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Jørgensen, Weckesser, Turner and Wade, Young People's views on Sexting Education and Support Needs: Findings and recommendations from a UK-based study, *Sex Education*

**Young People's views on Sexting Education and Support Needs: Findings and recommendations from a UK-based study**

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## **Abstract**

Young people's sexting is an area of increasing concern amongst parents, educationalists and policy makers, yet little research has been conducted with young people themselves to explore their perspectives on the support they need to navigate relationships in the new digital media landscape. To begin to address this absence, an inter-disciplinary team of researchers undertook a participatory study with students, aged 13 to 15, in a UK secondary school. This paper outlines key study findings, including young people's views on sexting, their recommendations for improved education around sexting in schools, their preferred sources of support, and their perspectives on the way adults should respond to young people's sexting. Findings indicate that sexting interventions need to be developed within the context of wider relationship issues, such as gender, power dynamics and trust between peers, and improved communication between students and teachers or other responsible adults. Findings may be used to consider ways of designing and communicating messages around sexting to young people within and beyond educational settings.

**Keywords:** sexting, young people, perspectives, relationships, UK.

## Introduction

Children and young people's use of social media and digital mobile technologies has been the subject of extensive policy and media debate in the UK and internationally, and 'sexting' in particular is met with increasing concern amongst parents, teachers, policy makers, and organisations working with children and young people (McGovern et al. 2016). Sexting may be broadly understood as the sending of self-generated and sexually explicit messages, images or videos using mobile phones or other electronic media (NSPCC n.d.a). This description, however, conceals a range of practices, from more 'experimental' (romantic and explorative) to more 'aggravated' (abusive and exploitative) cases of sexting (Wolak and Finkelhor 2011). A growing body of international research has explored young people's experiences of sexting, emphasising that sexting practices are both diverse and contextual (e.g. Jonsson et al. 2015; Crofts et al. 2015; Cooper et al. 2016). Nevertheless, young people's sexting is often presented in a rather uniform way, depicting it as harmful and 'deviant' (McGovern et al. 2016), exemplifying a 'sexting panic' (Hasinoff 2015) based on the moral anxieties that often surround new technologies, youth and sex.

In the UK, various stakeholders have provided parents and schools with advice on how to protect children in an increasingly unsafe on-line world (see for example, UKCCIS 2017; NSPCC n.d.b.). However, not much attention has been paid to the voices of young people themselves in the development of guidelines on sexting, despite acknowledgement that their views are key to ensuring initiatives are appropriate and relevant (Livingstone and Mason 2015). This paper discusses findings from a qualitative study with 14 young people, aged 13-15, at a high school in England. The study sought to begin to address the absence of young people's voices in the creation of sexting interventions made for (rather than with) them and aimed to 1) explore young people's views on sexting and current adult responses to teenage sexting and 2) co-create a set of practical recommendations for the participating school. This paper presents the main findings from the project, first describing participants' views about sexting to set the context and second, discussing recommendations derived from the study, which suggest the need for a diverse, flexible and youth-centred approach to future education and support.

## Background

Several studies have sought to estimate the prevalence of teenage sexting practices (see, for example Lenhart 2009, Mitchell et al. 2012, Hudson and Marshall 2017). A recent review of surveys (Barrense-Dias et al. 2017), which included mainly US, but also some European and Latin American data, found that the prevalence of youth engagement in sexting ranges widely, from less than 1% to as much as 60%. Discrepancies were due to a lack of consistency in definitions of sexting used across surveys and whether or not studies distinguished between active and passive sexting, the latter significantly more prevalent than the former (Barrense-Dias et al. 2017). In an earlier US phone survey of young Internet users, Mitchell et al. (2012) found, that when restricting definitions to include only behaviour that could potentially violate child pornography laws, only 1% of young people engaged in such practices. While such practices may not be widespread, young people however report that on the occasions when they experience negative consequences from

engaging in sexting, these consequences are profoundly harmful (Hudson and Marshall 2017).

Young people's experiences have also been found to be inextricably linked to social expectations of gendered sexual behaviour, with girls reporting more negative consequences and less satisfaction from participating (Cooper et al. 2016), being more likely to feel pressured into sexting current or potential boyfriends (Van Ouytsel et al. 2017), and reporting more concerns about reputational damage and the experience of more aggravated sexting cases (Anastassiou 2017). The gendered practices of sexting are well documented (Lippman and Campbell 2014; van Oosten, Vandenbosch, and Peter 2017; Ringrose et al. 2013; Ringrose and Harvey 2015), and gendered double standards in sexting consequences are a common occurrence (Walker, Sanci, and Temple-Smith 2013; Ringrose et al. 2013; Hasinoff 2013; Albury et al. 2013).

