Young people who produce and send nude images: Context, motivation and consequences

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The SPIRTO project

SPIRTO is a research project funded by the European Commission Directorate-General Communications Networks, Content and Technology, Safer Internet Programme as a Knowledge Enhancement Project under Action 4.1: A knowledge enhancement project which should investigate, through a quantitative and qualitative methodology, how the changing conditions of access and use of mobile devices bring greater or lesser risks to children’s safety (Grant Agreement Number SI-2012-KEP-411207). Its duration was 30 months (December 2012 – May 2015). Its goal was to build an evidence base of the risks associated for adolescents with the move to merged technology, in particular mobile or hand held devices.

Our focus was on risk related to the capacity to generate sexual content (often described as sexting). We wished to understand the different contexts behind the creation of these sexual images and the consequences for the young people involved. The final aim of the project was to develop training materials for professionals working with young people and parents. This would seek to provide information, enable further discussion with young people about risk, and examine effective ways of sharing knowledge.

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INTRODUCTION

Self-produced nude or sexual images (and sometimes sexual texts) have become an increasing source of interest and concern by specialist agencies such as law enforcement and educationalists, as well as the general public. The production of these images is often referred to as sexting (although seemingly not by many young people themselves). One definition of sexting is the sending or posting of sexually suggestive images, including nude or semi-nude photographs, via mobiles or over the Internet.

A recent review of the academic and professional literature highlighted the range of research and debate around adolescent and young adult sexting behaviours. Despite the extent of media-generated and academic interest in young people’s reasons for sexting, there remains a surprising lack of quality, in-depth research exploring their motivations and experiences of the activity. Klettke, Halford and Mellor (2014) identified a number of methodological constraints evident within the research field which include a focus on survey data and self-selected samples, lack of validated measures and reliance on self-report data: factors which have reduced the generalizability and explanatory power of some findings and led to a largely ‘disparate’ literature base.

Nevertheless, the existing literature highlights important issues of consideration for future research. Of particular interest is the existing knowledge base on young people’s motivations for making and sending self-produced sexual content. Findings suggest that sexting conduct can be varied in terms of context, meaning and intention. For some young people, self-producing images is a means of flirting and teenage experimentation, or a way of enhancing a sexual relationship. For other young people however, sexting practices may be a ‘marker of further risk’ (Houck et al., 2014:6; Jonsson, Priebe, Bladh & Svedin, 2014; Jonsson, Bladh, Priebe & Svedin, 2015), for example, in terms of engaging in early sexual behaviour and risky sexual practices or by demonstrating a potential vulnerably to victimisation, cyberbullying and online grooming (Korenis & Billick, 2014).

Whilst a number of research studies highlight the potential negative outcomes of sexting behaviours, critics argue that this neglects to address that young people may derive pleasure from their experiences and enjoy sharing sexual images consensually. Hasinoff (2013) points out that in order to accurately recognise non-consensual, harmful, malicious behaviours, it is a prerequisite to understand that sexting can be consensual. Powell and
Henry (2014) therefore argue that our understanding of sexting needs to recognise the complexity of sexting behaviour and be able to make a distinction between consensual and non-consensual creation and distribution of sexual images. This is necessary if it is going to inform legal, policy and education resources.

Recognising a distinction between those young people who willingly seek to make and send sexual images and those who feel some element of coercion is important within gender debates. Issues around female sexting are often inextricably linked to broader moral concerns about the sexualisation of girls within popular culture and the pressures they face to live up to gendered sexual ideals (Hasinoff, 2013; Karaian, 2012; Rollins, 2015). There is evidence that some girls may have more negative sexting experiences, with the potential for partner and peer pressure to make and send images, and the need to negotiate the social and cultural double standards of female sexual reputation if their activities are made public. However, in contrast to these concerns, some authors have advocated sexting as an opportunity for females to embrace sexual images as a self-mediated practice of creativity and self-reflection (see for example, Hasinoff, 2013).

Contextualising young people’s experiences within a broader socio-cultural and contemporary media landscape further highlights both the changing perceptions around adolescent sexual identity, risk and sexualisation and the increasing intersection between on and offline behaviours (Dir, Cyders & Coskunpiner, 2013). Within this framework it is necessary to understand the ‘very different kinds of concerns, ethics and aesthetics that pertain to different sexting scenarios’ (Albury & Crawford, 2012:468). Reyns, Henson & Fisher (2014) suggest that consideration of these various factors requires a need for more theoretically informed research on sexting, including young people’s perceptions and attitudes as well as a more qualitative exploration of their lifestyles and personality traits.

Common to a number of research findings is not only the ongoing gap in rigorous research about sexting (Walker, Sanci & Temple-Smith, 2011) but the need for recognition of both the multifaceted nature of sexual interactions and the importance of further unpicking these interactions to determine what sexting means to young people, their reasons for sexting, the specific contexts in which the activity occurs, and the consequences that follow on from sexting experiences. Learning more about these issues and the complex communication processes involved will help to develop more ‘detailed typologies’ (Albury & Crawford, 2012:468) and lead to appropriate and relevant ways of educating parents and professionals working with young people. Additional qualitative research will serve to further our understanding about the complex interplay of factors influencing sexting practices and their consequences.
RESEARCH AIMS

Although there has been considerable recent research on adolescent self-produced sexual images, the majority of studies have used survey data to understand the motivations for this activity, or proxy populations such as police reports. Whilst accepting the criticisms of self-selected research populations, it was felt that a qualitative approach was appropriate given the need for further exploratory work with young people who had self-identified as engaging in sexting behaviour.

Our research questions were:

1. What were the contexts for the production of these images?

2. How were the images, the motivations for producing and sharing them, and the ways of managing risks described?

3. What were the consequences for these young people and what recommendations did they make to parents, teachers and peers?
METHOD

Sample
The inclusion criteria for the study were young people aged between 12-25 years old who, before the age of 18, had sent or posted images that included them showing their breasts, genitals or bottoms (or parts of them) and was consistent with the definition used by the US Crimes Against Children Research Center (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011).

The research was carried out in the UK and in Sweden. In order to recruit young people for the study within these countries, a purposive sampling method was used. In the UK this included contacting schools, the Police, community centres, youth charities and clubs, and groups for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) youth, as well as advertising the project online (e.g. on Facebook). In Sweden participants were recruited through diverse channels such as clinical treatment units, schools and through advertising on a webpage for young people selling sex.

Procedure
Participant information sheets and a flexible interview guide were developed by the research team. This was written initially in Swedish, translated into English and back translated into Swedish. The guide included key areas aimed at facilitating discussion about identity, namely: mobile phone and Internet use; the contexts and reasons for taking and sending images; telling others; the consequences for the young person; and advice for others. In addition to the interview guide a questionnaire was developed including 14 questions about background variables, based on questions from a Swedish epidemiological study regarding young people and sex (Svedin & Priebe, 2004; Priebe & Svedin, 2009) and included measures about psychological health (SCL 5; Strand, Dalgard, Tambs & Rognerud, 2003).

