnson, 2020). This is particularly concerning given the documented rise of this trend in recent years. In a YouGov (2018) poll, 54% of women aged 18–24 years had received a dick pic, with 47% of that figure being unsolicited. Furthermore, during the first COVID-19 lockdown period in the UK (April to May 2020), 25% of girls experienced at least one form of abuse, bullying or sexual harassment online, including receiving unwanted pictures (Plan UK, 2020). Recipients of unsolicited sexual images and/or videos describe this harassment as a violation of one’s “sexual autonomy, privacy and right to everyday life” (McGlynn & Johnson, 2020, p. 4), and report higher depression, anxiety, and lower self-esteem following receipt (Klettke et al., 2019).

### *(b) unwanted solicitation for sexual images*

A second form of image-based sexual harassment is the unwanted solicitation of sexual images, also referred to as pressured sexting (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Thomas, 2018) and non-consensual solicitation of nudes (Döring, 2014). According to recent research, young women report being “bombarded” by repeated requests for sexual images and/or videos (Thomas, 2018), and refer to requests from male peers as commonplace (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Temple et al., 2012). This phenomenon is highly gendered, as men and boys are more likely to exert pressure on girls to send sexual images (Kernsmith et al., 2018; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ouytsel et al., 2017; Ringrose et al., 2012).

Researchers have found that repeated asking (Drouin et al., 2015; Englander, 2015; Thomas, 2018), referred to as “working a yes out” (Sanday, 2007; Thomas, 2018), and commitment manipulation (e.g. reassuring mutual love and trust) (Drouin et al., 2015; Ouytsel et al., 2017), are the most common coercive tactics used by adolescent boys in their solicitation of girls’ sexual images and/or videos. Despite the subtlety of these tactics, however, studies show that these behaviours are linked to offline forms of sexual coercion (Bianchi et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2016), as well as symptoms of anxiety, depression, and trauma among victim-survivors (Choi et al., 2016; Drouin et al., 2015; Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). Importantly, researchers have also found that asking for nudes was being increasingly brokered through sending unwanted dick pics, so called ‘transactional dick pics’, and we argue this represents a doubled form of sexual harassment (Salter, 2017; Mandau, 2019).

## 2. Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA)

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) refers to the non-consensual recording, distribution, or threat of distribution of nude or sexual images (Henry et al., 2018; McGlynn et al., 2017). While IBSA is described as a continuum of abusive behaviours beyond the familiar example of ‘revenge porn’, UK laws only apply to contexts where the offender has a direct intent to cause the victim-survivor distress (Gillespie, 2015; McGlynn et al., 2017). IBSA, however, can occur in many different contexts, and is often motivated by complex gendered dynamics. Recent research has found that boys share nude images of girls, referred to as ‘digital trophies’ (Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021), to achieve “homosocial reward” (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015, p. 206) among their peers. This male bonding strategy of sharing nude images of girls and women serves to normalise the objectification and ‘othering’ of women and girls (Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; Ringrose et al., 2013; Setty, 2019). Girls are also much more likely to have their sexual image shared without their consent (Burkett, 2015; Johnson et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2013), and following circulation, girls face far greater negative consequences (Naezer & Oosterhout, 2020; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019). In particular, girls commonly face slut shaming (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015) and victim blaming (Döring, 2014; Holoyda et al., 2018; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Mishna et al., 2018) from their peers when their sexual images are shared. Contrastingly, boys face reduced social consequences if their image is shared beyond the intended recipient, as homosocial masculinity works to couch men’s leaked dick pics as a form of humour and lad banter (Haslop & O’Rourke, 2020; Mandau, 2019) rather than sexually stigmatising boys.

### **INTERSECTIONALITY AND IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ABUSE**

First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), ‘intersectionality’ is a conceptual tool for understanding the ways in which systems of inequality interlock. Different ‘axes’ of identity include gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, religion, nationality, and/or disability, and different combinations of these factors create hierarchies of oppression and privilege shaping young people’s experiences offline and also online. Young people come from different backgrounds and contexts and therefore some young people will face increased risks of forms of image-based sexual harassment and abuse, as well as a reduction in supports available (Project deShame, 2017). In this report we map out, for instance, how intersectional factors shape how young people relate to social media applications’ privacy settings, since their socio-economic privilege and protection relate to the forms of digital literacy young people received in their school setting and whether gaining visibility and sexual esteem in the peer social network is more valued and important to the young person than keeping their images and information secure.

## HOW PLATFORMS FACILITATE IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ABUSE

Social media platforms create opportunities for users to engage in image-based sexual harassment and abuse, through their various technical functions--referred to as 'technological affordances' (boyd, 2014). First, many social media platforms are driven by maximising the 'visibility' of information, including images/videos, messages and users' profiles. These processes are monetised and feed into a 'transactional culture' (Manzerolle and Daubs, 2021), as well as open the gateway to phishing, hacking, porn push and other practices aimed at harvesting information and exploiting vulnerabilities of users, therefore also enabling cybercrime (Urwin & Calver, 2019; "Snapchat 'Has Become A Haven' For Child Predators," 2018). The monetisation of social media relations means that affordances can be gamed, and technical features can be used by perpetrators for 'searchability' of content and users which can be used to gain access to young people (McGeeney & Hanson, 2017). Second, social media platforms facilitate 'spreadability' of content through various features that allow users to "forward," "repost" or "share" content to others and across multiple platforms with "a few keystrokes" (boyd, 2014, p. 12). This spreadability can lead to the easy distribution of sexual content, including targeting of groups with unsolicited sexual images (i.e. image-based sexual harassment), mass porn push through porn bots, as well as the sharing of sexual images beyond the intended recipient (i.e. image-based sexual abuse). Third, 'persistence' refers to the particular permanence that characterises online communication. It is this persistence that specifically complicates the digital context of consent for young people's online image sharing, as a once consensual exchange of sexual images can later become IBSA, because the images are often saved, screenshotted or downloaded on the other person's device. While that recipient may not distribute those images to others at the time they were originally sent, or even later, the possibility of doing so persists (Henry and Powell, 2018). As certain platform affordances enable and facilitate image-based sexual harassment and abuse in unforeseen ways, educators and parents urgently need to develop greater awareness of the specific affordances of the platforms that are popular among youth (Charteris et al., 2018), as well as strategies for staying safe beyond privacy settings but rather through multiple forms of reporting.

## GOVERNMENT GUIDANCE

*\*This guidance also applies in Wales but is different in Scotland and Northern Ireland so a blanket explanation for practices across the United Kingdom is not possible.*

England's current government guidance about image-based sexual harassment and abuse (IBSH or IBSA) among under 18s exists across multiple documents, including: (1) 'Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings' published in 2020 (to replace the 2016 UKCCIS 'Sexting in Schools and Colleges' Guidance); (2) Ofsted, Research and analysis: Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges; (3) 'Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges' from 2021; (4) the 2020 RSHE guidance; and (5) 'Keeping children safe in education' (2021).

## **1. *Sharing Nudes and Semi-Nudes: Advice for Education Settings 2020***

Published in December 2020, this document is a significant improvement on the 'Sexting in Schools and Colleges' guidance which it replaces. It is a significant step away from victim-blaming and risk-oriented discourse which was implicit in parts of the old guidance document. In its place, 'Sharing nudes and semi-nudes' offers clear and reasoned advice for educators which links to teaching about positive relationships and consent. Much of the guidance draws on the work of researchers and expert organisations – at one point, when defining IBSA in relation to nudes and semi-nudes, it also references the Online Sexual Harassment policy developed by this collaborative research team (see [www.schoolofsexed.org/guidance-for-schools](http://www.schoolofsexed.org/guidance-for-schools)).

The shift in language is also important; there is a clear attempt in this guidance to take an approach which is based on young people's experience and terminology, for example by centring the language of 'nudes' rather than 'sexting'. The updated document also notes that some sharing of sexual images can be consensual and that online communication and the sending of images and videos is a normal part of daily life for the vast majority of teens now.

Overall, the guidance is much more nuanced than its predecessor. There is a clear intention to support young people and be non-judgemental. One criticism which remains from the previous guidance however is that there is a lack of analysis regarding how these issues impact young people of different genders in different ways; namely that girls typically experience IBSA and IBSH more frequently while concurrently experiencing more severe social stigma and slut shaming.

## **2. *OFSTED Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, June 2021***

Following the media coverage which the Everyone's Invited website gained, OFSTED visited 32 schools and colleges across the country to conduct a rapid review into the widespread claims of sexual abuse. In June 2021, they released a report which "revealed how prevalent sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are for children and young people with incidents so commonplace for many that they see no point in reporting them". The online environment was highlighted in the report which found that "nearly 90% of girls, and nearly 50% of boys said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers".

We are encouraged by the report's clear recognition of the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse experienced by young people, and the review's recommendations about improvements to sex education and to school staff training on these issues. That said, we suggest that the advice could go further by emphasising that tackling online and offline sexual harassment requires an understanding of the widespread normalisation of sexism, including in school life.



In the Ofsted document, there is a failure to look at how sexual harassment cultures are fostered across schools through (for instance) punitive victim-blaming uniform policies focused on girls' bodies (see [www.schoolsexed.org/guidance-for-schools](http://www.schoolsexed.org/guidance-for-schools)). Additionally, the document advises looking at sexual harassment as patterned and cultural, however, the focus remains on behavioural recommendations for individual perpetrators. This may serve to neglect the ubiquity of sexism and sexual violence in networked online platformed environments like Instagram or TikTok.

There is an array of language used in the report to discuss online and in-person forms of sexual violence. Regarding the online forms of sexual violence, terms are often grouped into three domains (non-consensual image-sharing, coercive requests for sexual images, and non-consensual image recording), however use of different terms is inconsistent and we would argue there is a need for an appendix summarising the terms used and how they relate to each other. Furthermore, while consensual sharing of nudes is not the topic of this report, we would be remiss not to note the way in which consensual sexting is grouped under an umbrella of 'peer-on-peer abuse' in some cases. This fails to differentiate consensual from non-consensual and harmful digital practices, which is an oversight where victim blaming and shaming of consensual sexual practices becomes common, and is therefore not conducive to fostering an understanding of healthy and positive youth sexual cultures.

### **3. Government Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment in Schools, for 2021**

This guidance was revised in light of the Ofsted Report outlined above. The previous document (from 2018) did acknowledge that sexual harassment could happen online, but it provided sparse detail about this dimension. The updated report pays closer attention to online issues, stating that "sexual violence and sexual harassment exist on a continuum and may overlap; they can occur online and face to face (both physically and verbally) and are never acceptable" (p.3. 6). Further, it highlights how safeguarding concerns regarding intimate relationships can emerge outside of the school or college. This is an improvement over the earlier guidance as it recognises that what happens outside of school (e.g. online) may relate to the peer group at school.

While these are welcome changes, we do still see a reliance on notions of online child exploitation and youth peer-to-peer abuse, rather than centring the way in which sexual harassment (online or otherwise) is grounded in normalised sexism and sexual double standards and wider rape culture in society. The document relies on the evidence from the Ofsted report on 'online sexual abuse' as widespread, though we also urge policymakers to consider more precise terminology when addressing issues of sexual harassment and abuse online. Critically, an umbrella notion of 'online sexual abuse' is not specific enough, and fails to identify the detailed forms of image-based sexual harassment and image-based sexual abuse which occur, and which are outlined in detail in this report.

#### **4. Relationships and Sex Education Guidance (2019)**

While the recently updated government guidance is a major improvement on what came before, there is opportunity for further development in areas related to image-based sexual harassment and abuse. In two cases, the term “in all contexts, including online” is added as a kind of catch-all tag on with no further explanation of specific online issues or ways to deal with relationships in online contexts. Those two cases are “the characteristics of positive and healthy friendships” and “how people can actively communicate and recognise consent from others, including sexual consent, and how and when consent can be withdrawn”. Arguably, a parenthetical note to reference online contexts is not sufficient guidance for educators who may not be familiar with the ways these issues might exist or transmute in online contexts.

There is one section of the guidance which lists topics pupils should know by the end of secondary school under the umbrella of ‘online and media’. Those which pertain to image-based sexual harassment and abuse include:

- Their rights, responsibilities and opportunities online, including that the same expectations of behaviour apply in all contexts, including online.
- Information about online risks, including that any material someone provides to another has the potential to be shared online and the difficulty of removing potentially compromising material placed online.
- Not to provide material to others that they would not want shared further and not to share personal material which is sent to them.
- What to do and where to get support to report material or manage issues online.
- That sharing and viewing indecent images of children (including those created by children) is a criminal offence which carries severe penalties including jail.

Elements of this are valuable, such as ensuring pupils know their rights online, and know where to get support if they need it. Unfortunately, the majority of these points have a victim-blaming tone, which contradicts the guidance in the previous two documents looked at here. For a fundamental shift in victim-blaming cultures, it is vital that sex education challenges online sexual harassment and abuse wherever they arise. Instructing students “not to provide material to others that they would not want shared further” ahead of telling them “not to share personal material which is sent to them” suggests that someone might be at fault for sending a private photo or message. In our view this is the wrong way to approach cases of IBSA and IBSH (see our recommendations and online sexual harassment policy for more details on alternative approaches).

#### **5. Keeping Children Safe in Education (2021)**

The guidance on safeguarding in education was updated in September 2021 and extended to all providers of education, including those which cater to over 16s. We welcome the report’s firmness on the need to take a zero tolerance approach to sexual abuse, violence and harassment. All young people reporting abuse are to be taken seriously, supported, and kept safe. The updated guidance also includes several important additions on the knowledge, attitudes, and procedures which school and college staff require

in order to appropriately respond to sexual abuse, violence and harassment. This includes information on the identification and impact of online peer-on-peer abuse, as well as on the need for trauma-informed approaches which consider how gender, disability, and other factors feed into students' experiences. The guidance discusses the development of reporting mechanisms, acknowledges how abuse and harassment can occur outside of schools and colleges (and may occur online), and reiterates how an absence of reporting does not equate to an absence of incidents, stressing that schools and colleges must be proactive when it comes to promoting children's safety. However, the document focuses largely on managing the perpetrator; greater emphasis should be given to victim/survivor support, including multiple reporting options including anonymous reporting, methods to measuring students attitudes, and methods to appropriately involve students in creating change.

## **LAWS RELEVANT TO IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ABUSE IN ENGLAND\***

*\*These laws also apply in Wales but are different in Scotland and Northern Ireland so a blanket explanation for practices across the United Kingdom is not possible.*

Here we provide a lay summary of the laws relevant to the subcategories of image-based sexual harassment and abuse which we have identified as prevalent amongst young people: unwanted sexual images, unwanted solicitation of sexual images, and image-based sexual abuse.