The responses of adult authorities to teen sexting have been critiqued for blaming the victims of non-consensual sexting (Karaian 2014; Hasinoff 2013) and employing child pornography laws to criminalise young people's sexual self-representation and communication (Albury and Crawford 2012; Karaian 2014). Responses also often adopt an abstinence approach by advising young people to simply abstain from sexting rather than providing education on how to manage the risks of sexting (Hasinoff 2013; Albury et al. 2013). Educational initiatives on sexting or 'sext education' (Dobson and Ringrose 2016), taking place through cyber-safety campaigns, construct schools as sites for policing sex and gender norms (ibid.). Many such initiatives target girls, implying that they shoulder the responsibility of minimising sexting risks (e.g. revenge porn and sexual predation) (Salter, Crofts, and Lee 2013). Given such problematic responses, researchers have called for educational initiatives that not only minimise the negative consequences of sexting, but also challenge (rather than reproduce) gendered double standards (Crofts et al. 2015; Hasinoff 2013; Ringrose 2012) and give more attention to young people's voices in sexting educational responses (Albury et al. 2013; Haste 2016). This paper responds to such calls, contributing findings from a participatory study that sought young people's views on sexting and their educational and support needs in relation to the phenomenon.

## **Methodology**

The study was carried out by a team of four researchers (two male and two female) from two universities in the West Midlands of England, representing a mix of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, education and media. Team members drew upon their respective research traditions, but were joined by their common theoretical approach to childhood and youth research, acknowledging children and young people as subjects, rather than objects of research (Kellet, Robinson, and Burr 2004) and as 'experts' in their own lives (Clark 2004). To allow the young people to actively engage in the discussion of sexting and in the development and co-creation of recommendations for practice, the project was designed as a participatory study.

Participatory research may be understood as a broad strategy within qualitative social research, which emphasises the involvement of research partners in the knowledge-production process (Bergold and Thomas 2012). The benefits of involving children and young people in research on matters of importance to them are well established (Kirby et

al. 2003; Christensen and James 2008) and participatory methods are commonly employed in research with children and young people to encourage their active participation (Coad and Evans 2007; Gray and Winter 2011) Within childhood and youth studies, participatory research is generally group and activity-based and uses interactive methods (Horgan 2017).

In this study, a three-stage system of data collection was adopted, involving two sets of small group interviews and one larger focus group each employing an interactive participatory technique. The team spent several lengthy meetings before and in between the group interviews and focus group, developing questions and discussing strategies for how best to involve the young people in the generation of data and co-creation of recommendations. Data collection was carried out between November 2015 and March 2016, with fourteen Year 9 (aged 13 to 14) and Year 10 (aged 14 to 15) students. Seven were male and 7 were female, and all were White British<sup>1</sup>, with the exception of one Asian British participant, reflecting the ethnic make-up of the school which was located in a predominantly white British working-class area. A staff member, who was responsible for the personal care of students at the school, and was familiar with the students and the topic in question, assisted with recruitment.

Ethical approval was granted from the Birmingham City University Ethics board and written informed consent was collected from both young people and their parents or guardians. Consent was reconfirmed verbally with young people at the beginning of each group interview and focus group. Participants received £10 gift vouchers after the second group interview as a token of appreciation for their time and involvement.

### **Data Collection**

The first stage of data collection entailed carrying out two sets of group interviews with four small friendship groups (divided by year groups and gender and matched to one academic researcher of the same gender) each lasting approximately one hour, making for a total of eight group interviews. Each group consisted of 3 to 4 participants. Research indicates that young people often prefer to be interviewed with friends (Author 2011; Punch 2002), and discussions with the contact staff member supported the case for group interviews, as it was believed students would be more comfortable discussing the topic of sexting in small groups of friends rather than individually. When the staff member contacted students regarding participation, it was thus explained that they could participate in their friendship groups. Participants were explicitly asked not to discuss any personal experiences or any experiences of their peers, as this was not the focus of the study.

