**Cyber-flashing: How are young women (16-18 years) navigating image-based sexual abuse in the forms of unsolicited sexual imagery?**

**Literature Review**

This literature review analyses and critiques existing literature relevant to my research. First, I examine the practice of sexting and how the double standards at play have contributed to the understanding of unsolicited sexual imagery. This review then examines research and theory on young women and their relationship with social media, and how this social media affords men the ability to send unsolicited sexual imagery.

It is vital to outline the existing literature on image-based abuse and how the normalisation of abuse extends to the virtual world. In order to understand how gendered power relationships exist online, it is important to explore hegemonic masculinities. What emerges are the gaps in literature and research on young women, aged between 16 -18 years old, navigating unsolicited imagery. Van Ouytsel et al. (2018) suggests online communication, in the form of social media, is one of the most important areas of adolescent research, due to the nature and emergence of new social media trends, especially those attached to risky sexual behaviours. This exploration of communication dynamics is important due to the peer dependent and interdependent nature of adolescents’ relationships, which largely take place online, outside of the school gates (Damour 2016). This is supported by the extensive research of boyd (2014), into how young people interact with new technologies within society. She states that not to be on social media and not to be experiencing what friends are experiencing places young people outside of the group, which is arguably more of a lonely and damaging place for young people.

***The online (sexting) world for young women***

In the development of young people’s sexuality, sexual orientation and expression, online peer-to-peer communication is an important research focus that is evolving daily (boyd 2014). Over the last two decades, we have observed and experienced a transformational shift in our social behaviours and interactions due to the proliferation of social media technology. Young people have been the targeted audience of large social media companies (such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok) as integral users of such mediums (Hasnioff 2015; Handyside and Ringrose 2017; Charteris et al. 2018; Mohsin 2020). It is the advent of these mediums that sexting has evolved.

There is research and literature on youth sexual behaviours online and many of the moral panics that surround this new social media technology are on sexting (Ringrose and Harvey 2015; Hasinoff 2015; Buiten 2020). A moral panic is given credence by adults concerned that the morals of children will be compromised due to a change in social settings, explained by boyd (2014, 105):

*A moral panic takes hold when the public comes to believe that a cultural artefact, practice or population threatens the social order.*

American research has found that 57% of parents of teenagers (aged 13-17 years) say they worry about their teen receiving or sending explicit images, including about one-quarter who say this worries them a lot (Pew 2018). Young women and teenage girls are often at the centre of such sexting moral panics, often blamed for not being alert enough with their social media usage and for simply not saying ‘no’ (Hasinoff 2012; Ringrose and Harvey 2015). Sexting is the portmanteau of texting and sex, sending a sexual image via a text message which is sent consensually (Hasinoff 2015; Jørgensen et al. 2019). The confluence of gender, social norms and technology make sexting and the complexities and implications this practice has on girls, an important area of study.

Amy Hasinoff (2015) has written much on the topic of young women and sexting. In her book *Sexting Panic: Rethinking Criminalisation, Privacy and Consent,* she frames sexting within privacy and consent, positioning sexting as the modern form of ‘love letters’. She challenges the notion of abstinence education for young people and sexting, believing that it is reasonable to share private images within the privacy of your own phone as long as it is consensual. Hasinoff (2015) also confronts the child pornographic laws in the U.S. and states that there is ‘*no distinction between consensual sexting* *and the nonconsensual production, distribution, or possession of private images’* (Hasinoff 2015, 6). Hasinoff (2015) writes in relation to the U.S. legal system which, although different to that of the UK, shares certain similarities. The major similarity is that it is illegal to own or distribute naked images of anyone under the age of 18. This includes children under 18 years of age sending images of themselves consensually. The police in the UK, however, have the ability to determine what is in the best interest of the public and sometimes the incident becomes a safeguarding matter to ascertain if there is any coercion or exploitation (DfE 2019).

Hasinoff has argued in her research the need for a more proportionate approach to youth consensual sexting. Much of her work addresses the forwarding of an already sent sexual image by a current or former partner – frequently but not exclusively male, known as revenge porn. The gaps in this work concern unsolicited sexual imagery, the affordances of social media platforms, and the lack of redress. Hasinoff does intimate that slut-shaming, victim-blaming and rape culture are further highlighted through social media platforms and the affordances of these technologies (Hasinoff 2015). At the heart of Hasinoff’s work is the young women and their best interests, and she effectively uses post-feminist theory to highlight how they are mistreated online, in the law and by the media.