It is important to caveat here that these laws were designed prior to the use of digital technologies for sexual violence. The laws applied to instances of image-based sexual abuse were, in large part, designed to prevent child sexual abuse material/images from being created and distributed on the internet. As such, they do not recognise the nuances of consensual youth-generated sexual images which, after creation, can be non-consensually shared. In response, we advocate for a consent, rights and ethics-oriented approach to image-based sexual harassment and abuse specifically in schools. The laws to some extent underpin this approach but there are gaps because of the nature of their origin, resulting in certain problematic behaviours going unprosecuted, while other seemingly innocuous acts are deemed criminal. Consequently, while a knowledge of the law is important, we advocate for school and curriculum approaches which recognise the law's gaps and adopt a nuanced approach which, as stated, is consent, rights and ethics oriented.

### **Image-Based Sexual Harassment**

- Unwanted sexual images**
- There are a number of laws in which a person could be prosecuted for sending unsolicited sexual content online, however, the act in and of itself is not yet illegal in England and Wales (though it is in Scotland).
  - Laws which could be applied to this include the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 and some aspects of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 such as "causing a child to watch a sex act" and "sexual communication with a child".
  - The Law Commission is currently conducting a review on laws relevant to this area and will release findings in 2021.

- Unwanted sexual images**
- Several sections of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 could be relevant in instances of sexual coercion, threats and intimidation including ‘causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity’.
  - In situations of demands for sexual images where threats are made, Section 21 of the Theft Act 1968 (Blackmail) is likely to apply.
  - All kinds of persistent harassment and stalking are offences under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. What constitutes harassment or stalking is not explicitly defined, but can include a range of actions when considering the context, nature, and duration of the acts.

### **Image-Based Sexual Abuse**

- As of 2015, it is “an offence for a person to disclose a private sexual photograph or film if the disclosure is made without the consent of an individual who appears in the photograph or film, and with the intention of causing that individual distress”.
- In April 2017, the Sentencing Council included the “threat to disclose intimate material or sexually explicit images”, within its guideline for offences under the Communications Act 2003 (7); however, prosecuting threats of image-based sexual abuse remains challenging.
- Under the Protection of Children Act 1978, creating or sharing indecent images of a child is illegal. It is illegal if the person creating the image is under the age of 18, even if they consent to it being created, or share it with children of the same age.
- In January 2016, the Home Office launched ‘Outcome 21’, a new outcome in the Home Office Recording Rules. This allows police to respond in a proportionate way to reports of youth-produced sexual imagery. This states that even though a young person has broken the law and the police may have evidence that they have done so, the police can record that they chose not to take further action as it was not in the public interest.
- Since April 2019, it has been an offence to take an image or video up a person’s skirt without their consent, often referred to as ‘upskirting’.

## THE STUDY

The aim of our mixed-methods study was to respond to gaps in our understandings of diverse young people's image-sharing practices. This larger category of practices fits on a continuum of risk and harm, where some practices reflect modern-day courtship practices, and thus pose minimal risks and harms for young people, while other practices constitute image-based sexual harassment and abuse, and thus pose a range of risks and harms for young people. Although our study examined a range of image-sharing practices, we have chosen to focus this report on our findings on image-based sexual harassment and abuse because of the urgent need to address these harmful behaviours. The aim of this report is, therefore, to improve the support available for young people, by informing parents, teachers and policymakers on how to identify and respond to diverse young people's experiences of online sexual violence.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do participants use mobile technology for image sharing? How do the affordances of specific platforms and technologies shape different possibilities of image sharing and therefore different decision making practices?
2. What are young people's experiences of unwanted sexual images (e.g. unsolicited dick pics) and unwanted solicitation (e.g. repeated requests for nude images)? What are young people's experiences of non-consensual image sharing (i.e. image-based sexual abuse)? How are these experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse shaped by intersectional and contextual factors such as school context and background?
3. How do young people respond to experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse (e.g. reporting to digital platforms, reporting to school, telling an adult)? How can adults (i.e. parents, teachers, school staff) better support teens who have experienced image-based sexual harassment and abuse?

## METHODOLOGY

### SHARING NETWORKED IMAGE PRACTICES (SNIP) MAPPING WORKSHOPS

Our combined qualitative and quantitative research responds to gaps in our understanding of young people's experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse. For the qualitative component of our research, we conducted SNIP mApping workshops – an innovative and interdisciplinary methodology which utilised a combination of guided focus group discussions and arts-based methodologies to generate critical dialogue about how young people create, share and receive images online.

The workshops began with facilitators showing images taken from advertising in public spaces (see figures 1 and 2) and celebrities' social media accounts, and asking open-ended questions about participants' perceptions of how bodies are portrayed in popular culture. We then inquired about the norms and rules around taking and sharing social media images, and asked how participants made and shared images of themselves and others on their phones and devices.



Participants brought their phones to the workshops, and were encouraged to share some of their social media images such as selfies that they liked, and later any content that they had found problematic.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

Following on from the discussion part of the focus group we then asked young people to draw some of the experiences they had discussed. We drew on Venema and Lobinger's (2017) use of participatory drawing and relational maps of how participants share images online, adapting this to the youth context finding out which platforms they used to share images. We provided paper templates that showed blank display screens (see figure 3) to facilitate drawing activities on Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook and Pornhub.

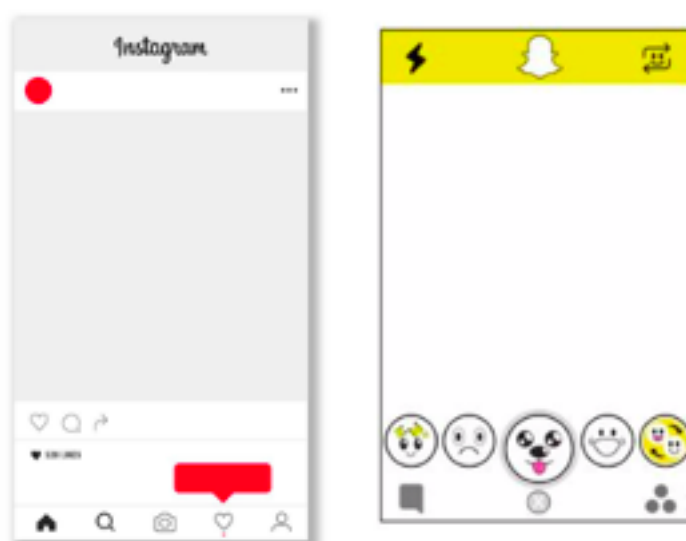


Figure 3.

This drawing method created a context where participants could ‘walk and talk’ the researchers through the process of creating, sharing and receiving images on various online platforms. This drawing method was particularly useful for discussing content that was not digitally retrievable or shareable, such as that received on Snapchat, a disappearing, ephemeral image-sharing platform (Charteris et al., 2018; Handyside and Ringrose, 2017; Koefed and Larson, 2016). This methodology enabled us to see the steps involved when young people use social media platforms to post, share, receive, and comment upon images. Furthermore, this methodology allowed us to explore how technological mediation shapes moral reasoning and decision making around digital image exchanges. Through our first few sessions we learned that the dominant social media platforms amongst participants were Snapchat and Instagram and most drawings focused on using these templates (see figure 4).



Figure 4.

We also provided poster boards, markers and a series of images, memes, and speech bubbles (see figure 5) to allow participants to creatively respond to the dilemmas they face online, for instance drawing mind maps of what they'd like to see in their Relationship and Sexuality Education at school (see figure 6). By documenting young people's experiences of the support they received when faced with online sexual violence, and their opinions on how this support can be improved, this methodology generated key findings on how stakeholders, including schools, families and communities, can buffer the harms of image-based sexual harassment and abuse.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

## **SURVEY**

Following on from this qualitative phase of research in May-September 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and just after the first national lockdown, we administered an online, anonymous survey to young people aged 13 to 18. Responding to the international research highlighting the urgent need to study consent and image sharing amongst young people under 18, our survey brought together four areas of inquiry: (1) wanted/unwanted sexual imagery received; (2) solicitation for sexual imagery; (3) youth self-produced sexual imagery; and (4) non-consensual sharing of sexual images. Bringing together these four areas illuminated the prevalence amongst a wider range of young people, enabled understanding of the content shared, the platforms used, and feelings experienced when imagery is shared or received. The survey was designed to find out the gendered nature of the sexual content of imagery (is it male or female genitals?) which has been neglected in surveys to date (Van Ouystel, 2019), the incidence of non-consensual content on specific platforms, which helps us see which apps are higher risk, and to gauge young people's responses and understandings of blocking and reporting options.

## **SAMPLE**

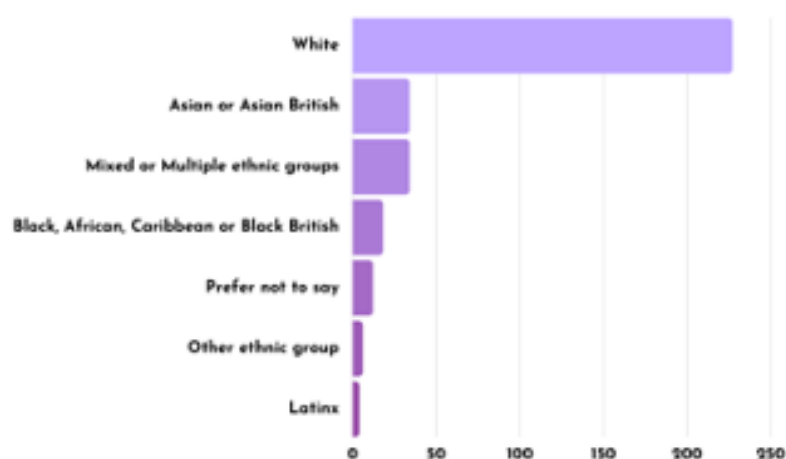
Taken together, our combined qualitative and quantitative research was conducted with 480 young people aged 12 to 18 years (336 in the survey and 144 in focus groups). We undertook our qualitative research in seven highly diverse secondary schools across England. We worked with 144 young people aged 12 to 18. The majority of participants were under 15 years-old, creating a unique data set with children under the age of sexual consent (16) and under the legal sexting age (18). We were interested in moving away from single-axis perspectives on sexting (Van Ouystel, 2020) to consider diverse youth's complex intersecting identities and the ways this shaped their experiences of image sharing.

A detailed breakdown of the participants in our qualitative study can be seen in this table:

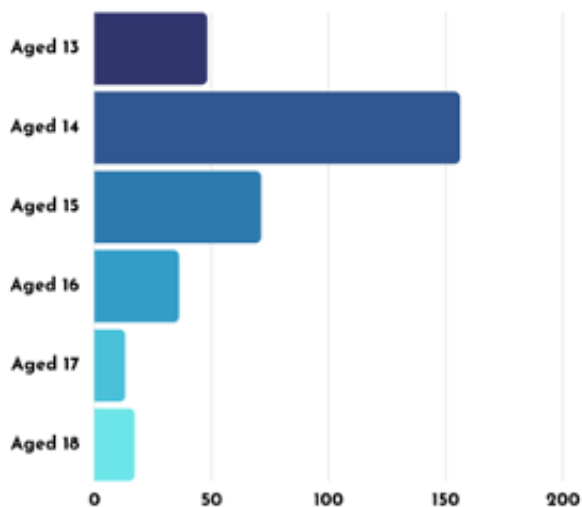
School Name	School Type	Location	Year Groups	Genders
South East London Community School – (SELC)	Mixed state secondary	South East London	Year 8 Year 10 Year 10	12 mixed (4 boys, 8 girls) 7 girls 6 boys
North East London Academy – (NELA)	Mixed state secondary	North East London	Year 7 Year 8 Year 9 Year 10	8 girls 2 girls 3 girls 5 mixed (2 girls, 3 boys)
Central London Mixed Comprehensive One (CLC1)	Mixed state secondary	Central London	Year 8 Year 8 Year 10 Year 10	5 boys 8 girls 6 girls 6 boys
Central London Mixed Comprehensive Two (CLC 2)	Mixed state secondary	Central London	Year 9 Year 9 Year 10 Year 10	4 girls 3 boys 4 girls 2 boys
Swans Independent School for Girls	Girls independent with Mixed sixth form	South West England	Year 8 Year 9 Year 10 Year 12	8 girls 8 girls 8 girls 8 mixed (5 girls, 3 boys)
Lords Independent School for Boys	Boys independent	North London	Year 9 Year 9 Year 10 Year 10	3 boys 3 boys 4 boys 3 boys
South East Independent Boarding School (SEI Boarding)	Mixed independent	South East England	Year 8 Year 8	8 girls 10 boys

For our quantitative research, our survey had 336 usable responses. The following tables demonstrate the demographic information of this sample.

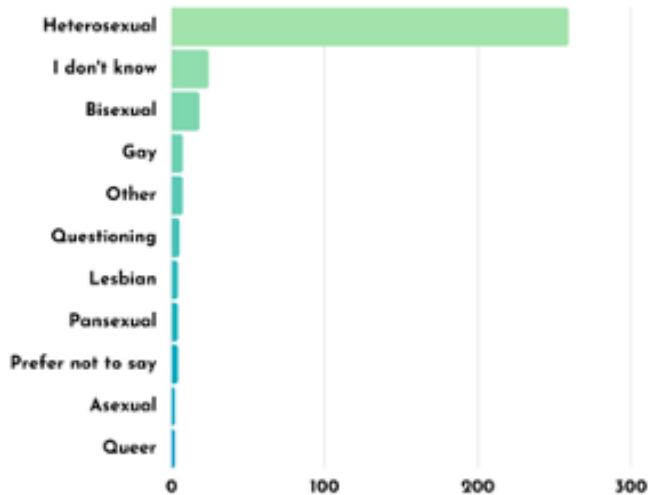
### Survey Participant Ethnicity



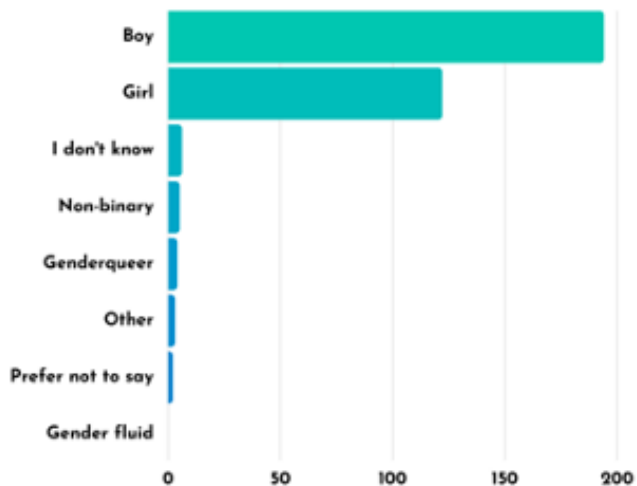
### Survey Participant Age



### Survey Participant Sexuality



### Survey Participant Gender





## FINDINGS

### 1. TECHNOLOGY FACILITATED IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ABUSE

#### SNAPCHAT

Snapchat creates various opportunities for perpetrators to access and harass known and unknown young people online. According to the survey findings, Snapchat was the most common platform used for image-based sexual harassment and abuse, accounting for 62% (n=57/92) of unsolicited sexual images and/or videos, 60% (n=54/89) of solicitation for nudes, and 33% (n=4/12) of images being shared beyond the intended recipient. In the focus group discussions, participants similarly described receiving unwanted images and solicitation on Snapchat. For instance, when discussing retrospectively the first time that young people received dick pics, Swans' sixth formers unanimously claimed that it was when they first downloaded Snapchat.