The first set of group interviews included participants writing down their responses to three broad questions on Post-it notes: 1) What do you understand by the term 'sexting'; 2) Who are the different people who are concerned about it; and 3) What would you say to them? In between each question, participants' written responses served as prompts for the groups to elaborate upon and further discuss their views on sexting and current adult responses to sexting.

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<sup>1</sup> Terms employed for ethnicity follow categories of the UK Office for National Statistics census data and are used widely within the UK context, including within schools.

In the second round of group interviews, participants were played an audio recording from a real life sexting story which had been broadcast on national radio (BBC R4 n.d.). In the case concerned, a girl had solicited a naked digital image from a 14 year old boy and distributed it without the boy's consent. School authorities became aware of the image and contacted the police, who subsequently reported the boy's actions as a crime and put his name on a police database. This case was selected for the group interview, as it was both recent (having been broadcast a few weeks prior to the interview) and 'atypical' compared to the cases the participants had spoken of in the first round of interviews (of boys soliciting images of girls) and thus could potentially spark more reflective discussion. After listening to the recording, participants were asked to freely comment on the story, whether it was representative, what they thought about the actions of all the actors in the case (young people, parents, school and police), if the situation was handled properly or how it could have been handled better.

In the last stage of the project, all participants took part in a focus group to discuss findings from the first two sets of group interviews. Focus groups are larger than group interviews and aim to explore how people collectively make sense of a phenomenon (Bryman 2008: 476). They allow participants to agree and disagree, change their minds (Litosseliti 2003), and thus co-construct new ideas in the course of the session. The focus group format was chosen for this stage of the research, as it allowed participants to discuss the ideas presented and develop recommendations with others beyond the initial smaller friendship-based groups. Participants were asked if they preferred the final focus group to be mixed or single-sexed, resulting in the focus group being mixed as this was the preference of the majority. However, during the focus group's main activity, participants self-selected into smaller groups of boys and girls. For the participatory activity, student recommendations derived from the group interview analysis were printed on poster size paper and participants were asked to discuss these in smaller groups and to freely rewrite, change and add to the recommendations on the poster. This was followed by a whole group discussion and reflection.

### ***Data Analysis and dissemination***

The first two sets of group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each member of the team independently read the transcripts line by line and conducted an initial thematic analysis (Bryman 2008). Following this, the team jointly discussed the data and agreed upon initial, refined and cross-cutting themes. These themes were 'translated' into five main 'student recommendations', which were presented back to participants in the joint focus group workshop for feedback and as an additional mechanism to enhance rigour and establish the trustworthiness of the findings (Marshall and Rossman 2016).

At the end of the focus group, participants generated a list of possible initiatives around sexting (e.g. parent education, on-going group based sessions within schools) and discussed the merits and drawbacks of each. Updated recommendations from the workshop were given to the school. As a means of further dissemination, participants joined the research team at an education university conference in July 2016, where they presented to an audience of academics and practitioners.

### **Findings**

### ***Young People's Views on Sexting***

As has been found in other studies with young people in English speaking countries (e.g. Albury 2015; Ringrose et al. 2013), 'sexting' was not a term participants generally use amongst their peers. Instead they refer to self-taken sexual digital images as 'nudes' or ' pornos.' Nudes were predominately, but not exclusively, shared via Snapchat – a mobile messaging application that ostensibly allows photos to be viewed for a user-specified length of time (1 to 10 seconds) before becoming inaccessible. Participants' initial descriptions of sexting often followed normative narratives concerning the practice:

Participant 1: It's texting and sending photos...

Participant 2: Sex messages.

Participant 1: Yeah, like, rude things that shouldn't really be sent.

(Year 10 Boys)

Participant 1: Like sending dirty messages.

Participant 2: Or dirty pictures.

Participant 1: Yeah.

Participant 2: Just inappropriate stuff really, over internetting (sic) stuff.

(Year 9 Girls)

Descriptions of sexual digital images and messages as 'dirty,' 'rude' and 'inappropriate' were closely followed by discussions of the risk of having a nude 'leaked', i.e. shared widely beyond potential intended recipients and without consent via text messaging, social media websites and/or local 'bait out'<sup>2</sup> web pages. Participants identified potential negative consequences that escalated from embarrassment to bullying and harassment, breakdowns in romantic relationships and friendships, and even depression and suicide.

[Your nude] could get leaked and everyone would end up seeing it and then you'll get embarrassed...

(Year 9 Boy)

[People will] start picking on you because of the way you look and stuff and send it around, like, schools and it could get everywhere, like, and everyone will see it...