Building upon this theme, Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell, Australian academics explore when a (sext) image becomes a form of abuse in the article ‘Beyond the ‘sext’: technology-facilitated harassment against adult women’ (2014). They argue that Australian law fails to recognise the harm that victims experience when sexts become non-consensual and used in the context of harassment. Concerned with the growing incidents of harm caused by online abuse, they developed a framework to assess technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment. In the framework, they cite *‘the unauthorized creation and distribution of sexual images (including non-consensual sexting or “revenge porn”)’* as their first parameter in the framework (Henry and Powell 2015). Whilst their research focuses upon women, it is useful to consider in the present research as the prevalence of young women receiving unsolicited sexual images is increasing (Smith 2018a).

***Social media as another conduit for gender double standards***

Social media has enhanced the gender double standards that have been and are present in the online and offline lives of adolescents in today’s society (Ringrose et al. 2013; Ricciardelli and Adorjan 2019; Mandau 2020).

*If a girl is known for sending out nude pictures, then people are going to think that she’s a slut or something like that, but if a guy sends it out...if he’s randomly sending it to somebody then people might think he’s weird, but if say a girl asks the guy for it and he sends it to her, then maybe his buddies are like ‘nice man’...*

(Ricciardelli and Adorjan 2019, 568)

Amongst others, Jessica Ringrose and her research into young people and their sexual behaviours on social media platforms has been crucial in understanding how social media has affected young women. She applies a feminist lens to her research and has explored the sexual double standards that exist in the exchange between teens (Ringrose et al.2013). These researchers argue that not only do the double standards exist online between teenagers, adolescent girls are scrutinised and become the centre of a moral panic over sexualisation. This discourse is perpetuated in the media, with the focus on sexually risky behaviour displayed from (heterosexual) girls.

This research was one of the first qualitative studies looking at teen sexting, and which provides invaluable insight and context around teenage girls navigating sexting. Whilst the social media platforms at the time were Facebook and Blackberry Messenger, two out of date modes of communication for adolescents today, they were the start of social media platforms having affordances (boyd 2014) that enticed young people to become competitive and negotiate their sexual status.

The research also captures the display or exhibitionistic nature of male sexting. One of the boys in Ringrose et al’s. (2013) research spoke about ratings accorded by (male) peers for the successful collection of topless images of girls. This collection became public proof that afforded bragging rights to his friends. In this way, the practice provided power or status to the male sexter. But girls had to negotiate this technology to find ways to say ‘no’ to requests of sexual images. It is never as easy as simply saying ‘no’, as young girls are caught between the fear of being labelled ‘frigid’ for denying the requester a picture, or the likely implications of being seen as a ‘slut’ for sending it. These examples demonstrate the early exploration of sexuality played out by teenagers on social media apps. This research has shaped understanding of the terrain that is social media and the navigation of the issues posed by receipt of dicks pics by young women in 2020.

Ringrose et al. (2019), in a research project on phallocentric matter(s) in Sex Education, used an arts-based methodology, where research participants drew images of unsolicited sexual images received, on social media templates. The research quickly identified that the most popular social media apps that were used by young people were Snapchat and Instagram. Whilst this was not the purpose of the research, by giving the participants the choice of which social media templates to use, it demonstrated which social media apps are the most important in a young person’s life. The researchers also pointed to the ‘lad culture’ that surrounds the sending of dick pics and penile-oriented images.

A research project by Handyside and Ringrose (2017, 2), looked at the app Snapchat and youth digital sexual cultures. They stated that Snapchat’s function of being ‘*temporary* *and ephemeral*’ has contributed to the app’s sexualised affordances and demonstrated how gender double standards proliferated on Snapchat, via the functionality of memory, or lack thereof, due to the pictures disappearing after a set amount of time, dictated by the sender. The gender double standards Handyside and Ringrose (2017) discussed are stereotypical of the offline world. Girls are labelled as ‘sluts’, by boys and girls offline, for sending a sexualised photo to their boyfriends, or even by posting a photo with cleavage or messy hair. Such images are viewed as sexual by boys which prompts a sexualised reply, although this was not the intended purpose behind the posting of the photo. When boys do the same, there is comedy attached to their snapchat behaviour and it is viewed as laughable, much like the ‘boys will be boys’ rhetoric. This has also a common idiom when girls receive dick pics. If the girls respond showing dislike or anger at receiving the image, a usual response from boys is to laugh it off and minimise the action of sending a dick pic (Mandau 2020). In a YouGov poll on unsolicited dick pics, 51% of men and 28% of women found it funny.