**Interviewer:** *When did dick pics kind of become more normal, and become kind of like everyday, like reality in your experience?*

**Dan:** *Probably when we got Snapchat.*

**Sally:** *Yeah, literally when we got Snapchat. (Swans mixed Year 12).*

Snapchat connects young people to potential perpetrators of image-based sexual harassment and abuse through several key features and trends:

#### QUICK ADDS

In Snapchat's 'quick add' feature, users appear in other users' quick add list if they share a mutual friend or 'another connection'. This feature allows users to create virtual connections with large networks of known, unknown and semi-known users. Young people described how they commonly received requests from unknown users, and also commonly accepted those requests.

**Daphne:** *You just swipe up and they added me back on it, bare people just added me. Got sixty adds in like a minute, it was crazy, and I accepted some of them, and there was these weird people, other people.*

**Margot:** *I've had like full grown adults trying to add me.*

**Patrice:** *Same.*

**Iriana:** *Gross. (Year 10 CLC1)*

**Jada:** *So like my account's on private, but say people add me, I'll just add them back, so I don't really pay attention to who's adding me, I just add them. (SELC, Year 10 girls)*

### SHOUT OUTS

'Shout outs' refer to the trend of teens actively increasing the visibility of their profiles to wider audiences to achieve more contacts. This is accomplished through another user posting a 'story', i.e. photos or videos shared to the users' contacts, with the intention of boosting their friends' contacts. Often this was done within the context of 'shout outs for shout outs (SFS)', where the user will receive a shout out in return.

***Sammy:** SFS which means shout for shout out. So you send a picture of yourself, like a face or something, and then you mention that person on your story, and then people add them, and then people add that, and then add, and they keep adding each other. And loads of people post your photo, with your tag, so everyone would add you. . . Once they add you then they would be able to text you, and once you do it like they can call you, text you your smartphone. (CLC1 Year 8 girls).*

### STREAKS

A Snapchat 'streak' refers to the number of consecutive days that a user has sent and received a direct snap with another user. These snaps create a score between the two users that counts the number of consecutive days that they have been 'snapping'. Young people consequently associate these scores with popularity—as having high streaks with many different people is seen as indicative of having many friends, which serves to motivate their increased engagement with the platform. Girls explained how streaks motivated them to open the snaps that are sent by these unknown users, which at times were unwanted sexual images.

### SCORE POINTS

Snapchat allocates each user a 'score' that is publicly displayed on their profile, and is calculated based on how many 'snaps' one sends and receives. This feature exacerbates issues of unknown users accessing young people's accounts because it creates an incentive for young people to enhance the visibility of their profile to a large network of users. Participants described actively choosing to keep their privacy settings open, accepting strangers' quick adds, and participating in shout outs and streaks in order to gain more contacts and 'views' on Snapchat and eventually increase their 'score'. Throughout the focus group discussions, it was made clear that having a high score on Snapchat was tied to popularity. As a result, many participants explained how they understood that these actions increased their vulnerability to image-based sexual harassment and abuse from 'paedophiles' and 'weird people', but they chose to do so anyway.

**Colleen:** Obviously, my Snapchat has a massive score, which means loads of people have me as a friend, which means a load of paedophiles can send stuff to me... and they just send it when I'm here to do streaks and get a higher score, but they're just doing it the other way because they want that. And I just want streaks. (CLC1, Year 8 girls).

#### **LACK OF IDENTITY VERIFICATION**

Snapchat offers the affordance of "pseudonymity" because of the platform's lack of identity verification (Evans et al., 2017, p. 41). This feature allows for perpetrators to create and use fake accounts to engage in image-based sexual harassment and abuse. The younger focus groups especially described an awareness of adult strangers online posing as children using the functions of Snapchat to lie about their age, gender, and other identifying characteristics.

**Ashana:** Yeah, it's actually, if you're on the internet you have to be safe, because there are some people on the internet that say oh I'm sixteen years old, but little do you know they're probably thirty or... Or fifty... And they're just like saying oh send me a pic of what you're wearing right now, send me a pic of where you live. (NELA, Year 7 mixed)

## **INSTAGRAM**

Instagram also creates various opportunities for perpetrators to engage in image-based sexual harassment and abuse. According to the survey findings, Instagram was the second most common platform used for image-based sexual harassment and abuse, accounting for 21% (n=19/92) of unsolicited sexual images and/or videos, 21% (n=20/89) of solicitation for nudes, and 33% of IBSA (n=4/12). In the focus group discussions, participants discussed two common trends on Instagram that led to their reception of unwanted sexual content:

#### **DIRECT MESSAGES**

Children across every site and in every age group had received unwanted sexual messages and impacts from porn bots on Instagram. Porn bots are automated accounts sending links to online porn content. For instance in SEI, the most sheltered, fee paying, elite school, 3/8 girls in Year 8 had received group messages with sexual images from strangers on Instagram that they immediately blocked. The Year 10 boys at SELC discussed receiving unsolicited sexual content and images online and a common experience was being approached by bots on Instagram.

**Callum:** So like if somebody tries to DM you and it will say request, if, if you don't follow them, they'll say, you have this many requests. And recently I've seen these requests and it's I want to see the sexy... And it's like, that's probably bots.

**Manjit:** Yeah definitely. It's not a real person. (Lords, Year 9 Boys group 2).

**Chris:** Yeah, these random bots most likely will just add you, no, they won't even add you, they'll just send you a DM, you get a notification saying this person wants to send you a direct message, and then it's just click this link, and normally you just decline it straightaway, but sometimes for the fun of it you accept the message so you can see what the link is, and it's just like Russian webcam girls, porn websites, dating websites, but not the reasonable ones, the dodgy ones, and just a nude, that simple. (CLC1 Year 8 boys)

**Portia:** Sometimes people will drop you some like weird DMs. Um... but like, yeah, not, the boys, its... extreme photos come from randomers. (Swans Year 10 girls).

### GROUP CHATS

Young people described commonly receiving 'message requests' from group chats, where the messages included unwanted sexual messages, images and links to pornography. The participants described that the user adding them was often a 'porn bot', and most often had a female name and a nude or semi-nude image of a woman as their profile picture. Although the users often have their Instagram accounts on private, they still receive these messages from strangers in the form of 'message requests.'

**Terri:** Well yesterday, um, I got a notification from Instagram saying that someone was requesting to message me, so I went on the request, and it was like a group of like sixty people and it was like oh wanna have sex? And I was like – what? So I just blocked them and clicked out. So I was like firstly how did they find me, if I'm a private account, and second of all if I don't know this person it probably means the list of fifty people that was on the chat too don't know the other person as well. (Swans Year 9 girls).

**Ash:** It's like a massive group of people, it's really weird, the profile picture. It'll be like hi X, and then the profile picture is weird, of someone's bum. (Lords, Year 9 Boys group 2).

## 2. IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL HARASSMENT

This section will provide further details on how image-based sexual harassment commonly plays out in the lives of young people. Our project focuses on two main types of image-based sexual harassment: (a) unwanted sexual images (e.g. cyberflashing or unsolicited dick pics), and (b) unwanted solicitation for sexual images. According to our findings, image-based sexual harassment was primarily experienced by adolescent girls, and perpetrated by a combination of unknown adult men, and known and unknown boys. In this section, we will provide an overview of the diverse contexts and implications of these forms of digital sexual violence.

### UNWANTED SEXUAL IMAGES

McGlynn and Johnson (2020) have introduced the term ‘cyberflashing’ to emphasise the parallels between the sending of unsolicited dick pics and indecent exposure (known as ‘flashing’). While flashing, i.e. men exposing their genitals as a form of exhibitionism (Oswald et al., 2019), may describe many of the contexts with which young people receive unsolicited dick pics, our focus group discussions also revealed several instances that go beyond this flashing context—for example, peers sending unsolicited dick pics as a form of initiating an exchange of sexual images or for ‘lad bonding’, to impress their ‘mates’. In this section, we will thus analyse these different contexts of the sending of unsolicited sexual images, in order to develop strategies to effectively challenge these harmful and diverse forms of image-based sexual harassment.

According to our survey findings, 37% of girls (n=44/122) had received an unwanted sexual picture or video online, with 32% of girls (n=39/122) receiving an unwanted picture of male genitals (i.e. ‘dick pics’). In the survey, only 7% of girls said that the dick pics were wanted. In contrast, 20% of boys (n=45/122) had received unwanted sexual images online, and only 5% of boys (n=10/194) had received an unwanted dick pic. In the qualitative data we found that an astonishing 75.8% of girls in our focus groups had received a dick pic, with the majority (although not all) of these ‘not asked for’ or ‘unwanted’. This fits with the recent research which records a high prevalence of girls and women receiving nude imagery (dick pics) from boys and men (Ofsted, 2021; Mandau, 2020; Salter, 2016; YouGov, 2018).

In our survey 80% of girls reported feeling “disgusted” and 58% felt “confused” when receiving this unwanted contact. Furthermore, girls stated they felt no interest or excitement when they received a sexual image that was unwanted. These findings are remarkably similar to those of a YouGov (2018) survey, which found that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the millennial women who had been sent an unsolicited penis image found it ‘gross.’

Unfortunately, this form of image-based sexual harassment was often experienced on a regular, sometimes daily basis. As previously mentioned, the majority of the unwanted images were sent using Snapchat, which allows for young people to be inundated with this content if their privacy settings are off—contributing to a normalisation of these harmful behaviours over time. As a result, girls generally describe a process of ‘getting used to’ receiving this unwanted content, and not thinking of it as harassment. The Swans Year 12 mixed gender group discuss their acceptance of these behaviours, which started when they signed up to Snapchat.

**Sally:** *But it's so common, it's not shocking anymore, you just get on with your life, you're like yeah.*

**Interviewer:** *OK.*

**Vic:** *It's just like another one.*

**Hayley:** *Laugh and then you carry on.  
(Swans Year 12)*

Similarly, Year 8 girls in an elite co-educational school explain that they get so many unsolicited dick pics it is not even a “big deal”.

**Natasha:** *I wouldn't really think of it as a big deal.*

**Jo:** *Exactly.*

**Natasha:** *It happens to everybody.*

**Jo:** *And it's got to the point where...*

**Alice:** *I wouldn't be surprised.*

**Natasha:** *...I wouldn't be surprised if I got one. It's turned into a thing where it's not, it's not normal, but it's like oh another one of these.  
(SEI, Year 8 girls)*

These excerpts demonstrate the ways in which young people have come to position the receiving of unsolicited dick pics as a tiring phenomenon they have had to get used to, rather than a form of digital sexual violence. This fits with the literature on this trend, as the receiving of unsolicited dick pics is commonly trivialised and normalised by women, as it is considered a routine and unavoidable part of women's lives (Amundson, 2019; McGlynn & Johnson, 2020). For example, in their research with 115 teenagers aged 13 to 19 in Canada, Ricciardelli and Adorjan (2019) found that it was so common for girls to receive unsolicited dick pics that the girls joked that they were going to create a scrapbook to commemorate them at the end of the school year. Importantly, while humour may be used as a mechanism of resistance, it also serves to minimise and further normalise these disturbing forms of sexual harassment (Amundsen, 2020 ; Mandau, 2019).

## **UNWANTED SEXUAL IMAGES FROM ADULT MEN**

According to our survey findings, a total of 42% of recipients (n=38/92) of unwanted sexual images claimed that they did not know the age of the sender. This was likely the result of the available anonymity of the platforms used—particularly, the ability for users to hide their age, among other identifying characteristics.

Of the recipients who did know the age of the sender, slightly more than half of the unwanted sexual images were received from youth senders (i.e. under 18 years-old) (n=30, 56.6%) and marginally less than half from adult senders (n=23, 43.4%). Interestingly, in our focus group discussions, participants most typically described instances where the senders were adult men. We will, therefore, begin with an analysis of the adult senders, followed by an analysis of the teenage senders of unwanted sexual images and videos.



In addition to age, both our survey and focus group findings indicate that the majority of unsolicited sexual images received were sent by strangers. In our survey, 37.9% (n=11) of the youth who shared unwanted sexual content were strangers, compared to 90.9% (n=20) of the adults. Strangers include senders who either the young people did not know or knew them online only or were initiated by bots. Individuals that the students knew in real life included friends, friends of friends, met in real life at least once or they were their romantic or sexual partners. Unwanted sexual images are significantly more likely to be received from stranger adults and known youth.

While focus group participants also explain that the senders of unsolicited sexual images are most typically strangers; it was often assumed that the senders of such content were adult men. Girls claim that they are often added and sent messages on Snapchat by “grown up men”, sometimes from other countries, who send them “pictures of their dick” or videos of them masturbating.



Figure 7.  
Masturbation Streak on Snapchat, Year 8 Girls CLC1



Figure 8.  
Swipe to see more - Snapchat masturbation video,  
Year 8 mixed group SELC

Young people position this anonymous content from “randoms” and “paedos” and “perverts” as disturbing and disgusting. A girl in Year 8 describes feeling “scared” and “uncomfortable” when she received her first unsolicited dick pic from a stranger.

**Charli:** *I was at my nan's house, because my nan watches Pointless, and stuff like that, and I can't be arsed to watch Pointless so I was just on my phone. I was scared. My dad was sitting next to me, so I was just like... LAUGHS... my dad was sitting next to me. Yeah, like I don't want mum to see this. I cried (01.53). I was swearing down the phone, so uncomfortable. Word. (SELC, mixed Year 8)*



Figure 9.  
 "I cried I was 10", "I told my aunt", "Blocked.", "Reported".  
 Year 8 mixed group SELC

Another Year 8 girl (aged 12) recounts her first experience of being contacted by video on Snapchat by a random man.

**Chantelle:** So I was at home, in my room, and I get a Facetime call from a guy, and he was rubbing his belly, but it was a girl account. He just showed me his face. He opened up his top and started rubbing his belly. And he was like do you want me to open my trousers? And I just blocked him.

**Interviewer:** And what was that through?

**Chantelle:** Snapchat.  
 (SELC, mixed Year 8).

This participant goes on to explain that the perpetrator is an "old man", and refers to the experience as "paedophilia." Importantly, the participant describes how the man was using a girl's account, which exemplifies (once again) the ways in which Snapchat, as well as other social media platforms, facilitates image-based sexual harassment and abuse by allowing for users to create accounts that hide their true identities. She went on to explain that the man was persistent and contacted her a second time from another account. This time she tells her mum and blocks the second account. When revisiting the incident in the drawing session, the same participant describes her reaction to this incident.