Once participants had consented to be part of the study they were interviewed by one of the three researchers at a place of their choice. Interviews lasted between 15 minutes and two hours, were recorded digitally and transcribed removing any identifiable material. The digital files were uploaded onto an encrypted web-based qualitative data management platform, Dedoose (www.dedoose.com) for analysis.
Data analysis
The data was qualitatively analysed using Framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton & Ormston, 2014), which involves a systematic approach of sifting, charting and sorting material according to key issues and themes (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). The data analysis in the current study involved five stages: Familiarization; Identifying a theoretical framework; Indexing and charting; Mapping and interpretation. For quantitative data in the background description of the participants SPSS version 22.0 was used when performing T-test.

Characteristics of participants
Fifty-one young people were recruited for the study. Forty-one interviews were conducted in the UK and 10 in Sweden. The sample included 30 females, 18 males and 2 individuals who answered that neither gender classification fitted them (Table 1).

Table 1. Country of interview and gender of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All n (%)</th>
<th>Girls n (%)</th>
<th>Boys n (%)</th>
<th>Not girl/boy n (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>All participants</td>
<td>51 (100)</td>
<td>31 (100)</td>
<td>18 (100)</td>
<td>2 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>41 (80.4)</td>
<td>21 (67.7)</td>
<td>18 (100)</td>
<td>2 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>10 (19.6)</td>
<td>10 (32.3)</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Information on the background of the interviewed young persons is presented in table 2. The mean age was 17.5 years (standard deviation 2.8) and the vast majority (96%) were born in their country of interview, although seven (14%) had parents born outside either the UK or Sweden.

The young people’s living situations were very diverse: only 56% were living with one or both of their parents. This is perhaps unsurprising given the mean age of the young people at time of survey. Alternative living situations included living alone, in shared accommodation with friends, or in housing support.

Most of the young people liked school (74%, better than or the same as most others) and they rated their learning performance in school as better or the same as most others (85%). There were no statistical significant differences between males and females, by age or between participants from the UK and from Sweden, as measured by the SCL-5. This excluded differences in how they perceived their psychological health. There was neither any differences in comparison with the epidemiological Swedish study of 4,498 18-years-olds in Sweden (Svedin & Priebe, 2009). To this end, young females from Sweden indicated more negative feelings than participants from the UK.
Table 2. Characteristics of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic item</th>
<th>All (n=50) %</th>
<th>Girls*1,2 (n=30) %</th>
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<th>UK*1 (n=40) %</th>
<th>Sweden (n=10) %</th>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>One parent or alternately</td>
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<td>16.7</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>22.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>On my own or other</td>
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<td>40.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
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<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Parents employment</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>One/both parents working</td>
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<td>71.7</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
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<td>Father working</td>
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<td>66.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother working</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>61.2</td>
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<td>30.0</td>
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<td>Some or great difficulties</td>
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<td><strong>Country of birth, UK/Sweden</strong></td>
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<td>88.9</td>
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<td><strong>Like school</strong></td>
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<td>Better than most others</td>
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<td>20.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Same as most others</td>
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<td>33.3</td>
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<td>50.0</td>
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<td>Worse than most others</td>
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<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learn at school</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Better than most others</td>
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<td>20.0</td>
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<td>Same as most others</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>55.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worse than most others</td>
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<td>27.8</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>See yourself as</strong></td>
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<td>Heterosexual</td>
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<td>Bisexual</td>
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<td>11.1</td>
<td>17.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
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<td>3.3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SCL-5 (Mean and SD)</strong></td>
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<td>3.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2.8</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Age (Mean and SD)</strong></td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>17.3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *1 One individual missing data
*2 Two individuals answered, “This classification doesn’t fit me” and are not included
*3 Comparison between groups * = p<.05, ** b= p<.01, *** = p<.001
*4 Comparisons between just girls * = p<.05, ** = p<.01, *** = p<.001
FINDINGS

The interviews generated a range of rich descriptive data across the topics of interest. During analysis different stages in the process of sending nude or nearly nude images were identified and six main themes with 20 subthemes were created. These will be described more in detail below (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Stages of sending nude images

Context for image

Living life online
- Internet use
- Staying in contact
- Social expectations and sexting behaviours
- Preparing to send images: consideration and context

Sending

Why send nude images?
- Fun, flirting and meeting new people
- Exploring sexuality
- A way of seeking affirmation
- Social acceptance/because others are doing it
- Part of a romantic or sexual relationship

Managing risks.
- Trust the receiver
- Trust the web-page
- Safe content

After sending

Consequences
- Immediate consequences
- Longer-term consequences
- Behavioural changes/consequences

Decisions afterwards
- Telling others
- Do I send again?

Advice

Advice to others
- Young people
- Parents, caretakers and teachers
INTERNET USE
Being online was a natural part of life for all interviewees. The computer, tablet or mobile phone was, for most, used on a daily basis. The time spent on these devices varied, and the difference between being online and offline was not always clear. Unlimited Internet access and owning a technically modern device, such as a smart phone, led to increased periods of online activity, including the sending of more texts, and frequent time spent talking on the phone.

There was also a minority sub-group who described more limited Internet and mobile phone use. This might have related to difficulties with access (e.g. “my phone broke”, “I don’t have good Internet access where I live”, “it costs a lot with texts”). However some were also conscious about the risks of spending too much time online due to the negative effects on their schoolwork, or the disruption to time playing sports or meeting with friends’ offline. Some described a more recent decrease in use as a result of not finding it as interesting anymore, or because they were staying in an institution where mobile phone use was restricted to certain hours during the day. In other cases, a change in mobile and Internet habits could be linked to their recent experiences of sending self-produced sexual images. This included problems with existing online contacts and/or attempts by individuals to contact them online. There were also those who could not use their mobile phones or computers as much as they liked because their parents had limited their access. Where individuals did describe using mobile phones or the Internet less frequently, it was interesting that this was associated with a reintroduction of old interests, such as reading or spending more time offline with friends after school.

It’s really bad like you know when you’ve used it for... guess it’s like a separation issues that you have. I’m a bit lost without it. I don’t know what to do. I’ve started reading again though. I used to read a lot and then when I went onto the Internet it kind if distracted me from reading. (UK 1)
STAYING IN CONTACT

The Internet could be used for doing schoolwork or for finding information, but foremost it was used for social networking. Social media were used to enhance wider social networks and to maintain existing immediate friendships. A typical day included both contacts with school friends and online contacts.

The most popular sites mentioned by interviewees were Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat along with Instagram. Almost all mentioned sites that included some kind of communication that enabled their need to stay in contact with existing friends and make new ones e.g. SKYPE, Hotmail, blog sites, Youtube, IMessage. There were few differences between countries but, for example, in the UK Tumbler, BBM and FetLife were mentioned whilst Kamrat was mentioned in the Swedish interviews.

A popular way of keeping in contact with others was through the exchange of images and films. During interviews the young people talked about image sharing as being something routine, which they thought that many young people did on a regular basis. They were aware that sharing images could trigger responses, especially sexually revealing images that could result in positive or negative comments and approaches. The young people also described getting tired of receiving sexual approaches from unknown people. These approaches were either ignored, answered or the person was blocked.
SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS AND SEXTING BEHAVIOURS
All of the participants talked of the social contexts to sharing images and the assumptions about its frequency and acceptability amongst young people. This included reflections on the possible motives for sexting and the social reactions to these behaviours. The assumption that lots of people were sharing images was accompanied by comments about it being ‘normal’ and something most youth do.