(Year 10 Boy)

[I]f someone finds out, like one of your friends, they might not be your friend anymore just because they're like, 'Why would they do that really?' (Year 9 Girl)

It's, like, if people get bullied, people obviously self-harm and could commit suicide. Because obviously, things get really bad when it gets out nowadays. Because obviously everybody's got social media... everyone sees it. (Year 10 Girl)

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<sup>2</sup> Websites and pages created to post naked and sexual images of girls in a local area for the purpose of 'naming and shaming' those deemed 'promiscuous.'



These quotes illustrate the possible social implications for the person who has made and sent a 'nude,' and the varied consequences of having an intimate photo shared widely without consent. Issues of 'trust,' often arose in these discussions of why nudes were sent and also how leaked images represented a breach of that trust:

If you're on it [in a relationship] with someone and you do send them an inappropriate photo, usually if they do show people then you're not usually on it [in a relationship anymore]....and you won't talk to them because you can't trust them anymore.

(Year 9 Girl)

If you send [a nude], you're sending it because you trust the person.

(Year 9 Girl)

Participants also reported sexting practices and consequences to be highly gendered, similar to findings found elsewhere (see, for example, Lippman and Campbell 2014; Dobson and Ringrose 2016). Both male and female participants felt that boys tended to be the recipients rather than the senders of nudes, and that boys were more likely to 'force,' coerce or pressure girls to send them nudes. Boys were not believed to be coerced into sending nudes, but sent them to be 'silly' or to 'act cool.' Consequences varied widely for girls and boys, due to perceived societal expectations of girls and boys respectively:

Participant 1: I think boys are less judged by it, this type of thing, than girls are.

Participant 2: Yeah.

Participant 1: Like, girls would just get called a 'slag' or something. [For] boys – it's an achievement.

Participant 3: Yeah! Whoa! High five!

Participant 1: Yeah, it's an achievement for a boy

(Year 10 Girls)

Participant 1: I would say if it's a girl who has done it they're more likely to be bullied, because if it's a boy I don't think the boy would care as much really

Participant 3: They'd probably get called slags and worst stuff.

Interviewer: And do boys get called things if that happens?

Participant 3: No.

Participant 2: Maybe. They'd probably have a joke around with other boys, but that's probably it.

(Year 10 Boys)

From the perspective of the female participants, the double standards in consequences of a leaked nude existed because girls' actions and images are subject to greater scrutiny and judgement. Some male participants felt that girls 'care more' than boys about how they are seen by their peers, and thus boys are able to 'laugh it off.' Furthermore, some participants made a distinction between popular and un-popular students, and stated that those students that are popular, both male and female, faced milder social consequences if they had a nude leaked, especially if the nude was deemed flattering and attractive. Practices

and consequences of sexting were thus perceived to be closely related to the wider context of relationships and power within and outside school settings.

In addition to the general acknowledgement of the potentially negative impact of sexting, participants also identified a number of scenarios in which sharing nudes was understandable and beneficial. Such contexts included if a young person: shared a naked image of themselves within their friendship group in order to gain reassurance that their body was 'normal'; created a nude as an expression of 'body confidence'; exchanged sexts as a replacement for physical sexual relationships; or sent nudes as a means for creating intimacy and establishing trust with someone they are were in a romantic relationship with. These scenarios were accompanied by more nuanced views on sexting, recognising the possible role these practices may play in building relationships and positive body images.

As the above quotes illustrate, sexting is a highly complex practice, which may have both positive and negative connotations for young people, depending on gender and popularity within the peer group. Their awareness of the potentially very serious social consequences of sexting suggests that educational initiatives around sexting need to go beyond providing information about already relatively well-known 'dangers' of sexting, and y engage with (different groups of) young people to ensure that interventions are relevant, appropriate and acknowledge the complexity and contextual nature of sexting.

### ***Modes of Communication - 'Sext Ed' in Schools***

Participants expressed a desire to learn and talk about issues to do with sexting in school and recommended that 'sext education' be regularly included as part of Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education curriculum<sup>3</sup>. When discussing current provision, participants stated that their school had provided only one assembly<sup>4</sup> that year on the topic:

Participant 1: I don't think we've ever had proper lessons of talking about any of this.

Participant 2: We only had an assembly, but it only showed us how a girl was bullied after.

Participant 4: And it only lasted 20 minutes anyway.

Participant 2: Not even that I don't think.