**Interviewer:** And then also like what you did when you got that, what decisions did you make?

**Chantelle:** I blocked. He had a hairy stomach, he was not cute at all, or fresh.

**Romy:** Oh!

**Chantelle:** I don't get scared, I just think of how demented they must be, and how sad their life must be too.

(SELC, mixed Year 8).



Figure 10.

"He got blocked like the speed of light" "Explicit content 3 hours ago",  
Year 8 mixed group SELC

This excerpt and drawings illustrate the common trend of girls initially feeling disturbed and shocked when they first receive this unwanted content, they block, and then seemingly overcoming this fear with displays of bravado and self-empowerment. We also see a constant stream of content as the young person emphasises it was sent to them "3 hours ago". Blocking is a strategy but awareness of reporting to the platform or adult is not apparent in these drawings.

Interestingly, siblings played an important role in monitoring younger sisters' accounts. We heard from several groups how they monitored the content and 'cleaned up' the sexual content and 'dick pics' on their younger siblings' phones:

**Daria:** *My little sister has Snapchat and she always gets ... she's only seven. And I literally have to go through her phone and like literally like...*

**Interviewer:** *Do you ever tell your parents about that?*

**Daria:** *I don't think it's that much of a big deal. I just delete it.  
(CLC1 Year 8 girls)*

This attitude of 'getting chill with the dick pic' and 'not caring' is a form of normalisation over time. It also could be a form of denial or a defensive strategy that girls use to try to prevent the incident from impacting them. We also wonder if it is a reflection of the postfeminist notion of a sexually liberated and empowered femininity made visible through performing 'sexy femininity' (Lamb, 2010).

In a society that promotes individual female self-confidence as the solution to institutionalised sexism, some girls may have learned that appearing upset about sexual harassment is a demonstration of their own weakness and victimisation, ideas that are promoted as part of everyday rape culture (Mendes et al., 2019). Consequently, teenage girls may choose to appear unfazed by unsolicited dick pics (particularly in a group interviewing context) because of a desire to align with mainstream discourses that champion female confidence and empowerment, and repudiate vulnerability (Amundson, 2020).

Unfortunately, this neoliberal focus on empowerment, means girls' and women's perceptions of sexist practices may be "patriarchy-friendly" (Gill, 2017, p. 618), in the sense that it enables this sexual harassment and abuse to continue taking place. It follows that encouraging young people to identify these practices as harassment and abuse is a first step towards challenging the culture which normalises it.

### **UNWANTED SEXUAL IMAGES FROM TEENAGE BOYS**

While many of the focus group discussions centred on adult strangers sending unsolicited dick pics, participants also discussed receiving unsolicited dick pics from teenage boys. This fits with the survey data, which found that a total of 33% (n=30/92) of the senders of unwanted sexual images were under the age of 18 years-old. Among those unwanted sexual images sent by young people, 63% of them (n=19/30) were unsolicited dick pics. This number is higher than the number of unsolicited dick pics sent by adults. In addition, more than half of the unwanted sexual images shared by youth senders (n=18, 62.1%) were from individuals the recipients knew in real life.

In the focus group discussions, the girls spoke at length about receiving unsolicited dick pics from teenage boys who were only known via social media, i.e. not known in person. Girls specifically explain that boys who are in their social media network, but they do not know personally, feel more comfortable sending unsolicited images because of the degree of separation from the girls' immediate school or peer group. Year 8 girls at CLC specifically explain that they received dick pics from "random boys" who are "outside of school." They further explain that they initially create these connections with these boys online, because they share mutual friends online.

A girl in another focus group describes her personal experience receiving an unsolicited dick pic from a friend of a friend.

***Pip:** Once there was this guy on Snapchat, I didn't know him but I thought my friend knew him, so I accepted this follow request and then on his story it was like who wants to see my big... you know, and then I saw like a text from him, because you know you do so I thought it was like a streak, so when I pressed on it and it was a picture of his like dick, and I thought it was probably something he got off the internet, so then I blocked him (Swans, Year 9 girls).*

Later in the discussion, this girl goes on to compare this form of online sexual harassment to forms of offline sexual harassment that she has previously witnessed, such as boys non-consensually touching girls "bums" as a joke. She further explains that girls "just kind of get used to it after a while, they don't really think of it as being harassed." This participant's experience and perspective on harassment demonstrates, again, the ways in which these forms of digital sexual violence become normalised among young people.

When discussing the trend of boys sending dick pics, girls explained that boys commonly cropped out their faces from the sexual image, and thus 'anonymised' the dick pic (Evans et al., 2017; Fox & Potocki, 2014). This anonymity allows for reduced fear of having the image traced back to them. At Lords, a group of Year 9 boys explained this to us:

**Arun:** *Boys are less worried but there is still an element of fear in case it gets spread around the whole school like everyone and everyone knows about it is something to be sort of embarrassed about. . . but it's not as worrying as it is for girls.*

**Sander:** *Like when girls send pics I think they send it with their face in it. And I don't think boys always send it with a face. So it's like less recognisable.*

*(Lords Year 9 boys Group 1).*



Figure 11.

Faceless dick pic "that's what boys do", Year 8 Girls Swans

The anonymity afforded by the dick pic allows users to solicit nudes by sending fake dick pics to girls to elicit a transactional 'trade.' By sending images that are found online, boys are able to reap the rewards of this trade, by receiving a nude image of a girl, without having to actually send a sexual image of themselves. An example of this is shown below:

**Fatema:** *There was this girl who had this crush on a boy in her form group. . .*

**Shanaz:** *So she was like kind of staring at him or whatnot and he almost plays her, because he didn't like her. . . but he started like speaking to her and. . .*

**Eshaal:** *Chatting to her. . . he was with his cousin at the time. So they just went like oh my God she'll probably do this, let's take advantage of it. And then she sent a picture of her boobs and her vagina basically to him.*

**Shanaz:** *No, apparently he sent a. . .*

**Eshaal:** *Yeah, it was fake, it was fake.*

**Fatema:** *He copied and pasted a picture from Google and sent her that.*

**Shanaz:** *Of his. . .*

**Eshaal:** *Yeah, it was fake though, which obviously like, you know, kind of. . .*

**Shanaz:** *I mean I don't know why she didn't see it because you could literally see the search tag in the thing, but she ended up sending pictures of her actual self to him, and gradually it got out and the whole year knew about it and it was just a very big thing because she kept denying it even though she kept her face in the pictures.*

*(Year 9 girls CLC2)*

In this example, with a group of self-identified Muslim girls, the boy is able to trick the girl into thinking that he has sent her a picture of himself because of the relative anonymity of the dick pic. The girl, however, then sends a nude “with her face in the pictures”, and thus faces severe social repercussions because of the lack of anonymity afforded by nude images of girls. The clear gendered sexual double standards that are demonstrated in this story are discussed in further detail later in the report. Girls also discussed it being more common however, for more distant acquaintances to send images than boys in their immediate peer group in their school:

**Interviewer:** *You had had dick pics sent to you as well?*

**Lucy:** *Yeah but it's the same story like I don't know them. It's just boys from the other school send us both one. . .*

**Avril:** *I think they know people from here and they're trying our usernames.*

**Lucy:** *Because when people tag you in a post or whatever like I've seen her around or like I like I know her I know a friend or something like that then they'll be like I'll add them and start talking to them.*

**Avril:** *I like the look of her so I'm going to start talking to her.*

*(NELA, Year 10 girls)*

In this instance, sending a dick pic is framed as an expression of attraction or interest rather than a non-consensual act. That the girls interpret the unsolicited dick pic as fitting within the same group of behaviours as boys “talking” to girls that they find attractive is particularly problematic, as it demonstrates the normalisation and acceptance of boys’ engagement in image-based sexual harassment.

Similarly, girls described a link between receipt of unsolicited dick pics and girls’ popularity and as a sign of desirability. Girls explained that a high following on social media, and thus a higher popularity status, was often correlated with increased receipt of unsolicited dick pics. This correlation can be observed in the following discussion with Year 7 girls:

**Colleen:** *If I had data (on their phone to connect to Snapchat) I could show so much like different nudes on my phone.*

**Sammy:** *You must get loads.*

**Colleen:** *Mm, I get so many.*

**Lou:** *I don't.*

**Interviewer:** *Why must she get loads?*

**Sammy:** *Because like all of her messages, you can just tell. . .*

**Lou:** *She's a really well-known person.*

*(CLC 1 Year 7 girls)*

The girls in this group go on to explain that Colleen is popular because of her brother’s association with a London gang and she has microcelebrity status as she is ranked in a competitive form of dancing (Marwick 2013). Importantly, they identify a correlation between being popular and “well-known” on Instagram and



Snapchat with being sent a lot of unsolicited material. This is a sign of how much you are known and liked. Returning to our discussion of technological affordances, girls who have more friends or followers on social media platforms, also have higher visibility of their accounts to people who they do not know, such as adult or teenage strangers. As this girl explained that she has over 3,000 followers, and was “well-known”, it was expected for her to “get loads” of unwanted nude images.

Another group of teenage senders are known boys, including peers, friends, romantic or sexual interests and partners. From our focus group discussions, we found that this particular context of unsolicited dick pics involves a very different set of dynamics than strangers or semi-known contacts. In particular, girls described how managing these behaviours within the in-person, known peer group is much more complex and potentially difficult than dealing with the content from the unknown older men or only digitally-known contacts.

These challenges are illustrated by a Year 10 participant’s experience at CLC1 who told us about an incident where a boy who was her friend sent her a dick pic and a video of him masturbating:

**Interviewer:** *When it’s known people that are sending you pictures, then what do you do?*

**Kathryn:** *So the boy on WhatsApp, he was high, do you know who it is? Yeah, he was high so he sent me a dick pic on WhatsApp. And a video of him like wanking.*

**LAUGHTER**

**Kathryn:** *... But I was just weirded out, I didn’t block them or anything because they were my friends, but the next day I told them what they did. And they regretted it, like a lot. Pretended to forget.*

**Julia:** *I’m pretty sure he didn’t forget that.*  
(CLC1 Year 10 girls)

Here, we see the participant navigating the situation and choosing not to block them “because they were [her] friends”. Indeed, she adds a bit later in the discussion that this has happened with other boys in their friendship group, hence her pluralising.

**Kathryn:** *One of them was high, one of them was horny, and one of them was for a joke, like the third person... was just like a picture of their pubes, it wasn’t their actual dick.*

Being friends makes it much more difficult to address as the girls go on to discuss.

**Interviewer:** *... did they apologise?*

**Kathryn:** *Um, I think they just, they just really went really red and was like – fuck. They didn’t apologise though.*

**Interviewer:** *OK, so what do you guys think about that type of like, what should happen around something like that happening?*

...

**Cardi:** *I think it’s more of a big deal when you know them.*

**Janelle:** *Yeah, same.*

...

**Cardi:** I think it's worse when it's somebody you know, because like say they are your friend, and you've trusted them, and you guys were really good friends, and they do that, it's just like, it's, personally I think it's more of a big deal.

**Kathryn:** When it's like someone you don't know you can just go they're a weird person, and then just leave it, but if it's someone you know and they're a perfectly normal person then it's kind of... yeah, like if you, you know what I mean, like if it's just some random guy (24.11) you're just like OK, and then you go I'm never gonna see them again. But if it's someone you know, and the fact that you'll see them again and...

**Cardi:** Yeah, if they go to the same school as you then you see them every day, and it just reminds you of like what they did.

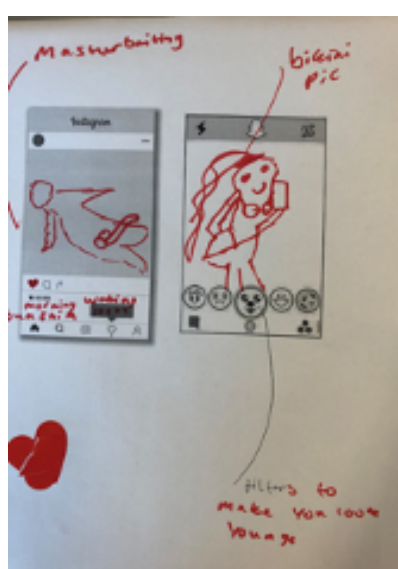


Figure 12.  
"masturbating" Year 10 girls CLC1 School

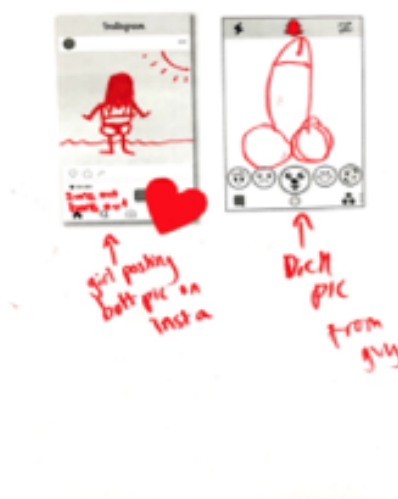


Figure 13.  
"Dick pick from guy" Year 10 girls CLC1 School

In the images, the girls draw masturbation videos and dick pics as well as girls taking "bikini pics". In the data extract, the girl repeats that it's a "big deal" when unsolicited dick pics are sent from friends and if they are at your school you have to actually see this person "every day". The nature of the schooling environment being unsafe for girls and having to continue "working" alongside perpetrators is salient, with many pointing out that reporting and punishment in schools needs to be proportionate and address these acts as abusive.

### UNWANTED SOLICITATION FOR SEXUAL IMAGES

According to our survey data, 41% of girls ( $n=50/122$ ) reported having been asked to send a sexual image, compared to only 17.5% of boys ( $n=34/194$ ). Of those who had been asked to send a sexual image, girls felt more pressure to do so, compared to boys. In particular, on a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 was strongly disagree and 5 was strongly agree, 44% ( $n=22/50$ ) of girls either agreed (4) or strongly agreed (5) that they felt pressured. Contrastingly, 45% ( $n=15/33$ ) of boys reported strongly disagreeing with feeling any pressure as a result of the request, and only 12% ( $n=4/33$ ) strongly agreed that they felt pressured.

These findings fit with previous research indicating that girls are more likely to experience pressure to send sexually explicit images (Englander, 2015; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). This is in part because solicitation itself can cause anxiety as girls fear that they may lose their romantic partner or interest if they do not comply (Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ouytsel et al., 2017; Thomas, 2018; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011).

In the focus groups, 74% of the girls we spoke to had been asked for a nude image. Similar to the girls' experiences of being sent unsolicited sexual images, girls described these experiences of solicitation as "normal" and "common". This is illustrated by the following excerpt:

**Interviewer:** OK, so how common is it for somebody to say send me a pic?

**Sandra:** I think it's quite common with our age. There are people that I've never met and they'll be like oh send me a pic, and I'll be like, I'll just block them, on Snapchat, because you don't know who they are.