This included behaving online as a “typical” girl or boy. There was a perception amongst the interviewees – both male and female - that girls were generally more likely to send images in a ‘sexual way’ to gain attention or to show off. In contrast, boys were seen as being more ‘jokey’ or comical when it came to taking and sending nude images. There was also the expectation that males would be proud of the images that they had taken and have little concern about whether they would be shared with a wider audience.

Although it was commonly perceived that girls sending private images to a partner was more acceptable, in many instances the interviewees felt that girls could easily be labelled a ‘slut’ if their images were exposed and shared, regardless of whether they were the victim. There was also an acknowledgement amongst many individuals that females have to navigate a set of expectations about their behaviours that are complex and difficult to understand.

YP: I think for any young woman there’s that sexy/slutty where do you draw the line kind of thing that depends on if you’re on the receiving end or not... With guys... I mean, you hear it all the time, like on Tinder and stuff, that you’ll be talking to someone and it’s like, ‘Oh hi how are you? Here’s a picture of my penis’ and it will happen three seconds in, so I guess maybe there’s less shame about it, I’d imagine, if it’s that common.
I: It’s a bit more complex for women you think?
YP: I think so. I can’t imagine being like, ‘Hi how are you, welcome to Tinder, here’s a picture of my vagina’. (UK41)

YP: Well people that I know, ...it makes them feel good about themselves. With girls mainly, it’s all about... because whenever girls do that they get confidence back from like, guys, and it makes them feel more confident and nicer in themselves.
I: Right, because they get flattered?
YP: Yeah but guys, they don’t really need flattering because they’re pretty full of themselves as it is, but I think, I think they just probably do it just to encourage maybe, more of it – I don’t know. (UK10)

Everyone is doing it... there’s people who have not done it, but most people have one way or another. (SW3)
The interviewees also described a more permissive attitude towards boys’ images, with more focus on the content of their images and what they were doing, than on how good looking they were perceived to be. In contrast, for females there was a lot of expectation on how they presented their image to their partner and peers.

Yes, being a girl is something completely different to being guy. As a girl, you should be thin, good looking and talented in school, be sexy but at the same time not a whore. It is not easy and I understand that many girls feel bad and have anorexia and stuff like that... Watch like celebrities, everyone is so stylish. Everyone who is someone is thin. But I’m totally against it. I do not care if I’m fat, but there is so much talk about it. The attitude in society is that you should look a certain way. If you don’t you are not normal. An overweight girl who showing herself online is not okay. (SW6)

PREPARING TO SEND IMAGES: CONSIDERATIONS AND CONTEXT

The decision about whether to send images was not always a spontaneous one. In the vast majority of cases, the young people carefully considered whether it was something that they wanted to do. For some, this involved discussing the option with a partner or friend, but for most, it was a decision that they came to alone and, most frequently, in response to a request from somebody else. This was particularly the case for those interviewees who were pursuing a relationship. In these instances the young people tended to see the activity as a natural progression of their developing relationship or as a means of facilitating a new relationship or connection with others:

_She was at the school before and I talked to her quite a lot then around school and texted her before and obviously we just thought, like, we’d take our relationship a bit further, so we just started going out and then it kinda led to [sending images]. (UK14)_

For a minority of young people however, sending images was something that emerged from a growing sense of feeling isolated from their peers at school. In the following examples, two young people explain how being in touch with online contacts became both a form of escapism and an alternative way of making social connections:

_I’d get home, I’d go back on Facebook either on my phone or on the computer and I’d speak to, just loads of people like, boys from different countries. (UK16)_

_I just thought that they were the good people and the people in school were, like, the bad people and I didn’t want to go to school. So I just went into school less often and I would spend the whole day and the whole night, on MSN chatrooms and stuff, just talking to more and more people because they made me happy at that time. (UK1)_
Indeed, for some people who were particularly vulnerable or lonely, the Internet and social media became a central focus of their daily activities:

*YP: There was no one in the real world... no one around here who wanted me.*

*I: Do you mean as a friend or girl friend?*

*YP: Both, I was... at loggerheads...I didn´t have a close friend either, I had nothing. I was very lonely and wanted someone to talk to. That was the reason that people wanted to chat with me.*

(SW3)

In the above cases, the contacts established online led to requests for self-produced sexual images and, in order to sustain their perceived friendships, the young people made a decision to send images to a number of individuals.

**IMMEDIATE CONTEXT**

In terms of the location and setting from which the images were sent, the primary context was at home in a private place, such as a bedroom. The young people frequently admitted taking precautions to ensure that no one would disturb them. This included choosing an evening when nobody was going to be around and locking their bedroom door. In addition, sending messages tended to take place sometime between evening and the early hours of the morning.

There were however exceptions, with some young people, for example, choosing to send messages or share Facetime during particular activities such as having a bath or getting changed in the mornings. In these instances the young people tended to already be in established relationships and used the opportunity to gain some private time together.

In most cases, sending an image tended not to be an isolated activity. Instead it formed part of a series of exchanges between the young people. This frequently started with text messages and typically became increasingly flirtatious and sexual.

However, not all instances of sexting resulted from a series of intimate sexual exchanges. In some instances, the young person found that responding to a request for a self-produced image became something of a staged and unnatural experience, as the following case illustrates:

*I found a pose that I thought looked really sexy and it was killing my back and I can just remember I couldn’t get it right or something like that, and I was just like, this is so weird, this is such a weird thing, this isn’t physically comfortable. I’ve put on so much makeup, this isn’t anything I would ever wear, and there was just this moment of, what is this? This isn’t like an authentic sexual experience* (UK 41)
For some young people the decision to send an image was made quickly and with little long-term thought, for example, where alcohol was involved or an unexpected request for an image was received. In the majority of cases however it was a decision that the young person came to over an extended time period: this was often influenced by their existing social relationships and friendships and involved a number of practical decisions regarding how to secure privacy and to feel confident and happy with the image being sent.
The interviews revealed different motivations for posting or sending images. These ranged widely across the spectrum from being something positive and fun, to being a more coercive, or abusive activity. Most commonly, the youths described a combination of different motivating factors that led to their decision to produce and send nude images.

The main motivating factors were:
- Fun, flirting and meeting new people
- Exploring sexuality
- A way of seeking affirmation
- Social acceptance/because others are doing it
- Part of a romantic or sexual relationship
- Being asked or coerced

**FUN, FLirting AND MEETING NEW PEOPLE**
Common reasons for sending nude images, described by 30 of the interviewed young people, were for was fun, excitement and as a way of meeting new people. The images could be sent to attract others, as a means of initiating a relationship or to gain feedback from others. Sending images for fun could also be perceived as a joke and not necessarily produced in a sexual manner. In this regard, meeting new people online and communicating with already known friends was a natural part of life for the young people.

Posting nude images was a sure way to receive comments from others. These comments were often flirty and included suggestions of chatting online or meeting up.

Sending nude images also formed a part of early dating behaviours between young people. This was the case where the contact was aimed at finding a partner for a sexual or romantic relationship. The images were sent with a hope that the person they were interested in would respond in a positive way.
EXPLORING SEXUALITY

Sending nude images did not necessarily mean that the young person had started to have sex. For some young people, taking and posting images formed part of their adolescent development. This could be a perceived phase that they and their peers were going through or a means of taking forward a newly formed relationship, for example, where a young person did not feel ready or had not yet had an opportunity to develop the physical side of their relationship.