These survey figures, combined with the qualitative research from Handyside and Ringrose (2017) and Mandau (2020), suggest that the circulation of images of male genitalia is either acceptable or being accepted. It is through such processes of seeing the sending of images as ‘a bit of a lark’ and ‘boys being boys’, that the practice of posting pictures of penises is normalised, and the rejections of these behaviours is trivialised.

***Dick Pics and Image-Based Sexual Abuse***

‘Dick pics’ is a slang term used to describe men who send images of their penises, commonly, but not exclusively, through messaging services and social media apps (Hayes and Dragiewicz 2018; Waling and Pym 2019; Mandau 2020). Dick pics are often unsolicited and sent to women, especially young women by heterosexual, cis-gendered men (Waling and Pym 2019).

In a recent YouGov poll of more than 2000 women, those aged between 18 – 24 years of age, 54% had received a dick pic, with 47% of that figure, being unsolicited (Smith 2018a). The Pew Research Center (2018) found that 25% of American teenagers (of 13-17 years) said they had been sent explicit images they did not ask for, while 7% said someone had shared explicit images of them without their consent. Girls were more likely than boys to report being the recipient of unsought explicit images (29% v 20%). Being the target of such messages was reported as an especially common experience for older girls with 35% of girls aged 15-17 saying they had received unwanted explicit images, compared with about one-in-five boys in this age range and younger teens of both genders.

Qualitative and quantitative research in the UK available however, focuses upon the experiences of women over the age of 18 and there is a distinct lack of research entirely focused upon adolescent young women and their experiences of unsolicited online sexual imagery. As the YouGov poll also highlighted, of all the women questioned, 46% received an unsolicited dick pic before the age of 18, rendering it an illegal act under UK child pornography laws (Smith 2018a). The fact that nearly half of *adolescent* females receive an unsolicited sexual image makes it vital to research this demographic of young women in order to ascertain, the means in which this is happening; their feelings about the practice, and the consequences of it.

Image-based sexual abuse is defined by McGlynn and Rackley as *‘the non-consensual creation and/or distribution of private sexual images: a phenomenon we have conceptualised as image-based sexual abuse’* (2017, 534). Whilst this would normally be couched as ‘revenge porn’, their justification for situating it in sexual abuse is because the act is largely a gendered form of abuse. They also used the outcomes for the victims, such as mental illness and loss of dignity, to situate this in the realm of sexual abuse. They argued that the media minimise the harms image-based sexual abuse by using flippant and catchy phrases like ‘revenge porn’ or ‘peeping tom’. The phrases ‘dick pics’ and ‘cyber-flashing’ could also be seen as flippant terms that are used by the media to minimise and even normalise the practice. Within McGlynn and Rackley’s (2017) research into image-based sexual abuse, they do not specifically refer to the sending of unsolicited penises, their focus was more upon the practices of ‘revenge porn’ and the like. However, their use of the words *‘non-consensual creation’* position unsolicited dick pics within their conceptualisation of image-based sexual abuse.

In a later article by McGlynn, Rackley and Houghton (2017, 25) they build upon image-based sexual abuse, by placing it *‘on a continuum with other forms of sexual abuse’*. They identified characteristics of sexual abuse as:

1. *“The sexual nature of the imagery;*
2. *The gendered nature of both perpetration and surviving the abuse;*
3. *The sexualised nature of the harassment and abuse;*
4. *The harms and breaches of the fundamental rights to dignity, sexual autonomy and sexual expression;*
5. *The minimisation of these forms of abuse in public discourse, law and policy.”*

(McGlynn et al. 2017, 29)

Taking into account these features of sexual abuse, the harms that arise according to gender and the gender double standards that are applied to the actions of sending unsolicited dick pics, I have approached this practice as a form of image-based sexual abuse.

Rebecca Hayes and Molly Dragiewicz’s (2018) literature review built upon McGlynn and Rackley’s research into image-based sexual abuse by shining a light on the act of sending dick pics as a stand-alone, fast emerging cultural practice that continues to solidify gender double standards. They stated that dick pics are:

*“part of a broader escalation in the culture wars over feminism and sexual violence, characterized by increasing misogyny and feminist activism online and offline.”*

(Hayes and Dragiewicz 2018, 116)

They used the continuum of sexual violence to frame women’s experiences of receiving unsolicited dick pics, and the concept of the normalisation of abuse to understand the concept of entitlement. The concept of entitlement is divided into sexual entitlement and aggrieved entitlement to understand why men send unsolicited dick pics. Whilst they are basing the analysis on anecdotal evidence from discussions that have taken place online, the ‘entitlement’ concept can be applied in relation to toxic masculinity traits and the behaviour of sending non-consensual dick pics to women.