(Swans, Year 9)

In typical scenarios like this one, we found that the majority of girls blocked the user but did not report these requests given they were not aware of anything illegal taking place. Many brushed it off as something you just had to get used to.

Focus group participants frequently discussed how this solicitation was initiated through being sent a dick pic to initiate 'trades'. This was similarly found in Oswald et al.'s (2019) recent survey of over 1,000 men, where the dominant motivation for sending dick pics was linked to a transactional mindset where the sender hoped to receive something in return. Mandau's (2019) research likewise reports that men perceive the sending of dick pics as a way of getting nude pictures in return from girls. Figure 13 "send one back babes" is a drawing of a transactional dick pic.

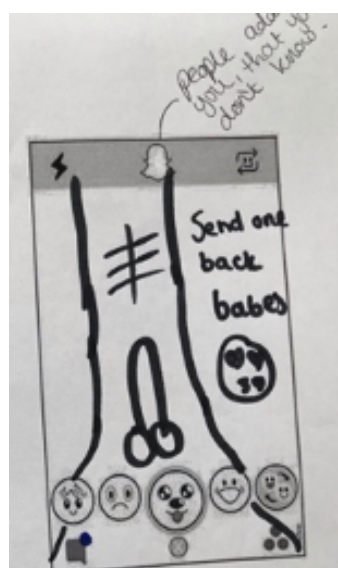


Figure 14.  
Transactional Dick Pic "send one back babes",  
Year 8 Girls NELA

The sending of the ‘transactional dick pic’ represents a new, doubled form of harassment: being sent an unwanted image as part of a proposition to send an image that may also be an unwanted request. Figure 8 is of a transactional invitation dick pic proposition “now it’s your turn”.



Figure 15.  
Transactional Dick Pic ‘Ride me: Now it’s your turn’,  
Year 8 Girls CLC1

### UNWANTED SOLICITATION FROM ADULT MEN

Nearly a quarter of the students who were asked to send nudes (n=18, 19.4%) claimed that they were unsure about the age of the requester. Of the recipients who did know the age of the requester, marginally more than half of the requests for the nudes were received from youth (n=60, 64.5%), and very few were received from adults (n=13, 14.0%). Contrastingly, in the focus group discussions, the majority of requests for nude images were from random older men on Snapchat and Instagram, particularly in the all girls school. A potential reason for this disconnect could be that participants found it easier to discuss the actions of people who were strangers to them, compared to discussing their experiences of solicitation from people they knew, including potential boyfriends or friends, which could be more personal.

Girls framed unwanted solicitation from adult men as child exploitation. One Year 10 girl proposed that men specifically target younger girls because they are easier to “take advantage of”.

**Diamond:** *Because most of them know who you are, because they added it from a shoutout, so if they clearly can see you’re a child, it’s grown men, and they see you’re a child, and they’re sending these type of images, then they could be trying to take advantage of us. Yeah, like they could be expecting that as we’re young they must like be thinking oh they’re young, will send it back, or we are gonna respond. Like we’re stupid or something. Yeah.*  
(SELCC Year 10 focus group 5 girls)

Importantly, while girls framed these adult men as predatory, girls did not understand the norms of repeated solicitation or being sent unwanted dick pics as a transactional invitation as a double form of harassment. This fits with Amundsen's (2020) research, where she found that while adult women in her study positioned dick pics as a form of sexism, they did not position it as abusive. As a result, masculine aggression, in the form of unwanted solicitation and 'transactional' dick pics, becomes naturalised, which "obscures from view the unequal and highly gendered social structures that both grant unsolicited DPs [dick pics] their harmful meanings and make such sexist practices possible from the outset" (Amundson, 2020, p. 5).

### **UNWANTED SOLICITATION FROM TEENAGE BOYS**

A total of 66% (n=33/50) of the requests for nude images that girls received came from people under the age of 18. This is a much greater number than the requests from adults. Of those teenagers who requested girls' nudes, 39% (n=13/33) came from a romantic or sexual partner, 36% (n=12/33) came from a friend or acquaintance, and 21% (n=7/33) came from a stranger.

This increased prevalence of young people engaging in this solicitation can be explained in part by the unique gendered context of digital image exchange in this age group. For starters, in the focus group discussions it became apparent that masculinity norms motivate boys to solicit nude images from girls, as boys are deemed more "horny" and sexually active. Contrastingly, girls are understood as "less horny", have lower sex drives, and will not send nude images without being asked. This dynamic is illustrated in the following discussion with Year 10 boys:

**Omar:** *Usually the girls send them, but certain girls get pressured.*

**Interviewer:** *Why do you think usually girls [are asked to] send more?*

**Gabe:** *Because girls are less horny.*

**Jamie:** *Might get pressured.*

**Interviewer:** *Why would they send more if they're less horny?*

**Marcus:** *Because their man asked them for some.*

**Omar:** *They don't really want it that way.*

**Gabe:** *They don't want no nudes from the man basically.*

**Omar:** *Obviously they'll want it, yeah, but like they don't really, I can't explain.*

**Interviewer:** *When you say less horny, are you saying because the men are more horny so they want pictures more?*

**Omar:** *Yeah.*

*(Year 10 Boys SELC)*

In this exchange, the participants all thought it more common for girls to send nudes in response to being pressured and asked from "their man". They further state that girls don't really want to either send nudes or get dick pics, because they are "less horny" than boys. These gender norms serve to create the expectation for boys to initiate an image exchange with girls by making the initial request for an image. Past research has similarly found that male adolescents describe sharing nude images of girls to display "sexual desirability and activity" (Setty, 2019, p.8).

Importantly, this expectation for boys to engage in this solicitation, and thus demonstrate their masculine heterosexual prowess, is then reinforced by their peers, who either pressure them to request images of girls or shame them if they do not engage in this solicitation—claiming they are not ‘man enough.’ Referred to as a “chase for digital trophies” (p. 96), this trend of boys collecting nude images of girls (with the intent to share them with one another) is considered both a male bonding strategy, as well as form of gender-based violence directed at girls (Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021). This fits within a tradition of men using women and girls’ bodies as “currency” for men to “prove” their masculinity to other men (Kimmel, 2005, p. 33), and achieve homosocial reward (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015, Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2020). In the focus group discussions, participants described the ways in which boys put pressure on other boys to request these images from girls.

**Arun:** *I think like say boys are with all their friends, they’ll be like... Pressured.*

**Manjit:** *Peer pressured into... .*

**Sander:** *But they wouldn’t send a dick pic.*

**Manjit:** *No, not like sending you dick pics, but asking you.*

**Sander:** *Boys in our year.*

**Arun:** *Boys in our year, but like also asking you for nudes, I think that they’d be peer pressured from their friends  
(Lords Year 9).*

The Year 10 boys at Lords said something very similar, noting the pressure is around getting nudes back, with sending as a means to an end, noting “there’s more pressure on boys to get nudes than to send them”. Year 9 at Lords also discussed the pressures on boys to get nudes of girls to prove their masculinity.

**Danny:** *Girls are more pressured into it kind of... I think the boys are just like maybe a joke that can go around the school with other boys. Like saying, oh, you’re not like you’re not man enough if you don’t have any pictures whereas a woman, the girls, I don’t think they are as pressured into it [asking boys for nudes]. I think boys just send it and then they ask girls - girls don’t just send it.*

*(Lords Year 9 boys Group 1)*

These descriptions of the pressures on boys to get nudes (even by initiating a trade through a dick pic) and girls to send nudes back demonstrate the ways in which image-based sexual harassment has become accepted as a normal component of adolescents’ online day-to-day lives. Girls consequently demonstrated an acceptance of boys’ engagement in nude solicitation. For example, when describing a boy who was “going around asking everyone” for nudes, the Year 10 girls stated, “they do have their like phase in year nine” (Swans Year 10 girls). In another focus group, the girls described a similar instance where a boy was “asking loads of girls for nudes.” They then stated: “that’s just what boys are like though, isn’t it.”

According to the girls, a common way in which these behaviours became normalised was the incorporation of these requests in the boys’ humour. Year 10 girls at SELC explain how peers would use memes and jokes as a way to ask for nude images.



**Soraya:** *Some of the boys, the younger boys now, the way they will do it, they'll be like – 'send nudes!' And there's lots of memes and like funny jokes about it, so it's like advertising it kind of. . . . But they actually want you to.*

**Cali:** *or there'll be like a hidden message, and they just make it funny so lots of people are posting it, they don't really like focus on the message, they just focus on how funny it is. (SELC, Year 10 focus group)*

Here, the girls discuss how they have to navigate the cultural fabric of lad banter, where requests for nudes are meant to be received as funny. Despite being couched in humour, the girls explain that the message is still clear.

Girls in Year 10 at SELC describe that unsolicited dick pics from boys their age are often motivated by the intent to elicit a nude image back from the girl.

**Jada:** *I think boys our age, if they are going to send it to someone they'll probably most likely do it on purpose, yeah, and. . .*

**Soraya:** *They expect something back.*

**Jada:** *I had a friend, yeah, and her boyfriend must have sent her a dick pic, and then he carried on trying to pressure her to send one, I feel that's what happens the most, these boys try and pressure them like into sending it back, because oh I send, or oh if you love me you'll send it back to me.*

**Soraya:** *Yeah, if you don't want me to break up with you, or something like that.*

**Alexus:** *They'll send one and be like now it's your turn.*

**Nia:** *That's the worst one.*

**Interviewer:** *On that how often do you think dick pics are sent with the aim of getting something back?*

**Rianna:** *All the time.*

**Nia:** *All the time.*

**Jada:** *All the time.*

**Nia:** *That's the main point of it, they don't do it and just be like 'enjoy!'*

**LAUGHTER**

**Alexus:** *They'll want one back.*

*(SELC, Year 10 girls)*

These participants describe how expectation for reciprocity is heightened within the context of a confirmed or official romantic or intimate relationship. Ouytsel and Gool (2017) similarly found that boys would often pressure girls to engage in sexting to 'prove their love', which mirrors the excerpt above, where the boy claimed "if you love me you'll send one back." Past research has found that this pressure is often exacerbated by girls' fear that their partner will break up with them if they do not comply with the request (Choi et al., 2016; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). As a result, this pressure can serve to push many young adults to engage in unwanted sexting for the sake of fulfilling a romantic interest's needs (Drouin & Tobin, 2014). This excerpt is also indicative of the common use of an unsolicited image to initiate an exchange of images. In addition to creating a double form of harassment, we found that this use of dick pics to initiate a trade can lead to the stigmatisation and shaming of girls.

**Esme:** *So I was dating this boy, he said he was thirteen, and then I kind of, I kind of dated him, and then his best friend told me he's turning fifteen, so then, but then he used to send me nudes, and I didn't really like him as well, and he was also, he used to force me, but I didn't send, but everyone thought I did send him, and these rumours all spread around. A few people knew.*

**Interviewer:** *So what do you mean, he would force you, what kind of things would he say and..?*

**Esme:** *Like he would like flirt with me, like you look nice today, and this and that, and then he would like send me something, like, you know.*

**Interviewer:** *OK, and so then you said rumours started circulating about you.*

**Esme:** *Yeah.*

**Interviewer:** *Why was that?*

**Esme:** *Everyone told that I sent nudes to him, but I never did.*

**Corrine:** *Because everyone was thinking like oh if he sent nudes, she must have sent something  
(Swans Year 8 girls)*

In this instance the girl has been sent an unwanted dick pic and assumptions are made that she has reciprocated. We also got the sense in the interview that the girl felt shamed and disbelieved that she had not sent nudes, showing the internalisation of victimisation.

### 3. IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL ABUSE (IBSA)

'Image-based sexual abuse' (IBSA) refers to the non-consensual creation and distribution of sexual images (McGlynn et al., 2017). Only a small minority of young people reported having their images shared (2.5% were girls and 3.6% were boys). While 16.7% of gender diverse young people reported having their image shared, it is difficult to make any conclusions about this finding due to the small sample size (n=18). See Table 1 for the breakdown of these findings. Of note, the prevalence of those who have experienced IBSA was higher among those young people who reported sending a nude image—with 14% (n=5/35) having had their image shared without their consent. Despite the relatively low rate of personally experiencing it, image-based sexual abuse frequently came up in the focus group discussions. This is because participants talked about a range of practices from digitally distributing and sending images without consent to also simply sharing the images on a screen. Importantly, we position the sharing amongst the peer group (often for homosocial reward) as image-based sexual harassment. As a result, while few participants in the focus groups had experienced IBSA, many knew of or had seen an image of someone who had experienced IBSA. The following section will consequently provide an overview of participants' experiences with and perspectives on this harmful form of digital abuse.

### Unsolicited image was shared with others

Gender	No	Yes	Total
Boy	187	7	194
	96.4%	3.6%	100.0%
Girl	119	3	122
	97.5%	2.5%	100.0%
Other Gender	15	3	18
	83.3%	16.7%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>321</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>334</b>

### BOYS AS PREDOMINANTLY THE PERPETRATORS OF IBSA

After getting nudes, the normalisation of sharing these nudes amongst the boys in their peer group was ubiquitous. This fits with previous research that has documented the heightened likelihood of boys engaging in IBSA, compared to girls (Burkett, 2015; Johnson et al., 2018). This sharing of nude images of girls among male peer groups is evidenced in the exchange below:

**Interviewer:** So what do you think about sharing images privately on Snapchat or Instagram or whatever the platform may be?

**Dominic:** People screenshot it and send it and stuff.

**Kye:** Yeah exactly. But I still think most people would do more on private images to one person than they would put on a story or something. Yeah.

**Dominic:** Cause if you do send a nude it's almost inevitable that it's going to be sent to at least one person.

**Savinder:** Or they'll like save it. Because if it's, if you're taking a picture from your camera roll, all right, and sending it then it's in the chat and they can save it in the chat with actually like screenshotting it or anything.

(Lords Year 9 Boys Group 2).

Dominic claims that it is "almost inevitable" that a nude will be sent to at least one person which indicates the normalisation of this form of abuse. Moreover, the way in which the participants snowball their responses about what is likely to happen demonstrates a shared understanding about screenshotting and saving nude images of girls.