Participant 1: But it didn't say anything about positive effects, it was all negative. Like it didn't say that they might not get bullied, it was like if you do it you're going to get bullied full stop.

Participant 2: And it never told us why not to do it and if it's illegal and things.

(Year 9 Girls)

All participants, boys and girls from both year groups, strongly felt that whole school assemblies were an ineffective means of disseminating information about sexting,

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<sup>3</sup> In England, Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education is a non-statutory subject in which students are taught life, relationship and work skills

<sup>4</sup> where the whole school student body or a large groups of students are gathered together to listen to material delivered from a podium

repeatedly stating that 'no one listens in assemblies.' Furthermore, students would not feel comfortable asking questions in front of their peers and information from an annual assembly would be quickly forgotten. Instead, participants expressed the desire for lessons that were ongoing, delivered 'every few months' and held 'just like conversations' to enable them to talk about the issues involved. Participants recommended that sext education lessons be separated by gender to increase students' comfort in discussions. Girls repeatedly stated that this was necessary because 'the boys do not respect us,' and on one occasion, this sentiment was shared by the boys, who said that the girls did not 'respect' them.

### ***Preferred Sources of Support***

Participants reported not feeling comfortable going to their parents or teachers for support should they face an issue related to sexting such as having a nude leaked. Instead they would seek help from peers or potentially an adult from a non-school affiliated child support organisation:

I'd feel too embarrassed to go to really anyone. I'd go to a close friend who I could trust. Or like there's organisations like Childline<sup>5</sup> where you speak to a young person.

(Year 9 Boy)

[I]f somebody is getting bullied [because of a leaked nude], you talk to your friends about it and your friend will stick up for you and help you and help you through it. ... And it's like that with everything, that's why they're your friends, but teachers, it's quite uncomfortable and parents it's quite uncomfortable as well to talk about things like that.

(Year 10 Boy)

Only a minority of participants stated that they would go to their parents with these issues, but most reported that they would not out of fear of punishment, 'getting told off' or having their mobile phones 'over-monitored':

Say my mum and dad didn't trust me, they do trust me, but if they didn't trust me they could patrol my phone. Does that make sense? So they could check messages and stuff like that

(Year 9 girl)

Participants expressed ambivalence over parental controls on their digital media presence. While recognising parents' need to 'protect' them from potential harms online, young people also felt such controls invaded their privacy. They did not want parents to take away or police their access to social media because, 'we need a life.' Parents were said to

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<sup>5</sup> Childline is a UK free and confidential service, which is available for children and young people under 19 years to discuss any issues or difficulties they may experience.

also need educating about sexting, but participants did not feel young people could deliver this, as parents would 'not listen to us' and would 'not take us seriously.'

With regards to teachers, participants reported that they were not always comfortable talking to them about sexting, many stating that it was too 'awkward' and some expressing concern about confidentiality. Participants preferred to talk to, and have sext education lessons delivered by someone 'who you don't see every day' such as a youth worker, a school nurse and/or older student mentors.

The insights derived from young people's discussions of preferred sources of support pointed to a broader set of issues regarding communication between young people and the adults who care for them. Participants' narratives also highlighted the key importance of trust in intergenerational relations and the way perceptions of trust shaped young people's preferred sources of support:

[S]ome teachers you can trust and you feel confident talking to them, but then others that you don't really get on with, it's harder to say to them, because you think they might not care, because you've had, like, arguments or you've been told off by them.

(Year 10 Boy)

### ***Roles and responsibilities of relevant adults***

There was no consensus among participants about which adults in positions of authority should be informed and involved in cases of leaked nudes. While some participants felt the school should not inform parents, others stated that parents should be involved. Some stated that schools should not be involved at all as nudes would have been created and sent off school property and thus out of the school's jurisdiction. While the majority of participants felt the police<sup>6</sup> should not be informed about the (consensual nor non-consensual) sharing of students' nudes, as they had 'better things like murders' to investigate, others felt that in some situations police should be involved as they had more authority than schools and would be more effective at removing nudes from phones in more aggravated cases:

Cause people will argue with teachers....but I think [they are] more unlikely to argue with the police.

(Year 10 Girls)

Participant 1: I feel like teachers ... are only trying to protect us from things, like that [negative consequences of sexting], but at the same time, do they really need to know about our social life and, like, that's...They're not our parents, are they?