For others, the sharing of images was viewed as a process of examining their sexual identity or exploring their sexuality. A minority of young people (n=7) identifying themselves as LGBT, found that going online to meet others through chat rooms or dating sites, led them to consider sending images as a means of engaging with likeminded individuals. In some instances, the young person was simply curious about whether they would be interested or sexually aroused by the images.

_The first time I wasn’t really sure if I was gay. There was this other straight guy and we were both just trying to figure things out. Then we started trading [images] and we both figured out we were gay and that’s how it went._ (UK38)

A young person’s experiences could also be communicated and shared with others. The following extract illustrates how the young person, above, who had previously explored his own sexuality through the exchange of nude images, later helped another individual to deal with sexual confusion:

_I: Would you send to people you know as well, or just strangers?_

_YP: See, there was this one boy who was younger...like he was a bit...like he was a year younger than me. He was unsure of his sexuality and that and I was like, if you’re really confused I’ll send you a picture. If you like it, just you like it, if you don’t, just don’t. So I sent him a picture and he was like, oh I don’t like that. I went... see, not gay._ (UK38)

Over time, some young people found that what had started as sexual exploration led to the active creation of nude images for the purpose of attracting on/offline sexual encounters, as the following extract illustrate:

_[I] was trying to be teasing rather than too explicit. I’ve sort of marketed myself, as it were, as someone looking for just a good time really, so no strings attached... So I just wanted to say in the pictures as well, I’m after a fun time sort of thing._ (UK37)
There was also a suggestion that sharing nude images could provide an emotional connection, or fulfil a need for acceptance and attention: something that the young people were lacking in their offline relationships at the time.

Overall, the young people felt that sending nude images as a means of sexual experimentation and exploration was a positive experience. This was primarily due to the opportunities it provided to aid understanding and promote intimacy with others, as well as to generate advice, understanding, positive sexual experiences and relationships.

**A WAY OF SEEKING AFFIRMATION**

Sending nude pictures was associated with compliments and affirmation about looking good in 24 of the interviews. In these instances, the young people reported that the activity helped to build self-confidence. This was particularly the case among the females in the sample. The importance of receiving nice comments or just knowing that they were good looking, were crucial reasons for sending a nude picture.

A minority of the girls (n= 4) described sending nude images as a way managing difficult feelings about themselves. The young people sought positive comments or affirmation in order to help them feel better about themselves and to regulate negative feelings:

A few of the interviewees said that the posting of images had become a crucial part of their contact with others online; a factor that they felt was increasingly out of their control. They described having an intense need to send images and this was starting to affect their school work or social situation with friends. These girls were living in socially problematic situations and described their psychological health as poor. One of the girls said that when she was taking and sending pictures this made her disappear from her life in the real world.

You just want to feel this intimacy and it’s too easy when you’re on these websites … to feel just that you have this kind of network around you um, who are … interested in you I suppose and who want you for being attractive. (UK19)

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Just for the moment that it might relieve anxiety, to get some affirmation about myself. (SW5)

So I used these images to measure how important I was. Somehow so it was good that… it build up my self-esteem a little bit and I could continue to live. (SW10)
SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE / BECAUSE OTHERS ARE DOING IT

Many of the participants talked of the social contexts to sharing photographs, and assumptions about its frequency and acceptability amongst young people. This included reflections on the possible motives for sexting and the social reactions to these behaviours. The assumption that lots of people were sharing images was accompanied by comments about it being normal and unproblematic. However, attitudes to these images were sometime more ambivalent.

Not all young people were able to clearly articulate why they send nude images. Some young people (n=15) said that they did not care, that they had sent them at a time when they were bored or that it ‘just happened’:

... it was just something...like, something I did... I didn’t think about and then I can’t really think what was going on in my head because it was one of those things when you’re doing something and you get carried along with it like...he was being nice and it felt like we were being quite close in the way that we were talking. You just forget that once it’s a picture then lots of people can see it. (UK3)

ROMANTIC OR SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

One of the most popular motivations for sending nude images (n=30) was that it happened in a romantic or sexual relationship. The images could be viewed as part of having sex, something to get them sexually aroused and something to masturbate to. It could be a way of taking a new relationship further, or as a way of maintaining a sexual relationship when their partner was travelling or lived far away.

... if I was Snapchatting a friend... or something like that and we were just having a laugh... I would send something of me like in the bath... But everybody, you feel kinda that everybody, it’s just kind of a normal thing, it’s not any great big deal... (UK14)

If a picture is everywhere in school I don’t know how much people would talk about it... it’s not like the world’s biggest thing (SW4)
Some young people suggested that this was a natural part of a relationship and expected from them within their peer group or by a girlfriend/boyfriend.

For others it was not seen as something routinely done to send nude images, even to a partner, but they said that the images were sent as a way of getting their partner to like them even more. In many of the interviews it was one person in the relationship who was the driving force, and sending images was described as a way of proving love. However, even if the images could be an important part of a relationship, they were not seen as better than, or a substitute for, meetings offline.

**BEING ASKED FOR IMAGES AND COERCIVE SITUATIONS**

Not all images were produced at the young person’s own initiative. The most commonly described reason for sending nude images was that someone asked for it (n=37). A partner could ask for an image or someone unknown could send requests. These might not be seen as coercive, but included situations where the young person in some cases felt pressured to send the image. The images could be sent to prove that they loved their partner or alternatively it was the boyfriend/girlfriend nagging them and asking for pictures.

These interviews suggested that in the end it seemed hard for these young people to say no. In six of the cases the young person described being coerced to send nude images. There were explicit threats, such as threats to spread images sent earlier. But some of the young people also described implicit threats: that they felt pressured or coerced to send images since they were afraid of reprisals from the receiver. Two of the Swedish girls interviewed, and one from UK, described how they were offered money or received money as compensation for sending nude images. There were also young people who described threatening situations that led to online and offline abuse.

The line between being asked for nude images, or being coerced to send, was not always clear. Still, most of the coercive situations were in relation to someone who was not a partner and older:
I was talking to this boy for ages and I started like being really friendly. Like when I just came to the school and we just kind of came out with it. Like he had said to me, would you ever do anything with me, and I was like, aye, and he was like would you ever send a picture and I was like maybe. And that’s when he just asked me, will you send it. (UK31)

It’s like…it was all the time, like ten times she kept on doing it across the week and it just like made me more want to do it because like she pressured me into it. By saying like oh, if you don’t do it then I’ll leave you and stuff like that. (UK36)

...They said “send a new one” and I didn’t dare not to. ...When I cammed they didn’t want to see my face so I could cried every time I cammed. (SW1)

Below is an example from one of the girls interviewed who sent an image to an unknown man who contacted her again and threatened to send her images to her parents. The man had threatened and abused many girls and when the case was revealed he was sentenced to prison for these crimes:

[...] After a few months, there came a text message that read: “I have found a video of you in which you have shown yourself in a bra. Do you want me to send it to your parents? ”. I got really upset and started crying immediately. I had received it during the night and saw it in the morning. I did not even think to not answer, so I just answered directly: “No, I have not done this”. The person wrote again “Stop it, I know it’s you. Do you want me to send it to your parents? ”. He knew that my mother was a teacher and that my dad had his own company. He would spread the video in school. But it would not happen if I logged on Skype now, for him - I assumed it was a he - I was like "I do not know who you are, you can be someone in my class, or whoever." "Yes, but I will tell you after." I have read the conversation over and over again, on Skype. Things I did not remember that he wrote, I have been able to see by now. Like this: "Sign in to Skype and confirm my friend request." So I logged in and it was Micky mouse. I confirmed and so he began to write, "I want us to cam instead, go ahead put on your cam." No, I don’t want to. I have no cam". "Stop fooling yourself, I know you have." I was shit scared and sat and wept. But then the phone rang and I answered with the cam and so I sat and cried, I didn’t dare to say anything to anyone. "The only thing you need to do now is to show your bra, if you do, you’ll never hear from me again. This will just stay between us". (SW9)
Most of the young people interviewed were aware and conscious about the risks of sending nude pictures and films to others. A smaller number had not thought about the possibility of something going wrong. It was all about balancing between the good effects of sending the nude images and risks. They therefore managed the situations in different ways and had different strategies to avoid unexpected and negative consequences.