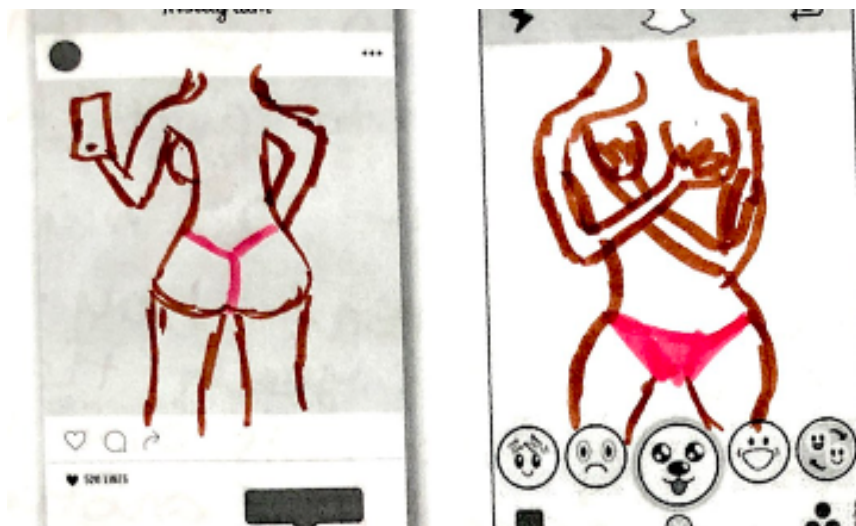


Figure 16.  
'semi-nude' mirror selfies from the back and front,  
Year 8 girls CLC2

When discussing the contexts of these behaviours, we repeatedly heard descriptions of a cis-heteronormative economy in which sexual images of girls' bodies functioned as a form of homosocial currency between boys across all schools. It was consequently made apparent that this 'homosocial reward' (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015) motivated both the solicitation for nudes, as previously discussed, as well as the sharing of those nudes amongst male peers. At CLC 1 School, a Year 9 boy discusses this connection between soliciting and sharing girls' nudes in the peer group: "people ask for nudes just so they can show their friends like ah I got this girl to do this and send it to me ah look I'm sick." This heterosexual masculinity performance is evidence of a key element of gaining homosocial regard in the digital context. It is important to emphasise that a lack of consent is built into this homosocial dynamic where regard from a male peer trumps all other forms of digital intimacy (Dobson, 2018). This was made clear in the elite boys' school:

**Interviewer:** *When people show images either by sending them or just showing them on their phone in real life, do you think there's any intent to cause harm there?*

**James:** *Nah.*

**Joe:** *It's like, social.*

**Anwar:** *I don't think people actually intend to cause harm.*

**Interviewer:** *What are the intentions?*

**Anwar:** *Just to show their friends that they received them.*

**Joe:** *Yeah.*

**James:** *To get gassed.*

**Anwar:** *Yeah. Then I think it's seen almost like other like, well other like sexual acts it's seen like it's similar to receive nudes.*

**Joe:** *Just something to be proud of, I guess.*

*(Lords, Year 10 boys group 2).*

In this discussion, Joe overtly describes the act of showing nudes of someone else as "social". James says that people show their friends "to get gassed" and Joe says the image is "just something to be proud of". The boys' comments highlight again how nudes of girls form a social currency amongst boys, where they

can achieve lad banter forms of regard and kudos from their male peers (Salter, 2016; Haslop and O'Rourke, 2020). Moreover, while the boys may not intend to cause harm, there is a clear disregard for the fact that these images were intended to remain private. Rather than understanding these images as private and sharing as violating consent (McGlynn and Rackley, 2017), the boys' perception of these images focuses on the use value for themselves and other boys (Skeggs, 1996; Ravn et al., 2019).

It is important to note that the relative reward around digital sharing is carefully judged against the perceived risks associated with perpetration. These risks were perceived differently in the independent boys school, as well as the mixed elite boarding school where we spoke to Year 8 boys who seemed to have received more media literacy education about online privacy and risk than any other students we spoke to. The boys in the elite boys' school were keenly aware of the relative risks associated with being found in possession of the images, as can be seen below.

**Dominic:** *I've never actually seen somebody like send me nudes but I've seen somebody on their phone and show it to me.*

**Harry:** *that means you still know that they've, you know that they've sent it so they still got that kudos at least like you know they don't have it to share with other people.*

**Interviewer:** *Okay. Um, when people share or, so would you say it's more common for someone to show you a picture than send it?*

**Dominic:** *I think it's like difference between seeing it in real life and sending it. In real life is there's no like record or evidence of it, for, if a social media, you can save it, you can screenshot here, you can do like many things with it.*

*(Lords, Year 9 boys group 1)*

From this excerpt, it is clear that the risk of getting in trouble through a digital footprint of non-consensual distribution does not serve to deter the boys from engaging in image sharing altogether. Rather, the boys have found a way to mitigate the risk by showing another person their screen in-person, which acts as a loophole because "there's no like record or evidence of it" being shared. In addition to reducing the risk of being caught as a perpetrator of IBSA, this strategy of only sharing an image in-person could result in many images being shared without the original sender's knowledge—in contrast to more visible forms of IBSA where an image is shared to another person's story, for example. As a result, the prevalence of young people who have their image shared may be higher than our reports show, as it does not account for the young people whose images have been shared beyond their knowledge. We refer to all these practices as forms of image-based sexual abuse.

In contrast to the discussions surrounding boys' participation in IBSA, participants explained that girls rarely shared boys' nude images. The following excerpt explores these different gendered contexts:

**Rhianna:** *So where the boys, if you broke up or something the boys would probably expose you, or show their friends, send it to their friends. With the girls they'd keep it to themselves like.*

**Jada:** Or just delete it.

**Nia:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So there's never been a case of somebody sending around someone's boy parts?

**Destiny:** Some girls do, but it's not as often as boys do it to girls.

**Nia:** I don't think it's often in the school.

**Jada:** No.

(SELC Year 10 girls)

This lack of motivation to show or share was explained by the lack of social reward associated with non-consensually sharing images among their female peers. This came up in the focus group with Year 8 girls, where the girls discussed their perspectives of a girl who kept a dick pic of her past partner.

**Corrine:** She's broken up with A, but she still keeps her dick pics on her phone.

**Esme:** Yeah, she still keeps them on her phone.

**Interviewer:** Keeps pictures of him.

**Corrine:** Yeah, she was going through her camera roll and I said what the hell? And she said oh look, it's A's dick. I was like OK. It's like you're not going out with him anymore, you can delete that. But she just keeps it on there.

**Interviewer:** What do you think she keeps it for?

**Corrine:** It sounds kind of weird, but like a trophy, you know.

(Swans Year 8 girls)

While the girls discuss keeping a dick pic as a trophy which they may be able to harness for 'power' over the boy because the girl can expose him, they ultimately said that doing so would be "weird". In addition to lacking the same social reward, girls also explained that they didn't share dick pics because the receipt of dick pics for girls was seen as shameful. In particular, one Year 10 girl stated: "for boys it's like a trophy, for girls it's like shameful to share." This quote clearly indicates the lingering sense of shame and stigma that can be connected to openly discussing their involvement in sexting, as well as the clear sexual double standards involved in the exchange of sexually explicit images.

## **LIFE OF THE IMAGE AND RISK FOR GIRLS**

A decade of research has demonstrated that girls are at greater risk of their images being shared without their consent (Johnson et al., 2018; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose et al., 2012; Setty, 2019). This research has also found that girls often face slut shaming and victim blaming when their images are shared due to the differential value of images of bodies and sexual double standards (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). In line with this research, our focus group findings indicated that the negative consequences for having one's image non-consensually shared were far greater for girls compared to boys, with girls facing increased stigma and shame. The Year 10 girls at Swans recounted this sexual double standard:



**Sam:** *I feel like if like, if like a guy, if his nudes get leaked like it doesn't really matter that much, but then for a girl she'll be made to feel like a slut, or like, you know.*

**Interviewer:** *OK.*

**Lainie:** *It's a lot worse, like if a girl was, because then people are like oh my God, she's such a slag, she's such a whatever else.*

**Portia:** *Yeah, they might even put him up to it, he might get encouraged for it, like that's so cool, you have confidence in sharing everything.*

*(Swans Year 10 girls)*

Another group, Year 10 boys at SELCS, described the slut shaming of girls who have had their images shared as a form of "verbal assault":

**Interviewer:** *So you all said you have seen a picture that someone's passed around of a girl's body.*

**Gabe:** *Yeah.*

**Interviewer:** *How frequently, is that like a one-off or has it been a few times, or..?*

**Gabe:** *Every day.*

**Interviewer:** *Every day, really?*

**Kwasi:** *Yeah, and certain, like depends, if you have like thousands of people watching your story that means more people are gonna be sending it in.*

**Interviewer:** *So how are those pictures of girls' bodies that are shared without their consent, treated by people?*

**Kwasi:** *They just get mocked.*

**Gabe:** *Yeah, they get verbally assaulted.*

**Interviewer:** *How, what do people say?*

**Omar:** *People call them hoes and sluts and stuff.*

What was notable about this exchange is the boys use the words "verbally assaulted", which is one of the few times a language of abuse or harassment came up in the interviews. This shows an understanding of harm in these normalised practices associated with digital image exchange. We argue that these moments, where boys identify and consider the abuse inherent in such practices, need to be explored and worked with in educational environments.

The stigmatisation of girls was also apparent in a story that emerged in the Year 10 focus group with boys from Lords independent boys' school. We heard of multiple instances of nudes moving digitally between the boys' and girls' schools:

**Tom:** *There's definitely one instance in our school that I can think of. And it went quite big of this girl. And uh, she sent like quite a few pictures that were really like bad to boys, one boy in a year. Um, well two boys who are who then kept them and do show other people and then she's had quite a bit of, not hate, but people don't really want to be friends with her any more after they found out that it was her.*

In this example, as with the episode we discussed earlier the girl lost friends because of the stigma attached to having a sexual image shared without her consent.

## CONTEXTUALISED HARM: UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONAL RISKS

Our qualitative data found that in some instances, sexualised images were used as a sexual currency that could be employed as evidential proof of sexual activity for some girls. In these instances, the girls seemed invested in the identity of being hard or tough and sexually experienced. This was true for a girl at an inner city state school in London. Here a Year 8 girl, Amber led the discussion:

**Amber:** *At what age should a girl have a boyfriend?  
(NELA Year 7 mixed)*

Amber asked this question as a way to start discussing a girl, also in Year 8, who had shared a video of herself giving her boyfriend a blow job as her snap story. In response, one girl, Kat, says she shouldn't have done it, condemning the girl. By contrast Amber discusses how the sharing of the video is about status. Here the sexual activity, and the subsequent documented proof is used as visibility of sexual prowess, a means through which the girl can achieve some limited status when her options for other forms of attainment may seem limited.

This example sits in sharp contrast to an encounter we had at an elite boys boarding school. Here, the protected environment became very clear with the boys, also in Year 8, when they were asked about risk.

**Rupert:** *Well there are, in the future, people, like CEOs of companies . . . when people are coming to get jobs they'll look them up on social media and are trying to find positive things that will back their um, points, hire them into the company, but if they go on social media and they find like nudes on the internet, then the chances are the company won't hire them...I always think that if a company really wanted to they could find out literally everything about you, because even if you delete a message it's always there on the software and on their, on like, for like so, uh, for like the people who like are in control of the data. So if a company really want to, and they really want to go that far, they could literally find everything you sent, everything you texted, even if you deleted it.  
(SEI Year 8 boys)*

In this example, Rupert positions the concept of 'risk' in relationship to his future career prospects. The boys in his group also didn't see any 'sense' in nudes – this is illogical in their context, which contrasts very sharply to other contexts where sexting and sexual display and visibility is a logical part of performing desirable femininity and masculinity. It is arguable that as they benefited from privileged class positions these boys didn't feel an acute need to showcase sexual experience as a status symbol.

Rupert and Amber's accounts taken side by side highlight the marked difference in approaches needed to support and educate based on a multitude of intersectional factors. As such, we argue that image-based harassment and abuse are not simply gendered, but also shaped by socioeconomic and cultural factors. Thus, we advocate for a nuanced approach to understanding and contextualising online sexual harassment.

## 4. NEED FOR DIGITAL SEX EDUCATION

In addition to exploring their experiences of various online risks and harms, we also gathered important data on exactly what gaps need to be addressed in the support provided to young people. Studies show that young people are largely unhappy with the education they have received about sexuality topics such as sexual harassment, relationships and LGBTQ+ rights (Jørgensen et al., 2019; Keating et al., 2018; SIECCAN, 2019). As a result, this section seeks to highlight these shortfalls from the viewpoints of young people in order to inform our recommendations on how digital sex education in the UK can teach young people how to safely navigate the digital context of sexual harassment and abuse.

### LACK OF REPORTING AND NORMALISATION OF ABUSE

Across our study, we found that participants rarely reported their experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse. By 'report' we are referring to instances when the young person identifies what has happened as a problem, and participates in a formal process to take some action towards preventing or seeking support for the harassment or abuse. From our survey findings, just over half of participants (n=54/106) reported doing nothing when they had received unwanted sexual content online or had their image shared without their consent. Similarly, the Project deSHAME'S (2017) survey with 3,257 youths aged 13 to 17 found that 53% of respondents ignored their experience of online sexual harassment.

When asked why they chose not to report, 49% (n=45/94) responded 'other', 30% (n=28/94) responded 'I don't think reporting works', 15% (n=14/94) responded that they 'knew the person', and finally 4% (n=4/94) responded that they 'didn't know how to report.' According to the Project deSHAME'S (2017) survey, the top barriers to reporting online sexual harassment were: being too embarrassed, worrying about what would happen next, and worrying about being targeted by those involved. When asked specifically why they would not seek help from a teacher, the most common response was that they were worried that their school would overreact.

For those who did report image-based sexual harassment and abuse, they most often did so by reporting it to a friend (n=27/106), followed by reporting it to a platform (n=18/106). This also fits with the Project deShame findings, as 68% of British participants in that research claimed that they would speak to friends if they experienced online sexual harassment. In our survey, only 5% (n=5/106) reported telling their parents/carers and a mere 2% (n=2/106) reported it to their school. This fits with the literature on young people's reporting patterns. In particular, Jørgensen et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study with youth in the UK and found that young people were "too embarrassed" to report their experiences of sexting or image-based sexual abuse to a teacher or parent/carer (p. 32).

These findings were echoed by our focus group discussions with young people. Reporting the unsolicited dick pic was difficult for multiple reasons. For starters, the social media platforms were deemed useless. So it was better to block than report, especially on Snapchat where the image disappeared. Girls could not save the images on Snapchat because the platform reports a screen save to the user which could be seen as encouragement or could also put the girls at risk of further harassment from boys. Some participants discussed not reporting when contacted by adult strangers, companies, or competitions on social media apps, because they "didn't think of" it.

**Gauri:** *You need to like be careful, and be like no, sorry, like I don't know you, or block them or like report them on either Instagram, Snapchat, or any social media.*

**Robbie:** *And the sad thing is sometimes they don't get caught.*

**Adrienne:** *But I didn't report them or anything because I didn't think of that.*

**Gauri:** *I think like it's not OK for older people to start adding us on Snapchat. . .*

*(NELA, Year 7 mixed)*

In spite of their awareness that “it’s not OK for older people to start adding [them] on Snapchat”, one participant still remarks that she didn’t report it because she didn’t think of that. The lack of knowledge around reporting functions and lack of faith in their efficacy contributes to the normalisation of receiving unsolicited sexual images via social media platforms. It points to the need to overtly teach about the reporting functions in digital sex and relationships education while encouraging these platforms to strengthen the processes which ensure reports of online harassment are addressed in a timely and effective way.