Hayes and Dragiewicz’s (2018) application of sexual entitlement, posits the man as a superior being, feeling a sense of entitlement to sex, whenever he wants and with those that he sees as lesser beings, that is women. In relation to dick pics, the action of sending is an expression of this sexual entitlement and of the exertion of male power associated with the sexual abuse of women and children. Aggrieved entitlement becomes the backlash against feminism and the increased control women are seeking over online relationships.

Arguably, Hayes and Dragiewicz’s (2018) most valuable contribution in their article is the relation of ‘flashing’ offline to ‘flashing’ online (the dick pic) and how the former is a criminal offence. Flashing (offline) became a crime in 1842 in response to its increasing incidence (McNeil 1987). The question here is ‘why are dick pics not taken more seriously in the online and offline sphere’? Is this a reflection that ‘virtual dicks’ are less threatening than physical, in your face (so to speak) dicks?

A rebuttal for this hypothesised rationale is that the sender can be in close proximity to the recipient using the Airdrop function via Bluetooth. For example, the sender can be right next to a woman on the Tube, and she will have no idea who sent the images other than its someone close by, unknown, and who may without her being able to identify them as the sender, follow her home from the Tube Station. What could be more unsettling and fear inducing than that? I challenge that the propositions that a dick pic is less fear inducing than seeing the person in the flesh – literally speaking also.

Several researchers have cast dick pics as an expression of attempted power from men (for example, Paasonen et al. 2019; Mandau 2020; Vitis and Gilmour 2017; Ringrose and Lawrence 2018; Mendes et al. 2019).

***Dick Pics and Gender Roles***

A significant piece of research titled, *‘Directly in Your Face’: A Qualitative Study on the Sending and Receiving of Unsolicited ‘Dick Pics’ Among Young Adults* conducted by Morten Birk Hansen Mandau contributed to the understanding of my topic. The participants were aged between 17 and 20 years old, 9 males and 20 females. It was conducted in 2019 which makes it a particularly pertinent and contemporary reference for my own research.

Mandau (2020) adroitly explains how gender plays a big role in understanding the participants’ responses and experiences of sending and receiving unsolicited dick pics. He establishes the experiences of young women first, laying the foundation for moving on to explaining the intentions of young men in sending unsolicited dick pics. Unsurprisingly, there is a large disparity between the two sets of results: girls experience receiving unsolicited dick pics as invasive and a misguided attempt at flirting, whereas boys use it for showing off to their (male) friends and as an attempt at soliciting a nude in return. Mandau attends to this by going into a deeper analysis of gendered understandings. His analysis suggests that the way in which society has constructed female heterosexuality, as both permissive and inhibitive, due to current social norms, sets up the dynamics for and the power relations of sending dick pics. He argued that young men may misconstrue negative reactions from girls as not wishing to be ‘slut-shamed’ and therefore, continue to send dick pics. The focus groups for this study were organised in same-sex groups which may have encouraged more ‘laddish’ behaviour with the male participants performing in front of each other. This behaviour can be located within hegemonic masculinities and how toxic traits can be perpetuated due to the social norms online and offline.

To support the above assertion, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) stated that hegemonic masculinity came from men who were automatically receiving the benefits of patriarchy, through culture and institutions, and that women were compliant, strengthening the hegemony. It is a normative behaviour that identifies and confirms masculinity. Whilst there have been criticisms about the theory being heteronormative (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), in the context of heterosexual, cis-gendered men sending unsolicited dick pics to women (Waling and Pym 2019) this theory is relevant to my research.

Ricciardelli and Adorjan (2019) discuss solicited and unsolicited dick pics in the research project 'If a girl's photo gets sent around, that's a way bigger deal than if a guy's photo gets sent around': Gender, sexting, and the teenage years. They conducted qualitative research on 115, teenagers aged 13-19 in Canada. They situated dick pics within sexting and relate it to hegemonic masculinities and the role of girls in the practice of receiving dick pics. Although they discussed how digital spaces also permeate offline spaces, they did not address the digital affordances of social media apps. They raised a salient point, however about how girls normalise receiving dick pics, through laughter for example as, in this extract:

*“We had a carpool crew, and there was me and my ﬁve best friends throughout all of high school. We joked that we were, cuz it was just a frequent thing, where at the end of grade 12, as a grad gift, I’m making a scrapbook and the cover’s gonna be a collage of all the dick pics we got in the last three years, and we did it, this beautiful, bound collaged dick pic collection. So it becomes a funny thing, I found no one takes it seriously. When people do that, no one’s like, ‘oh look at you,’ it’s more like you show your friends and you laugh about it, which is kind of terrible (added emphases).”*