**TRUST THE RECEIVER**

A majority of the interviewees explicitly talked about trust, although in addition to this there were references to situations that implied trust. If the pictures were sent to a person they trusted this meant that they could feel confident in sending the images, and that they would not be misused in any way. A person they trusted could be, for example, a friend, boyfriend or someone they knew from school, but also a contact only known online.

There were multiple strategies described about how to feel more in control of the situation when sending the images. One way was to make sure both parties had sent and kept the images: a sort of mutually assured destruction. If one party decided to spread the images, the other could do the same. For those who sent images to someone unknown to them, or where they were afraid that unwanted people might get access to the images, different strategies were used such as only posting nude images at night time when fewer of their friends potentially could see them, and then take away the images again in the morning.

**TRUST THE WEB PAGE**

There were also other situations related to trust that were described by the young people. A way of having control over the sent nude material was to post it on web pages with private accounts where only confirmed friends could see. Two of the young people also said that they felt safe when posting nude images since most web pages have a system that takes away material that could be misused.

Also young people described using nicknames rather than their own name. Some sites or apps were described as more “safe” to use: for example Snapchat was mentioned since the images posted there could not be downloaded and were just shown for a short time.

Two of the interviewed girls also discussed how they felt more safe having, for example, Skype conversations compared to sending pictures since pictures could be downloaded and more easily spread.
SAFE CONTENT
One active way of managing the risks associated with sending nude images was to only send pictures that could not identify the young person. This might be achieved by not showing faces, tattoos or piercings.

Also sending pictures that only showed a part of the person, such as a picture only of their breasts or bottom, made the images less likely to be identifiable. Some young people edited parts of the images before sending them, or masked the surrounding area.

... like he would always send first. So then he’d know like if... the fact that if he showed someone I could easily always do the same – which I’m not going to do [laughs], but yeah, so it would make me feel more like alright, okay that he’s not going to do it type of thing.... The fact that if he did ever show someone they would never know who I was because I don’t ever put my head in it because I don’t... just in case [laughs] just in case they did ever get shown to someone. (UK10)

In some pictures I have masked some of the surrounding area... So you can’t figure out... editing so you put a black box over anything that may reveal where you are. (SW8)

In case somebody else saw it and I could just deny it if it was like, not me! Like if it wasn’t my face on it I could just deny it. (UK16)
IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES
Once a young person had sent or posted an image, their initial response was to feel anxious about what might happen next. Twenty-eight of the respondents admitted that they felt nervous about the consequences of their actions. These concerns primarily focused on whether the image would be non-consensually forwarded to other friends/family members.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these feelings of anxiety tended to be heightened where a young person already felt confused about whether or not they should send an image or where they were under pressure to send something.

In addition, 13 respondents said that they felt embarrassed and self-conscious about sending intimate pictures – particularly if this was a new experience or partner.

Immediate anxieties also concerned how the image would be received by others, notably, whether their partner and/or other recipients would like and appreciate what they had sent. These concerns and feelings of awkwardness could however be reduced once the young person received a positive response from the recipient, or if they had previously sent images without any negative consequences.

Many young people found the experience positive from the outset however. Ten young people reported feeling sexually aroused or excited immediately after sending an image. For others, the experience could affirm trust with a partner and enable them to enjoy an intimate shared experience.

YP: I can choose what I put online, but it just feels something different, something outside the box, something against the grain, that sort of thing.
I: So you enjoy it or...?
YP: Yeah, I do. Well, yeah because you’re sharing something with other people that you haven’t before. (UK37)
Just 5 young people said that they had not hesitated or thought through their actions before sending an image. In two of these instances the individual had been under the influence of alcohol and immediately regretted their decision, as one young person explained:

I’d say I just wanted to get it over and done with at the time but...in the morning, I woke up and I was like ‘oh crap’ (UK 27)

**LONGER TERM CONSEQUENCES**

In the long-term, the majority of young people acknowledged having some negative feelings about their experiences, with many expressing feelings of regret. Thirty respondents worried about what would happen to their images and admitted feeling that they had lost ownership or control over the pictures that they had taken.

Alongside concerns about unwanted image exposure, many interviewees recalled personal attitudinal changes, ranging from feelings of slight embarrassment or unease about what they had done to a growing sense of negativity and shame around their actions. A number of young people also identified feelings of anger and regret.

Despite these concerns, forty-nine percent of respondents (n= 25) recognised some positive benefits – either to their relationships or to their own self-confidence.

Additionally, thirty-three per cent of respondents (n = 17) felt that nothing of real significance had happened since sending their image. Although in these instances the young people could still feel regret or embarrassment they also tended to be relieved that they had not encountered any negative outcomes.

Overall, regardless of the consequences they experienced, most young people recognised that they had learned and matured as a result of sending images: whether this had led them to be more informed about the risks, to think more carefully about the websites they use, or to understand more about why others engage in the activity. The following case study highlights the reflections of one young person on the experience of posting a number of images.
CASE STUDY: ALEX, Age 19

Alex has been sending nude images for nearly five years, starting when he was just 15 years old. He began signing up with dating sites and joining chat rooms in order to explore his sexuality. To gain attention and to attract potential partners, Alex began posting nude images of himself. Although he initially set his privacy settings to ensure his pictures were private, over time he received more requests for pictures and began to send them to increasingly large numbers of people:

As people unlocked their private pictures for [me] I felt very obliged to unlock mine for them.

Although Alex initially enjoyed the attention and complements he received and felt ‘oblivious’ to any dangers, he became increasingly anxious about who might see his images and where they could be shared. This led him to confide in his mum about what he had done and together they set about deleting his accounts and reorganising his privacy settings. Reflecting on his actions now, Alex admits that he can see the positives as well as the negatives of sending nude images:

I do regret sending some of those pictures... I do think about it and what might have happened to them but it’s made me realise as well, what I’m doing, what I want from people, in terms of relationships, what I need and what I’m comfortable with so... in that respect, I have gained confidence from my experiences...

He has also recently altered his behaviours to feel more comfortable about what he does. In particular, Alex has learned to be more selective about who to send images to, which has given him back a sense of control over his actions:

It’s not like when I was younger, it’s more something that I’m in control of now’.