Compounding this lack of knowledge around reporting functions and lack of faith in their efficacy was the overall normalisation of image-based sexual harassment and abuse across all focus groups. In the focus group discussions, young people generally accepted image-based sexual harassment and abuse as “normal” because they lacked the knowledge required to identify these behaviours as abusive. In a discussion with the SELA Year 10 girls, without any prompting, a participant says that because sending unwanted images is so normal, they cannot know that it is a form of assault.

**Monique:** *Can I say something completely different?*

**Interviewer:** *Mhm.*

**Monique:** *They think it's normal. . . yeah, it's normal, or they didn't do anything, and that is sexual assault, but most teenagers don't know that, so they don't do anything about it, and they just leave it. And they're feeling bad.*

**Interviewer:** *That's really useful and important, have you been taught about sexual assault in your sex education?*

**Monique:** *I don't know what every single sexual assault is, I don't know what you could define it as.*

In this excerpt, the participant disrupts what is normal and starts to think more critically about power relations. However, she contends that most people her age do not have this awareness around what sexual harassment and abuse are because of lack of education on these topics. She went on to draw the following mind-map about how schools need to address online sexual assault in sex education.

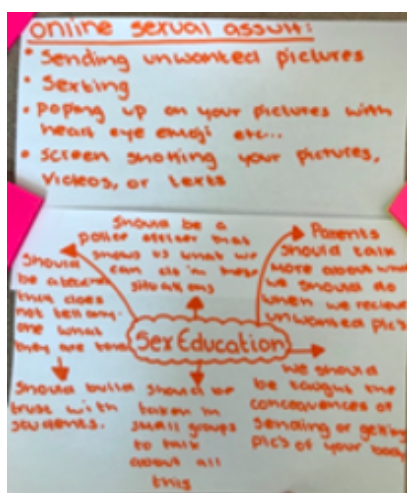


Figure 17.

Online Sexual Assault and Sex Education Mind Map, Year 10 girls SELC

### STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

In addition to discussing the issues with their education, many participants offered strategies for improving their digital sex education. Participants discussed the ways in which parental and educational interventions need to refocus their attention towards eliminating the gender norms that motivate boys to engage in these harmful forms of image-based sexual harassment and abuse. This perspective was discussed in several focus groups. Girls in Year 9 at Swans explained that boys should be taught not to send unsolicited dick pics.

**Bryony:** You need to somehow get across to the boys, before they get this I don't care attitude, that it is unacceptable to send an unsolicited dick pic to a girl, because it's just . . . disrespectful.

**Ginny:** Yeah.

**Bryony:** Not for any oh it will be shared and all of this fear mongering, you need to somehow get them to understand that it's disrespectful.

**Ginny:** Yeah, it's not right.

**Bryony:** Morally unacceptable.

(Swans Year 9 girls)

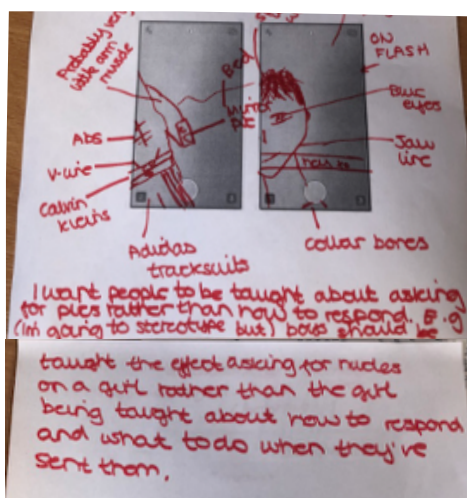


Figure 18.

'I want people [boys] to be taught about asking for pics rather than [girls] how to respond', Year 9 Girls Swans

Year 12s at Swans had a similar discussion:

**Jen:** It's kind of important maybe to tell the boys maybe not to like send them to random girls, if they're gonna go oh like I'm gonna like find this random girl and add her to Snapchat and send her something, maybe tell them not to do that...

(Swans Year 12 mixed)

Together these excerpts emphasise the need for schools to move away from discussing the victims' behaviours and to refocus the attention on boys' roles in either perpetrating or contributing to a culture that normalises image-based sexual harassment and abuse.

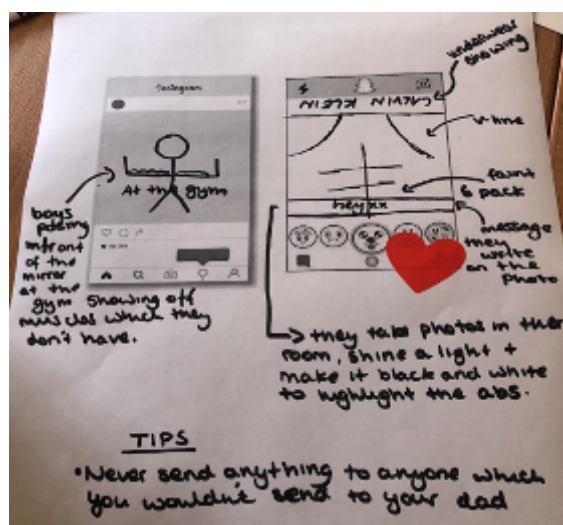


Figure 19.

Boys posing at gym: Tips 'Never send anything to anyone which you wouldn't send to your dad',  
Year 10 Girls Swans

In addition to focusing on aiming to prevent the perpetration of image-based sexual harassment and abuse through education, participants discussed lowering the age of at which they learn topics related to digital sex education. According to Year 10 girls, digital sex education should start at Year 5 because the age of sexting is dropping and we again see a concern about younger siblings managing these social media contexts.

**Alexus:** To be honest I think it's going down, like the age is going down.

**Destiny:** Yeah.

**Cali:** Yeah, younger.

**Soraya:** Because I see like year sevens show off their bodies.

**Rhianna:** My sister, when she was in year six, she come home one day and she told me a story of a boy like he had took a picture, and they're only in year six [10-11 years old]. And like where they have the WhatsApp group, and she said it was going around the WhatsApp group, and like she thought it was funny and stuff, obviously where she was young, but I was like whoa, a year six boy knows stuff like that. When I was in year six I didn't know to do stuff like that.

**Interviewer:** So it was of his parts, the picture.

**Rhianna:** Yeah.

**Nia:** Feel like when you're younger as well you don't really understand the consequences of what you're doing.



**Interviewer:** So when do you think that schools should start educating young people?

**Alexus:** Year five and six.

**Interviewer:** Year five and six?

**Cali:** Yeah, because in my primary school we did sex education and everything but we didn't really talk about the importance of social media, and (39.21) to be honest. All we talked about was hormones, basically.

**Soraya:** When we was in primary school it wasn't that deep.

**Cali:** And puberty.

**Soraya:** We never really used social media that much when we was in primary, it wasn't that popular, but it's got more popular now.

(SELC, Year 10 girls)

In the above passage we see how private message groups like WhatsApp are used to screenshot and share images of young people more widely than original senders, in this case a boy's nude of "his parts". Clear understandings of consent are needed to address this 'digital empathy gap' around image sharing (Project DeShame, 2017).



Figure 20.

Tips for girls: 'Don't feel pressure to share pictures of yourself... because someone tells you to', Year 9 Girls Swans

The Year 8 focus group from one of the most elite schools and youngest age groups (SEI) agreed that digital sex education should start in Year 5:

**Alice:** I think for sex education we got taught in like year seven, and they say they teach it from there because that's when you start to get your phone, but you want to have it before, because you can already have done things, or received things that could be really like quite embarrassing or that you don't want happening. So I think you should be taught in at least year five or something like that. Yeah, year five, year six.

(SEI Year 8 girls)



The Year 8 boys in SEI say they that the curriculum needs to include more lessons on “sexual activities” on the internet including how to report unwanted messages:

**Dominic:** We are taught about not giving away passwords and stuff, and being careful about bullying and things, but one thing that can be changed, things like this, taught about sexual activities on the internet.

(Lords Year 9 boys)

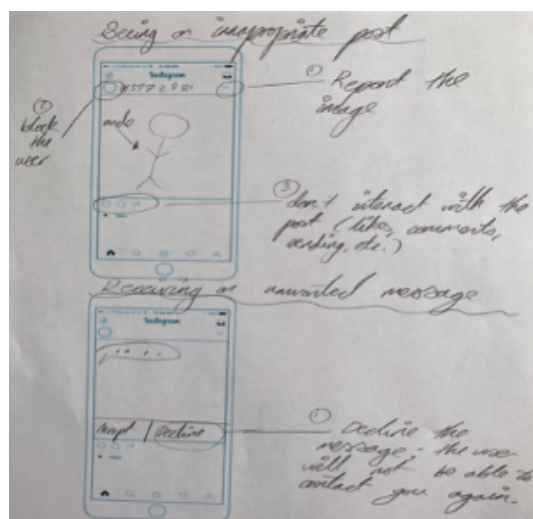


Figure 21.

A Year 9 boys Tips: 'Report the image; decline the message', Year 9 Lords

The boys go on to explain that sex education should be more “open” and taught from a young age.

**Rupert:** We had a talk about like sex ed and stuff, I think it's in Sweden they get taught from like a really young age.

**Edward:** Because they are super open about it.

**Preston:** Exactly. I think people need to like, need to accept it more, and they need to be, I think from a younger age we need to be taught on like sex education stuff, because then you become aware of everything.

(SEI Year 8 boys).

Another topic that came up in the focus group discussions was the need for educators to understand the affordances of different apps. This need is outlined by the Year 10 girls:

**Saimaira:** It would be helpful if it was younger people because they understand what we're going through, right? What do you mean by that, what are you going through? No like as in they'll know how certain apps work as well, I feel like if you're older, I'm not saying that all older people...

**Adiva:** ...like for example you guys never knew what private stories were.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Saimaira:** So they can't really understand how we should like go about certain situations if they don't know what the situations are.

(CLC 2 Year 10 girls)

Finally, participants believed that smaller group formats would be more effective than large scale assemblies which previous research has also shown to lack effective interpersonal dynamics for learning and engagement on sensitive issues such as youth sexting (Jørgensen et al., 2019).

**Manjit:** *I Um, I don't really think assemblies work as much . . . If you should like talk to the students in a classroom, like you should kind of make it light-hearted, not as serious, just to make them like kind of process it more.*  
(Lords boys Year 9, Group 1).

**Sander:** *I think it's quite awkward when teachers talk to students about sex education especially assemblies because they didn't really feel like a conversation. It just felt like a telling off.*  
(Lords, Year 10 Group 2)

Several students described how this assembly format specifically was not conducive to sharing their personal experiences and seeking support from teachers.

**Cali:** *And I feel like they should do smaller assemblies as well, like into groups, because let's say if this group was bigger I don't feel like. . . if it was boys and girls as well, I don't feel like some people would like talk about what they want to talk about, they may not feel comfortable with certain people . . . . And they're like if anything does happen speak to this teacher . . . a teacher we don't even like normally talk to, like you wouldn't be comfortable to go in.*  
(CLC 2, Year 10 girls)

**Jo:** *I think we've, we've had a couple of assemblies on like if you do receive these images, go and speak to people within the school, but I don't think anyone would.*  
(Lords boys Year 10, Group 1)

Rather than having "awkward" conversations with teachers, several participants discussed the potential value in having younger facilitators initiate these discussions with students.

**K:** *What would be useful, do you think?*

**Saimaira:** *I think like learning from a younger person, because the people they choose, I don't think they understand.*

**Adiva:** *Yeah, they are really old.*

**Iba:** *Yeah, if they had like a personal story or something.*

**Saimaira:** *It could affect someone more than the assemblies they are doing now. I think it would be more useful if they told us the different approaches, because obviously cyberbullies are just people that are online and are not really good, that are bad people, then they obviously approach people in different ways, and we might not know all the ways and we might think it's harmless, but if they like explained and like told us more about the different ways that they could like target young people then I think that would be more helpful.*  
(CLC2, Year 10 girls)

As we can see in this array of quotes the students do not find the risk and harm assemblies about what they shouldn't do helpful or informative, they are missing an affirmative message about how to respond to and address when problems have already happened. Hence we need to shift from a 'don't do it' message to 'it's already happening', and consider what will be the most supportive strategy.

## EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings we have come up with context specific recommendations for schools, parents and carers, tech companies, and welfare professionals as well as recommendations for future research.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

#### POLICY LEVEL

**1. *Introduce a whole-school approach to tackle sexual harassment and abuse.***

This includes challenging all forms of sexism, online and offline harassment, abuse and discriminatory behaviour, and embedding an understanding of gender and power relations in all aspects of school activities, including school curriculum and policies. Given that image-based sexual harassment and abuse are poorly understood, we recommend using our policy guidance to specifically address online gender and sexual risk and harm, available at: [www.schoolofsexed.org/guidance-for-schools](http://www.schoolofsexed.org/guidance-for-schools)

**2. *Remain solution-focused and avoid victim blaming.***

Students must feel confident that they will not be blamed or disciplined if they experience sexual harassment or abuse. For example, if a student sent a nude image that was shared, avoid questions such as ‘why have you done this?’, as this places emphasis on the actions of the victim. This recommendation aligns with the government guidance (2020), “[Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people](#)”.

**3. *Implement a victim-centred approach to online and offline sexual harassment and abuse.***

Our research showed that young people are not reporting their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse because they fear that it will make matters worse. Young people must feel confident that their agency will be respected, and that their wishes will be taken into account regarding how the incident will be dealt with. Taking a victim-centred approach involves prioritising the victim and their needs above all else, before involving other actors, such as police and the perpetrator.

**4. *Train teachers and staff on identifying and responding to online and offline sexual harassment and abuse.***

In line with a whole-school approach, we recommend implementing staff training for all school staff, particularly for those who teach RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) or those with a pastoral role. Training must cover:

- a. What behaviours constitute offline and online sexual harassment and abuse and who is at risk.
- b. How to appropriately respond to disclosures of sexual harassment and abuse in a supportive and sensitive manner.
- c. The support services available to young people who experience sexual harassment and abuse. See table 1.
- d. How and when to report and record incidents of sexual harassment and abuse in line with the school's internal systems and procedures, and the lead member of staff to speak to on such matters.
- e. How to communicate with parents and carers about incidents of sexual harassment and abuse, including the support services available to parents and carers.

## Support and Reporting Services

Table 1.