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<sup>6</sup> In the UK, following the Protection of Children Act (1978) as amended by Sexual Offences Act (2003), it is illegal to make or distribute indecent (nude) images of anyone under 18, even if that image is made by or with the consent of the person who is aged under 18.

Participant 2: I think teachers should be quite close as well, because if something happens, like, at home, where you can't talk to anyone there, then you can talk to a teacher about it ..

(Year 9 Boys)

These diverging views about the respective roles of various stakeholders (police, parents and teachers) in dealing with incidents of leaked 'nudes' or aggravated sexting, illustrate how young people's sexting blurs the boundaries between public and private (Bond 2014). The overlapping of contexts (school versus home, and private versus public) generates uncertainty amongst young people as to where responses should be coming from. Some expressed preference for a response from the familiar and private sphere (e.g. their parents) while others opted for a more institutional and public approach, led by those with more authority. In general, however a calm and communicative approach was recommended:

I don't think parents should just have a go at their child... But I think they should maybe help their child understand why it's so wrong, it makes them know that they can't really do this, that they can't do it.

.....

Just sit them down and talk about it.

(Year 10 Boys)

The same approach was mentioned in young people's discussion of the case presented in the second round of group interviews:

I feel like the teachers have acted wrong about it because they've shouted at him and, like, told him that he's done wrong. But you need to talk to him about it more calmly and gently, like, not just start shouting at him because it's only going to make things worse.

(Year 9 Girl)

The perceived role of teachers was generally presented as ambivalent, as participants, on the one hand, did not feel that teachers should know too much about young people's personal life, but on the other hand, could present a back-up 'second option' if parents were not supportive or accessible.

Some participants reported learning for the first time through the project that sexting could be a criminal offence, showing the important role of educational interventions in conveying such knowledge. However, they also unanimously felt that such punitive actions were too harsh a consequence:

Participant 1: It's severe and [sending a nude] is a bad thing for anybody to do, but I still feel like maybe you've got pressured into doing it. You're doing it because you feel like it's necessary... you should get a consequence but it shouldn't be major, like, you know...

Participant 2: Like thirty years in prison or something. It should be like...

Participant 1: Yeah, but...if you want to work with kids it can ruin that I mean, I want to be a teacher when I'm older. That would be a horrible thing to happen.  
(Year 9 Boys)

Participants felt that the school and police involved in the case (discussed in the second group interview) placed too much focus on the victim (the person whose nude had been leaked), and that the sender of the nude should also be held accountable and face reasonable consequences. When discussing punishment in general, some participants argued that social media corporations facilitating the practice of sharing sexual content, also had some responsibility. Specifically, it was felt that bait out websites need to be shut down and that platforms such as Facebook and Instagram should take action to removed leaked nudes and explicit photos more quickly after they have been reported.

## Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to focus in-depth on young people's views on their own support and education needs around navigating the phenomenon of sexting. While the study is based on a relatively small sample of 14 participants, serial group interviews and a focus group allowed for in-depth, rich data collection as a rapport was built between researchers and participants through the three visits. The benefits of such a rapport are illustrated by how in initial interviews participants often gave more normative responses (e.g. sexting as 'rude'), but in second interviews more nuanced views of the practice arose (e.g. sexting as building intimacy and positive body images).

Generalisation is not an aim of qualitative research such as this. However, study findings were consistent with those from existing research on teenagers' experiences of sexting, especially with regards to the use of terminology such as 'nudes' and ' pornos' (Ringrose et al. 2012), the varied reasons and motivations for sexting (Van Ouytsel et al. 2017) and the perception of gendered double standards in sexting practices and consequences (Lippman and Campbell 2014; van Oosten, Vandenbosch, and Peter 2017; Ringrose et al. 2013; Walker, Sanci, and Temple-Smith 2013). While the socio-demographic background of the sample reflected the student population concerned, lack of diversity (in relation to ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and (dis)ability) was a limitation of the study. In future research, we hope to recruit a larger and broader sample that will enable a wider representation of views on sexting and appropriate responses to it.

A key finding from the project was the importance of the style and content of communication between young people and relevant adults. The young people in the study repeatedly stated that they would like teachers, parents and others to respond to sexting practices by talking *with* them (e.g. in a class) rather than *at* them (e.g. in assemblies). Participants were not particularly interested in web applications (apps) or websites on this matter, but preferred a more personal and relational communicative approach. They also emphasised the importance of teachers and parents not 'shouting' or 'having a go' at them.