Yet despite acknowledging that he has been fortunate to meet likeminded people as a result of sharing nude images, Alex also holds many regrets:

I... wish that a lot of it hadn’t happened, that I hadn’t been so quick to send pictures and to expose myself in that way... to make myself so vulnerable and so open to being used. That’s’... a difficult one to think about and to face up to... but part of that is maturity as well I think and just learning through experiences. It’s hard to separate that from the consequences, you know, of what I experienced but it’s definitely something that I have gained from what I’ve learned and what I now know. (UK19)

Like many young people, the individual above identified a range of emotions learned from their experience, with no distinct negative or positive outcomes. Rather, there is a recognition of the complex interplay of factors linked to the experience of sending images.
**BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES/CONSEQUENCES**

Changes in behaviour were reported far less often than attitudinal or relationship changes. Where young people did recall altering their behaviour after sending images, the primary responses were to: desist from sending any further images; to increase sending images in order to gain attention or in response to threats or further requests; and to arrange to meet up with the recipients of their images (if they were not previously known to them off-line).

For a minority of young people (7), their images were shared non-consensually with their family. In a further 11 cases, images were shown to their peers – a move which led seven young people to note changes in the attitudes of their peers towards them. In several instances this resulted in the young people experiencing harassment, threats or bullying. One young person recalled an extreme response she experienced from another girl:

*The fact that people seen it and... come up in the street and stuff to me and say things like that I should be stabbed... I've still problems with this girl... she still comes up to me and says that I should have died and if I was on my own she'd stab me to death because of the pictures.* (UK36)

On a more formal level, 8 young people reported that their parents and the school had found out that they sent images, usually because the images had been found on a mobile phone. The most common result was for the individual to receive advice from the Police, school Guidance staff or another authority figure and for parental restrictions to be put in place regarding grounding and/or restricted access to Internet and phones. Again, this public recognition could be a cause of embarrassment and shame for the young people.

**TELLING OTHERS**

Forty-three per cent (n=22) of the young people reported that they had not told anyone about their experiences of sending nude or nearly nude images. The main reasons for this were that they felt a need to keep everything private; that they felt embarrassed, or in some cases ashamed about what they had done; or that they had simply moved on.

Additional concerns that the young people held about telling others was whether the information would be passed on to their peers or strangers. Nevertheless, when they did choose to tell someone about their experiences it was nearly always a friend. Fifty-seven per cent of interviewees (n=29) admitted that they had turned to a friend following their decision to send images. Again, the importance of trust was mentioned and only very close friends were viewed as confidants willing to keep the information private.

For most young people, the benefits of telling friends were also that they were more likely to provide advice and discuss shared experiences. Moreover, they were also prone to look
more favourably upon the young person’s experience, or to provide a calmer, realistic approach to counterbalance the young person’s own concerns.

In contrast, the interviewees perceived that parents would demonstrate anger and disappointment. Additionally, they worried that parents might bring in external authority figures such as teachers or the Police. Perhaps for this reason, and in response to a question about who they would not want to see their images, the answer was nearly always ‘my mum and dad.’

Nevertheless, discussing their experiences with parents was not always something to be feared. In the following extract a young person explains that whilst he thought his family would support his actions and trust his judgement, choosing the right moment to discuss his experiences was more tricky:

I: Are you saying that [your parents] don’t know what you’re doing?

YP: I don’t know... I think they do. I’m not like ‘...by the way, I send people pictures of my penis you know’... ‘Cheers mum, what’s for dinner tonight?’ [laughs]. It’s not really the kind of conversation. I think they do know though. (UK 28)

In this instance, the individual appreciated the open, relaxed attitude of his family and felt that it was something he would not be afraid to discuss with them if need be. Interestingly, in the two cases where the young people did choose to confide in their family, they found them to be helpful and pro-active, acting in ways to reduce their fears and deal with their problems.

...basically I went down stairs and I told my mum what I had done and how stupid that I felt and she was kind of like ‘right, okay, I understand why you did it, I understand absolutely everything, but I want you to de-activate absolutely everything and take absolutely everything down because hopefully that way nobody will have access to anything.’ (UK19)

Moreover, in both cases it was the strongly-held belief that their family member would provide support that prompted the young people to finally confide in them.
DO I SEND AGAIN?
The primary concern for young people regarding whether or not to send images again involved the issue of trust. The most common response to the question about whether they would consider sending images again was ‘maybe’ (n =17). The caveat was usually that they would need to be in a positive, long-term relationship and expected to want to please a partner or to sustain a relationship where long-distances might be keeping them apart. Additional future considerations focused on ensuring that they used a trusted and secure App., or website.

For the twenty-seven per cent of young people (n=14) who felt that they would not send nude images again, there was almost always a clear and decisive reason for their decision. This ranged from seeing the experience as an experimental teenage phase or an exploration of their sexuality, to a recognition of the fact that it had been a negative experience and one that they would not repeat.

For others, it was simply a realisation of a new level of maturity, increased confidence, or a lack of interest in sending images again.

Among the group of 10 young people who did feel that they would send images again, this tended to be either because they were in an established relationship and it was something that they enjoyed and/or gave pleasure to their partner, or it was an activity that they were currently experimenting with in order to, for example, explore their sexuality or to meet others online.

YP: I’ve been in relationships after when they’ve asked me for [images] and I’ve just said ‘no’.

I: And why is that, why have you said no this time but not before?

YP: Em, I don’t know, just more confident about myself probably. So I don’t feel like I need to do that. (UK11)
YOUNG PEOPLE
The interviewees provided a range of advice for their peers. Most stated that as a result of the potential risks involved they would not recommend others to send images. However, they acknowledged that it is a personal decision and for those individuals who may be keen to do so, the advice was to ensure that a lot of consideration is given to sending a “safe” nude image. The young people advised that images should only be sent securely, either using an App, such as Snapchat, or a private site.

Interviewees also suggested that if any hesitation is felt by an individual then it is better not to send. However, the most frequent advice given was that images should only be shared with someone who is known and can be trusted, and preferably only in the context of a relationship.

There was also a reminder that once images have been sent there is a loss of control over any consequences. In particular, some young people advised that anyone considering sending images should be aware of the potential non-consensual sharing of their images beyond the intended recipient.

The young people acknowledged that sending nude images is not something to be expected in the context of a romantic or sexual relationship and some interviewees suggested that, in their experiences, it could even destroy a relationship if both partners do not feel ready. It was also underlined that no one should ever feel pressured to send nude images.

Finally, a minority of young people also stressed that others should be aware of the potential positive effects of sending images. Most notably, individuals highlighted the benefits that image sharing can have when exploring sexuality or adolescent development.
PARENTS / CARETAKERS AND TEACHERS
The young people also provided advice for parents and teachers. Most importantly, the interviewees said that adults need to be interested in young people’s online life and social networks and to have awareness about the kinds of activities young people engage in, including the potential for sending nude images.

In general, parents and teachers were perceived to be in need of further education in order to enhance their abilities to communicate effectively. The young people described adults they knew as uninformed and not up to date with youth society and sexuality.

To facilitate discussions about sending nude images, interviewees suggested that parents needed to know reasons why young people send images and what the consequences might be. With more knowledge the adults would also be able discuss how to keep safe online in a way that did not focus on banning, scaring or a “don’t do it” approach. Instead, what was called for was to an ability to talk to the young people in an open and honest way that would allow them not to feel ashamed or as if they had done something wrong.