Organisation	Service
<p><b>Childline</b>  <b>W:</b> <a href="http://www.childline.org.uk">www.childline.org.uk</a>  <b>Helpline:</b> 0800 1111</p>	<p>Childline offers free, private and confidential counselling over the phone, online messaging or email for anyone under 19 in the UK.</p>
<p><b>Mermaids</b>  <b>W:</b> <a href="http://mermaidsuk.org.uk/young-people">mermaidsuk.org.uk/young-people</a>  <b>Helpline:</b> 0808 801 0400  <b>Text chat:</b> Text MERMAIDS to 85258  <b>E:</b> <a href="mailto:info@mermaidsuk.org.uk">info@mermaidsuk.org.uk</a></p>	<p>Mermaids supports transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse children and young people until their 20th birthday. Services include: educational resources, and support over phone, text message and email.</p>
<p><b>The Mix</b>  <b>W:</b> <a href="http://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team">www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team</a>  <b>Helpline:</b> 0808 808 4994  <b>Crisis Text Line:</b> text THEMIX to 85258.</p>	<p>The Mix is a free and confidential multi-channel service for anyone age 13 to 25. Offers support on diverse issues through articles and video content online or phone, email, peer to peer and counselling services.</p>
<p><b>Rape Crisis</b>  <b>W:</b> <a href="http://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help/looking-for-information/support-for-children-and-young-people">rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help/looking-for-information/support-for-children-and-young-people</a></p>	<p>Rape Crisis provides support for girls aged 13+ who have survived any type of sexual violence (including online).</p>
<p><b>Report Remove</b>  <b>W:</b> <a href="http://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/remove-nude-image-shared-online">www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/remove-nude-image-shared-online</a></p>	<p>This tool removes nude images or videos of under 18s that have been shared online, that are public or available to anyone on the internet, but cannot remove images or videos on encrypted networks like WhatsApp, or which are saved on a person's phone or computer.</p>
<p><b>Report Harmful Content</b>  <b>W:</b> <a href="http://reportharmfulcontent.com">reportharmfulcontent.com</a></p>	<p>This website allows you to report online safety issues, including various forms of online sexual harassment, threats, bullying and harassment, online abuse and unwanted sexual advances (not image based).</p>
<p><b>CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command)</b>  <b>W:</b> <a href="http://www.ceop.police.uk/Safety-Centre">www.ceop.police.uk/Safety-Centre</a></p>	<p>CEOP can be used by under 18s to anonymously and confidentially report sexual coercion, threats and intimidation online, e.g. someone asking or pressuring for nude images.</p>
<p><b>Internet Watch Foundation</b>  <b>W:</b> <a href="http://www.iwf.org.uk">www.iwf.org.uk</a></p>	<p>This tool removes sexual content of children shared online. Reports can be made by those under and over 18.</p>
<p><b>Revenge Porn Helpline</b>  <b>E:</b> <a href="mailto:help@revengepornhelpline.org.uk">help@revengepornhelpline.org.uk</a></p>	<p>The Revenge Porn Helpline offers support to over 18s who have had images shared non-consensually.</p>

Table 1.

<p><b>NSPCC</b>  <b>W:</b> <a href="http://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety">www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety</a></p>	<p>The NSPCC Online Safety pages provide advice and information for parents, young people and professionals on privacy settings, parental controls, how to talk to young people about digital safety and more.</p>
<p><b>UK Safer Internet Centre</b>  <b>W:</b> <a href="http://www.saferinternet.org.uk">www.saferinternet.org.uk</a></p>	<p>The NSPCC Online Safety pages provide advice and information for parents, young people and professionals on privacy settings, parental controls, how to talk to young people about digital safety and more.</p>

## IN THE CLASSROOM

1. ***Gender and sexual violence should be prioritised in PSHE lessons and those lessons, given they are compulsory, should be allocated time and space in school timetables.***  
School RSE curriculums must leave time and space in their timetables for lessons surrounding online and offline sexual violence. All students should be required to receive this education from a young age, and teachers and schools should be provided with the adequate resources and support to do so.
2. ***Deliver RSE and digital sex education in small groups by trained and confident members of staff, or external expert providers.***  
Research consistently shows that lecture-style assemblies are ineffective, and that young people prefer more informal discussions in smaller groups when discussing sensitive topics. Our focus group participants told us that they would like RSE to be taught in an “open” way, and for them to feel comfortable to speak to the teacher leading the session. Training is vital to be able to create a safe and non-judgemental classroom environment.
3. ***Eliminate punitive and risk-focused approaches to nude image sharing.***  
Extensive research shows that abstinence-only approaches to sending nudes and semi-nudes are ineffective in preventing young people from sending nudes, as they are often aware of the risks involved and engage in these activities in spite of these risks. Furthermore, a risk-focused approach can be harmful, as overemphasizing risks can prevent children from seeking support when they need it, out of fear that they will be blamed for their own victimisation. Instead, teachers should acknowledge the motivations for students to engage in nude image sharing and should teach students how to make informed decisions about if, when, how, and with whom to sext consensually and responsibly.
4. ***Focus on preventing perpetration of image-based sexual harassment and abuse.***  
Rather than teaching students to avoid sending nudes, which places the onus on the victims, students should be taught not to sexually harass and abuse others online. This reorients the focus away from the actions of the victim, and towards the actions of the perpetrator. Given our finding that the majority of perpetrators are boys and men, boys especially should be taught in school how to identify and challenge masculinity norms and unequal gender relations. Students should be taught to reflect on their role as participants or bystanders (especially in group contexts of image sharing), and their responsibility to prevent and intervene in incidents of online and offline sexual violence—when it is safe to do so.

**5. Teach students about the intersectional, gendered nature of sexual harassment and abuse.**

Students should be provided with an open and safe space to explore how masculinity and femininity norms impact all young people by informing sexual double standards (e.g. slut shaming) and the gender policing of other students (e.g. homophobia, transphobia, 'lad banter'). Furthermore, outline the ways in which LGBTQ+ and BAME young people may have different experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse. RSE and PSHE should employ intersectional approaches that include contextualised safeguarding to recognise variable vulnerabilities and harm, so that students from diverse backgrounds and/or who have less supports are understood and supported appropriately.

**6. Teach students to identify and respond to harmful behaviours including sexual violence in both online and offline contexts.**

Our qualitative research found that teens lack a language and framework to understand experiences of online harms, which contributes to the normalisation of digital sexual violence. By addressing online interactions through a consent and ethics lens, students are able to identify coercion, harassment, sexist and homophobic bullying, hate-speech etc. RSE should empower teens by giving them a language to name these experiences. It should also equip young people with a range of digital literacy skills, including how to block, report, adjust privacy settings, etc.

**7. Start teaching students about online and offline sexual harassment and abuse at a younger age.**

The young people we spoke to explained that their sex education was too little, too late, with a resounding call for it to start much younger. Whilst we only researched pupils aged 12 to 18, we heard anecdotes of primary school children experiencing online harms. Educators must plan curricula that respond to young people's actual experiences, as opposed to planning based on their own assumptions or unavoidably dated experiences, and to account for the fact that young people have sexual rights.

**Note: for a more detailed summary of guidance and recommendations for schools to tackle online sexual harassment, please see 'Online Sexual Harassment: Comprehensive Guidance' document for schools, available at: [www.schoolofsexed.org/guidance-for-schools](http://www.schoolofsexed.org/guidance-for-schools)**

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

**1. Avoid taking an overly negative and disciplinary approach to your child's technology use.**

Research shows that children often avoid telling their parents about their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse because they worry about being punished or having their technology taken away. Crucially, children must feel that if they experience online abuse, they will not be in trouble if they confide in an adult.

**2. Be non-judgemental and supportive towards your child's online activities.**

For many young people the traditional online/offline binary no longer exists. It is essential that parents and carers understand that for teens today, digital communication is an inextricable part of their lives. This includes forming friendships, romantic and sexual relationships, developing their identity and their understanding of the world around them. Rather than focusing efforts on restricting social media or mobile phone use, we recommend cultivating a trusting and honest relationship around online activity, so that children feel confident to speak openly about experiences online that make them feel uncomfortable, weird, upset or angry. Parents and carers should try to understand the underlying motivations of children to put themselves in more vulnerable situations. For example, they may have sent an image for fun, or to a boyfriend or girlfriend.

**3. *Initiate open conversations with your child about sending nude images.***

Research suggests that parent-child communication about sexual topics can reduce the impact of harmful sexual experiences, especially for young women. Through maintaining open communication, parents can help educate and raise awareness about and subsequently help to counter the rates of image-based sexual harassment and abuse.

**4. *Initiate conversations with your child about their social media usage and privacy settings.***

Privacy settings on social media can be difficult to navigate, and we found young people's understanding of 'digital defence' to be varied. This conversation should recognise the complicated role that privacy settings can play in teens' social lives and values. For example, young people may want to have fewer privacy settings because of their desire to appear 'popular'. Parents and carers should, therefore, help their child find a balanced approach to their online safety, that combines multiple strategies, in addition to privacy settings. There are numerous guides available online to assist with this (see list of support services above).

**5. *Support your child's understanding of consent, bodily autonomy, equality and ethical decision making.***

The tools that young people need to navigate digital intimacies overlap with those that they need to explore any relationship or sexual encounter safely and ethically. It is therefore important to support them in navigating online spaces safely and ethically. This could include role-modelling everyday consent, and there is no age too young to begin this. A classic example is ensuring children know that they are not obliged to greet relatives with a kiss or hug. It is also important to emphasize that it is unacceptable for anyone to make them feel uncomfortable, pressure them into doing things, and to show them things that they do not want to see.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TECH COMPANIES**

**1. *Snapchat should maintain a record of images, videos and messages.***

Reporting on Snapchat was deemed useless because the images disappeared. In response, Snapchat should be urged to maintain a record of the images, videos and messages that are sent through the app, in order to identify perpetrators and facilitate easier reporting of incidents of image-based sexual harassment and abuse.

**2. *Create clearer and more extensive privacy settings.***

Children and indeed, adults, find that navigating the privacy settings on popular social media platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, Tiktok) is challenging. To keep young people safe online, the way to manage these settings must be made clearer. Furthermore, social media platforms should set their default privacy settings to offer the maximum (rather than minimum) protection and privacy for the user—especially for younger users.

**3. *Create more rigorous identity verification procedures.***

Our findings showed that a large percentage of incidents of image-based sexual harassment and abuse were from unknown adult men—many of whom had created false identities online. Social media platforms have a responsibility to protect children from these adult predators and should do so by putting more effective measures in place to prevent users from creating false identities online. This could involve verifying a user's identity using a passport or government ID, as well as putting a user's verified age on their profile.



**4. *Develop innovative solutions to prevent image-based sexual harassment and abuse and improve reporting functions.***

If children report the sharing of a child sexual image to the social media platform, removing these images can be inefficient and there is nothing to stop the image from being screenshotted and re-uploaded. Across our qualitative and quantitative research, participants claimed that they did not report incidents of image-based sexual harassment and abuse to the social media app because they did not think that reporting works. Social media platforms must consequently improve their responses to these serious forms of digital sexual violence.

**5. *Social media platforms should work with child e-safety platforms to improve the online safety of young people.***

There are numerous child e-safety platforms and support services such as Report Remove, Report Harmful Content, CEOP and the Internet Watch Foundation which aim to prevent and support victims of image-based sexual abuse, online sexual harassment, grooming and child sexual exploitation. However, it is still difficult and inefficient to remove nudes shared nonconsensually on popular social media apps (e.g. Snapchat) or private messaging apps (e.g. Whatsapp). An integrated approach between young people's online safety services and social media companies could be a highly effective solution to keeping children safe online.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE PROFESSIONALS**

**1. *Provide a consistent approach to sexual harassment and abuse.***

Safeguarding children's boards and other welfare professionals must work in partnership with schools, and ensure practices align with school policies and procedures, to provide a consistent approach for the young people in their care.

**2. *Prioritising children's rights when safeguarding.***

Children's rights must be centred in responding to safeguarding concerns that relate to offline and online sexual harassment and abuse. This includes being transparent with a child about a safeguarding process; ensuring that any conversations about a young person's involvement in or experience of online sexual harassment are had with the knowledge of the young person, and, if possible, in their presence; and, within the boundaries of safeguarding best practice, take into account the wishes of the victim of sexual harassment.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT**

**1. *Provide schools with adequate funding and resources.***

Ofsted inspections currently include a significant focus on whether sexual harassment is occurring in schools, without the necessary support, knowledge and training from specialists being available to schools. Safety should be a priority, and schools should be supported to focus on knowledge building, rather than meeting inspection expectations. The evidence highlights the need for schools to have the financial means to secure appropriate staffing, training and high quality evidence-based resources to teach gender and sexual equity and tackle the roots of sexual harassment and abuse.

**2. *Allocate resources to young people's mental health services.***

Young people who experience online harms often require mental health and wellbeing support, and yet waiting lists for CAMHS are currently unacceptably long. Resources must be provided to better support young people's mental health which is currently at crisis point.

**3. *Revise the statutory Relationships, Sex and Health Education guidance to remove victim-blaming rhetoric and better outline online harms.***

The existing Relationships Sex and Health Education guidance (2019) for secondary schools states that schools must teach students “resisting pressure to have sex” (p. 25). This causes schools to teach children that victims of coercion are responsible for changing their behaviour, rather than the perpetrator, further bolstering harmful victim-blaming narratives. All such references must be removed from the guidance. The guidance should also make it clear that schools should teach about what constitutes online sexual harassment, including the image-based sexual abuse and cyberflashing.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

1. While several studies have explored the phenomenon of adults sending and receiving unsolicited dick pics (e.g., Marcotte et al., 2020; Oswald et al., 2019), this trend among adolescents is relatively unstudied. Given the prevalence of this trend in the current study, there is an urgent need to further research the context and implications of this trend among adolescents. Further research is needed to analyse peer to peer dynamics of adolescent boys sending unsolicited dick pics to adolescent girls.
2. Focus group discussions demonstrated the relevance of homosocial masculinity in adolescent boys’ engagement in image-based sexual abuse and the solicitation for nude images. Future research should analyse these gendered contexts like lad banter as it is developing in online contexts in order to develop strategies to deconstruct these harmful gender norms.
3. Given the small sample size of LGBTQ+ young people in our study, it was challenging to make any conclusions about this population and their experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse. Greater efforts should thus be made to study LGBTQ+ young people’s experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse, as well as consensual sexting.
4. While our study found that the technological affordances of specific social media platforms facilitated image-based sexual harassment and abuse, further research is needed on how always emerging platforms shape image sharing and enable abuse and/or protect users. Technological factors that can be changed to address the issue of image-based sexual harassment should be a focus.
5. While IBSA research has typically focused on adult women victims and on images distributed by electronic means (Bates, 2017; McGlynn et al., 2020), our research revealed a trend of sharing images in the (typically male) peer group on smartphone screens to avoid a digital footprint of IBSA. We also found that victims may not be aware of their images being shared, hence low reporting rates. The nuances and complexities of IBSA amongst teen victims needs to be urgently studied in further depth.

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