(Ricciardelli and Adorjan 2019, 571)

It could also be deduced from this excerpt that the girls are performing their own type of activism against these dick pics. This challenges the stereotypes of women being passive when receiving ‘dick pics’ (Vitis & Gilmour 2017). To challenge this belief, there have been acts on popular social media apps whereby this is not the case and women are responding with humour and activism (Vitis & Gilmour 2017; Ringrose & Lawrence 2018; Mendes et al. 2019). Vitis and Gilmour (2017) have explored one woman’s unconventional ways to tackle unsolicited dick pics and sexual language, whereby she successfully uses art and humorous language to resist and shame the masculinity of the perpetrators. This highlights the need for broader research into young women’s responses to unsolicited dick pics.

***Sex Education and the Reinforcement of Gendered Social Norms***

Schools are frequently environments that reproduce gender and heteronormativity in many of the school’s practices, traditions, pedagogy and playground dynamics (Kehily 2002). This is further reinforced through sex education via the content and the way in which is taught to young people and contributes to the way in which young women navigate unsolicited sexual imagery.

Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) becomes compulsory, from the age of four in every British school in September 2020[[1]](#footnote-1). Even with the advent of this hard-fought victory (Wood et al. (2019), parents will still have the right to withdraw their children from these lessons, up to nine months before their 16th birthday (DfE 2020). Whilst the guidance is an improvement upon the previous syllabus, there is little reference to sexting and no mention or reference to online image-based sexual abuse or online sexual harassment (Ringrose et al. 2019; Ringrose 2020).

Traditionally, much of what is taught in sex education lessons is related to biological facts and teaching girls ‘refusal skills’ (Lamb et al. 2013). A consistent message that girls hear is the discourse around being a ‘good girl’: not contracting a sexually transmitted infection, abstaining from sex, preventing pregnancy and with no mention of having sex for pleasure (Armstrong et al. 2014). When the moral panics surfaced about sexting, schools started using videos with ‘danger’ messages as resources to dissuade teenagers from sexting, largely situating the girl as ‘at risk’, thus perpetuating the gender norms (Dobson and Ringrose 2015 and Jørgensen et al. 2019). Dobson and Ringrose (2015) researched this phenomenon and presented their research in the article Sext education: pedagogies of sex, gender and shame in the schoolyards of Tagged and Exposed. They took a cross-cultural approach, looking at Australia and the UK’s use of two similar sexting education resources, that are widely used in schools across the two countries. They argued that the films reinforced the double standards that exist for both girls and boys but also normalised sexism that currently exists within schools as well as in online and offline spaces. The emphasis of regulation of social media apps and girls’ behaviours online is reinforced in the videos, which also mimics what girls are taught in sex education. They also stated that the videos distort the lines around non-consensual sharing of images. The advent of compulsory sex education in UK schools, may enable a re-vamping of resources.

Jørgensen et al. (2019) performed a participatory study of adolescents on the effectiveness of sexting education. They took a youth-centred approach to their research which gave the participants a voice as well as enabling the reader to understand the experiences of young people. They stated that the participants had received sexting education via school assemblies and whilst it was useful to understand that adolescents would prefer single sex ‘sext’ lessons, there was no further exploration of sex education, that may have covered other aspects of sex online. An interesting point to emerge was that the adults in the lives of the participants: parents and teachers, were not useful places of support. There was either a lack of knowledge about sexting practices and social media and or the adults created a victim-blaming culture if ‘nudes’ were linked.

A 2010 Sex and Relationship Education report specified that 80% of teachers did not feel confident or specifically trained in teaching sex education to students (as cited in Ringrose 2016). Whilst this was ten years ago, it is unlikely that in the interim, 80% of teachers have now been sufficiently trained. Drawing from my own knowledge as a sex education teacher, I know that in many schools this subject is left to the form teacher. This is problematic and diminishes the value of this subject and makes it difficult for teenagers to receive useful and timely information. If students are not getting knowledge from schools about sex and relationships, they will turn to their friends and social media for this education (Attwood et al.2015).

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1. At the time of design and execution of this research, the Relationships and Sex Education compulsory teaching was due to come into force in September 2020. Prior to submission and writing this decision was postponed and a new date of the start of the summer term 2021, was set as the date for introduction. This decision was made due to the ongoing uncertainty of the coronavirus pandemic and to give schools more time to prepare adequately. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)