On a practical level, some young people went as far as to suggest that adults should engage with young people to ensure they take safety precautions before they consider sending nude images. This might include researching the options in order to information and advice:

I would just be like...before your child uses these sites, research into it, don’t just go straight into it, because you never know what’s gonna happen. Look up sites about taking care of yourself online, about your health, your mental health, everything like that. Don’t just jump straight into it, do your research, make sure you know what... your child is getting themselves into. (UK39)

There were also those who underlined the responsibility of schools to educate young people as part of the wider sex education curriculum. This also places demands on the teachers to be updated in the subject. Some youths also discussed the responsibilities on a wider societal level, including the need to campaigns aimed at informing younger children who were unlikely to have posted nude images yet.
DISCUSSION

This analysis of interview data from 51 young people resulted in a process model, which described stages involved in sending nude images. These included the context for image production, motivations and considerations for sending, consequences and decisions after sending along with advice for other young people, parents/caretakers and teachers.

The young people interviewed were recruited from two different countries (UK and Sweden), and lived in different regions, which included big cities as well as rural areas. Their backgrounds differed and these differences were evidenced both in the interviews and in the additional questionnaires. The responses to the questionnaire revealed that the background of those interviewed were similar to a representative sample of Swedish youth (Svedin & Priebe, 2009). Also, in relation to questions about health (SCL-5), the interviewed youth showed no significant difference when compared to Swedish youth in general (Svedin & Priebe, 2009). However, one difference shown in this sample was the over representation of non-heterosexual orientation. One explanation could be that some of the informants from the UK were recruited through a LGBT organisation. On the other hand, 30% of the interviewed Swedish girls described being bisexual and 10% unsure of their sexual preferences, compared to 5% of Swedish girls who reported they were bisexual and 3.7 % who were unsecure within national representative sample (Svedin & Priebe, 2009). Previous research has indicated that sex online might be of greater importance for LGBT youth since it is an easy way of experimenting sexually and finding potential partners (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014).

Differences were identified between the young people from Sweden and the UK both in terms of the intensity of the experiences described and the language used, although all the themes were evident in both groups. These differences may reflect where the samples were drawn from (the Swedish group included young people who had self-identified as selling sex as well as those who were attending a therapeutic clinic), but it may also relate to cultural differences, such as traditionalism, identified by Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, Valkenburg and Livingstone (2014).

All of the young people interviewed were active users of the Internet and social media, in particular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, which supported the easy exchange of images. These activities appeared to be associated with a general set of social expectations about the frequency of the exchange of sexual material by young people and its general acceptability. However, acceptability seemed to be also qualified by the gender of the person who had taken and sent the image, with girls more often than boys seen in both a negative light and also under pressure to ‘look good’. This was also evident in the ways that the content of images was described. Different, gendered social expectations
about online behaviour have been described in other research. In a recent Swedish report Forsman (2015) found large differences between images sent by girls and by boys. Boys were careful when posting images that they, under no circumstances, could be classified as girly or gay. The ideal was a ‘stoneface’ (looking serious and not showing any feelings). For girls, the ideal image was a picture of a smiling face and may be taken from a skewed angle to change the composition or to create a ‘duckface’ (pout with the mouth towards the camera) in order to look more sexually attractive or suggestive.

Although only a minority of young people described sending images as something they thought very little about, or decided to do when the opportunity arose, most of the factors that led to them sending images resulted from communications with others, typically a growing friendship or relationship. This is in contrast to the often reported view that young people do not think about sexting and later regret their actions (e.g. Temple, Le, van den Berg, Ling, Paul & Temple, 2014). For the young people in the sample, sending nude images frequently involved a lot of preparation and planning to ensure privacy and to manage the image.

The primary motivations for sending nude or nearly nude images were similar to those identified in the broader research literature. For the majority of young people this involved being in a romantic or sexual relationship with someone known to them and their own age. It could also be that it was fun and exciting. However, this was not always the case and for some involved people who were not known to them offline and who were possibly considerably older than them. These relationships often appeared to be coercive, although even where the contexts appeared consensual, they often required some level of persuasion. Walgrave, Heirman and Hallam (2013) found, in a survey of 498 adolescents aged 15-18 years, that the most important sources of social pressure were friends and romantic partners, which was particularly the case for females. Indeed, it has been suggested that for some girls involved in romantic relationships, consenting to ‘unwanted’ self-produced sexual images is a type of ‘sexual compliance’ or an ‘undesirable price’ they have to pay to maintain ‘a desirable relationship’ with a partner (Lippman & Campbell, 2012:17; Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Renfrow & Rollo, 2014).

Given the sample of young people included in this study, which was largely female, it is perhaps no surprise that the persuasion in the first instance often came from a male partner, although the other person often reciprocated by sending an image. Englander (2012) also had found that the most common motivation for sexting was because the boyfriend/girlfriend wanted the picture. Strassburg, Rullo and Mackaronis (2014) sampled 1100 undergraduate students about their experiences of ‘sexting’ while at secondary school. What was evident from their study was that sexting was a reciprocal behaviour, although a higher proportion of males than females were willing to send an explicit picture of themselves outside of an established boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. In the present study, sometimes persuasion to send an image came in the form of affirmation about the way that the person looked, but feeling good about oneself was often in response to feedback about the images themselves. Chalfen (2009) has suggested that one motivation for young people is ‘looking good’ and ‘appearing desirable’ in order to gain attention and
obtain positive feedback about their looks from their peers. Other studies have suggested that girls sometimes use sexting as a strategy for gaining the acceptance and attention of a potential partner, as well as a means of attaining popularity with boys (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). For some, motivation was seen as flirting or fun rather than something more serious or intense. All scenarios inevitably had another person as an audience, and was often seen as exciting and sexually charged. Within a relationship context, Döring (2014) notes that sexting is frequently associated with positive expressions of mutual affection, bonding and trust as well as fun, flirting and as ‘arousal’ in anticipation of physical intimacy with the recipient.

What was central to sending images, managing risk, and also informed the advice offered by these young people to others, was the difficult issue of trust. Trust was seen as a justification for sharing images and a pre-requisite for knowing that there was little risk of loss of control over what happened. Trust was described both in relation to the web page where the images were posted but also trust in the relationship where the images were sent. A relationship that were seen as trustworthy required some management, and for some young people this included retaining images of the other person to ensure that if they broke trust, then they ‘had something on them’. These relationships sometimes appeared quite fragile, and certainly they were often of short duration. Trust in itself was not sufficient to manage the risks and many young people sent images that did not include their face, as well as choosing to use web cams rather than camera phones. Finally the youth also described what a safe content was, for example not showing anything that could identify you on the image.

Reflections after sending a nude image were wide ranging. In general, the feelings the young people reported were not mutually exclusive: for the vast majority, sending images involved a combination of both positive and negative emotions. Interestingly, some young people felt that the experience had been largely beneficial and enhanced their relationship but they still had anxieties and concerns about the permanence of their images and whether these might be shared in the longer-term.

For most young people however, the consequences of sending images involved a range of conflicting positive and negative emotions rather than any imposed external sanctions or negative public consequences. The negative consequences were both immediate, and for some, more pervasive. The most obvious consequences acknowledged that the positive feedback they had received led to greater long-term intimacy. Sending images could also provide an emotional connection or an escape from reality, but lead to longer-term negative outcomes, such as requests or threats to provide further images.