Most participants reported that they had only been taught about sexting through assemblies led by community police officers presenting a cyber-safety film. As has been reported elsewhere (Dobson and Ringrose 2016) such initiatives tend to construct schools as sites for the policing of sex and gender norms. Additionally, such initiatives tend to be based on problematic responses that criminalise sexting or adopt an abstinence stance

(Albury et al. 2013; Hasinoff 2013; Karaian 2014). Education concerning the potential legal implications of sexting may however, in itself, not prevent young people from participating in the practice (Walker, Sancı, and Temple-Smith 2013). Considering participants' varied views on sexting, and their preference for a smaller interactive and gender-separated settings for discussing sexting practices, one key recommendation from the study would be for schools to consider carefully the forum in which material on sexting are presented, the methods by which it is communicated, and the way the varied motivations for sexting can be acknowledged.

Trust and breaches of trust were recurring issues in young people's narratives when describing why nudes were sent and leaked and when talking about who to turn to for support if an incident of a leaked nude occurred. Concerns about confidentiality were also prevalent and some participants were worried that they could not trust their teachers with information about sexting. Based on these perceptions and participants' comments on the recommendations discussed in the final focus group, two additional recommendations may be derived. First, sext education lessons or educational tools need to focus as much on wider relationship issues, such as consent, trust, gender, body image, bullying and sexual harassment, as they do on the particular apps (which rapidly change) or the dangers of being online. In particular, aggravated sexting cases need to be considered alongside recent reports on the widespread sexual harassment of female students (aged 13 to 21) in UK schools (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee 2016), and the growing use of mobile technology as vehicles to perpetrate sexual assault (Quadara 2010). Acknowledging a broader view of relationships in the context of social media highlights the importance of educating young people in what it means to be an ethical user and consumer of technology, as advocated by Harrison (2015) in the context of cyberbullying, and Powell (2010) in relation to 'bystander education.'

Second, as trust is a key issue for young people in discussions of sexting, schools and colleges need to consider both how trust can be strengthened and how confidentiality is communicated and practised in general. School authorities may consider setting up mechanisms by which young people can confide in someone more distant from their everyday interactions at school (such as school nurses or youth workers). Students' embarrassment and concerns with anonymity might also make trained outside experts (such as sexual health professionals) or specialist teachers a better option for the delivery of sex(t) education than regular teachers, as argued elsewhere (Pound, Langford, and Campbell 2016).

Parents' and teachers' perceived lack of knowledge of digital technologies has been identified as a barrier to talking to young people about sexting (Haste 2016). As argued by Cerna, Machackova, and Dedkova (2016) in the context of cyberbullying, parents' lack of Internet skills may be an additional reason for children not to turn to their parents if they need help. Reflecting these barriers, participants argued that not only they, but also their parents would benefit from educational support around sexting. Such support might be usefully extended to teachers who may equally experience embarrassment in talking to teenagers about sexual matters (Ringrose et al. 2012).

Finally, young people's narratives illustrate uncertainty about who were the most appropriate adults, with duties of care, to handle incidents of aggravated sexting and/or leaked nudes. Participants generally believed that support was a better option than criminalisation, and many were, in fact, not aware of the legal implications of sexting prior

to participating in the study. In line with recent UK guidelines on how to address teenage sexting in schools (UKCCIS 2017), there was a consensus that each case be judged individually and given a suitably measured punishment reflecting the relative severity of the case. Participants' narratives emphasised insights made by researchers and practitioners; that sexting is a practice of diverse reasons and implications (e.g. Wolak and Finkelhor 2011) and that there is no 'catch-all' response to its consequences. Extending this to the question of how to educate around sexting, it may therefore be argued that various avenues of education and support may need to be developed and practiced in parallel.

## **Conclusion**

The present study sought young people's views on sexting and engaged them in the development of recommendations concerning how to address sexting and its consequences within schools. Findings highlight the importance of communication, trust, and appropriate education and support for young people. Data showed some perceived imbalance between the young people's views on sexting and the responses of the adults around them, prompting the idea that not only young people but also parents, guardians and teachers need education in how to address teen sexting. The varied motivations and consequences of sexting discussed in the paper highlight the need for an equally varied approach to education and support, which places sexting within its wider context of relationships and trust, and which addresses issues of intergenerational communication. As this study has sought to show, it is crucial that young people are involved in the development of such an approach, and a participatory framework, as described in this paper, may usefully be applied to facilitate their involvement.

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