For some young people these feelings continued and were accompanied by fears about loss of privacy and that the images may be shared with others. It has been argued that explicit images can be distributed via mobiles and social media, leading to concerns that such images will ‘follow’ an individual in later life e.g. through college, job hunts, and future searches for romantic partners (Perkins et al., 2014). For a few young people this in fact did happen and resulted in hostility from other peers. There also seemed to be gender
differences in that the experiences of females were more negative than those of males. Young people may have more negative experiences when they interact with people relatively unknown to them online and lack an intrinsic motivation for engaging in sexual interaction (Kerstens & Stol, 2014). In their national survey of Dutch adolescents, these authors also report a strong relationship between online sexual interactions and other negative experiences such as being cyberbullied. Research exploring the links between sexting and cyberbullying has found that being female and a sexter may increase the relative risk of multiple types of cyber victimization (Reyns et al., 2013), whilst Jonsson et al., (2014) suggested that youths who engage in voluntary sexual exposures online may be more likely to both participate in online harassment and to be victims of online harassment themselves; with boys in particular experiencing bullying or having sexual images of themselves spread without their consent.

Ybarra and Mitchell (2014) concluded that sexting should be considered as one aspect of adolescent sexual development and exploration and, in some instances, risk-taking and psychosocial challenge. While it is relatively rare that sexting results in involvement from the criminal justice system (Korenis & Billick, 2014) it is the case that the visibility of this behaviour in the images that are sent challenges some of our expectations about young people and sexuality which Rollins (2015) describes as being ‘transmitted in cyberspace’. Sending nude images was largely seen as something private and not instinctively to be shared within others. However this was not the case where an individual had a particularly negative or difficult experience. When advice had been sought, for example, from school guidance staff or a relative, the young people tended to feel this had been very beneficial and had enabled them to gain some perspective on what had happened. Overall, parents were the least likely to be told about the young person’s experiences, the main reason being embarrassment and fear of their reaction. In most cases however, it was felt that there was no perceived need to discuss the subject within the family.

For some of the young people, sending images was an ongoing and enjoyable process and one which could aid self-confidence or enhance a relationship. For others, the experience had been immensely stressful and difficult, resulting in a decision to avoid future involvement in making and sending images. For most interviewees, any decisions were less fixed and largely dependent on a range of factors, including whether a potential partner might be keen to receive images, or whether they would still enjoy or be interested in the activity at a later stage in their lives. The advice given to other young people and to parents/caretakers and teachers all focused on the need to be safe online. Although it was acknowledged that every young person should make an informed, personal decisions about whether to send images. As the majority of young people found few longer-term positive benefits, the consensus was that sending images was not worth the risk. However, the advice given to other youths who did want to send images was to think about whether the person receiving the image is trustworthy and to accept that the image may be shared non-consensually beyond the intended recipient. The advice to parents and teachers focused on making sure that they are up to date with knowledge about online activities and that they can talk to their child, whilst at the same time respecting the private nature of nude images.
and the fact that young people are interested in meeting new people and also are curious about sex.

**Strength and limitations of the research**

Qualitative research is especially relevant in research projects aiming to gain first-hand information and experiences from people on a particular topic (Neergaard, Olesen, Andersen & Sondergaard, 2009). Qualitative research also allows exploration about subtleties and complexities about how the research subjects and/or topics are identified, that are often missed by more positivistic enquiries (Anderson, 2010). The strength of this study is the range of informants across two countries with different strategies to engage young people in the research. This allowed gender comparisons across a variety of different experiences related to the motivations for, and consequences of, sending nude images. This, together with young people’s recommendations to parents and peers, were the core aims of the SPIRTO project. Another strength of the project was the use of a cloud based encrypted web application to support mixed methods research (Dedoose), which allowed the four authors to work with the data analysis and communicate their interpretations, and ask questions of, how dated was coded. This resulted in a creative consulting and consensus process despite researchers being at different universities in different countries.

There are also limitations to the study that need to be kept in mind. The sample did not have a balance when it came to gender, with a minority of boys in the UK sample (17) and no boys in the Swedish sample. While this precluded a specific focus on gender differences, it was noted that the Swedish girls described more problematic experiences of sending nude images and also described significantly worse health, (evidenced in the questionnaire including the SCL-5). There were also more interviews conducted in the UK and there were differences in how informants were recruited, with the majority of the young people being identified through schools in the UK, while all informants in Sweden came from different sources, such as social welfare institutions and practitioners. It is likely that this reflected a more clinical sample. It was also apparent that the sheer volume of data from 51 interviews also constituted a challenge, since the processing and analysis of the data were extremely time-consuming. This could pose a risk of missing information that was hidden in this rich material. However, the advantage of this large body of material is that it will provide a basis for further analysis.
ADVICE AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings from the interviews with 51 young people, the following advice and implications have been identified.

For young people:
- Know and trust the person(s) you send images to
- Never feel pressured or coerced into sending an image
- Nude images are not a self-evident part of a romantic or sexual relationship.
- Only send images that feel confident and comfortable being viewed by others
- If you hesitate or have concerns- don’t send!

For parents/carers:
- Keep up to date with youth activities online and ask your child about their life both online and offline.
- Understand that sending images is a natural part of growing up for some young people and talk through the reasons for sending images.
- Discuss with your child what risks that can occur when sending a nude image.
- If your child experiences any negative consequences of sending a nude image, be supportive and talk to your child: do not judge or get angry.

For teachers and professionals:
- All personnel at schools need continuous education about young people’s online activities, including the sending of nude images, as part of more general education about safe relationships with peers and adults.
- All students need education in school about how to be safe online, including information about the positive and negative consequences of sending nude images.
- Education is needed about the role of the receiver. All young people should be made aware of how non-consensual sharing of images can hurt reputations and pride and is a breach of trust.
- If a young person’s nude image is spread without their consent at school, actions should be taken to ensure students within the school delete the images from their computers and mobile phones.
CONCLUSION

The fifty-one young people in this study had all sent nude or nearly nude images of themselves to other people and in the majority of cases this was in the context of an adolescent relationship with someone whom they felt they could trust. However, most participants described some level of persuasion the first time that images were sent and for the minority this seemed to be very coercive. Coercive behaviours very often took the form of flattery, although the social context for this was a general acceptance that ‘everyone was doing it’.

The contexts varied between individuals and appeared to be country-specific, but this may have been a function of how some of those participating were recruited. All appeared to be aware of the risks involved in sending images, although circumstances at the time (which included sexual arousal) may have led to the discounting of some element of risk.

In the main, risk was actively managed by excluding identifying features (such as faces) from the images sent, or using webcams rather than mobile phones. Negative consequences were more likely to happen when the young person was communicating with people not known off-line, but this was not universally so. The majority of young people experienced some transient feelings of anxiety after sending images and nearly all described ongoing issues. These ranged from occasional worries about the possibility of the images being shared through to feelings of despair over what had happened. However, there was marked ambivalence expressed about how they described their own experiences, and it would be inappropriate to ignore aspects that were often expressed more positively. The findings from this study are in line with previous research and add to our understanding of the complex meanings and consequences of this behaviour.
REFERENCES


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