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# Rethinking Risk in Adults' Engagement with Sexual Digital Imagery

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## Abstract

**Introduction** Camera-equipped smartphones and other devices allow people to capture and share images directly with others in ways that are spontaneous, instant and relatively inexpensive. Such sharing is a common part of modern sexual intimacies, despite media and educational discourses warning of potential risks.

**Methods** This paper reports on a qualitative study in which we interviewed 23 Australian adults about the ways in which they used with digital sexual imagery in their sex lives. The study aimed to explore participants' experiences of digital sexual self-image creation and sharing and the ways discourses of risk and safety shape these experiences.

**Results** Findings showed that participants tended to view the creation and exchange of sexual images as a form of sexual play that built intimacy, sexual tension and eroticism into their relationships and expanded their sexual and relationship experiences in positive ways. Participants were aware that sending sexual or nude images left them vulnerable to potential harm or unwanted sexual exposure and were concerned that some people would view such practices as foolish or irresponsible given these risks held such high profile. These concerns meant participants were often secretive about their experiences although the sense of risk and vulnerability in these exchanges enhanced intimacy or eroticism for some participants.

**Conclusions** Educational approaches to managing digital risk should recognise that people often have positive digital sexual experiences that can lead them to disengage from fear-based messaging.

**Policy implications** As digital technologies evolve, their integration with human sexual intimacy will continue to change and develop in unforeseen ways. Educational and regulatory responses will require ongoing scrutiny and innovation to acknowledge users' positive experiences and desires while responding to risks and challenges.

**Keywords** Digital technologies and sex · Sexting · Digital sexual images · Doing risk · Digital sexual literacy

Modern, camera-equipped, smartphones allow people to capture and share images directly with others or via social media and websites in a way that is spontaneous, instant, and relatively inexpensive. The ubiquity of digital cameras means communication using digital images (photographs and video) is now part of everyday intimacies. People send images to each other, view the Instagram feeds of their

friends and family, and communicate via video stream (Madianou, 2016; Watson et al., 2021). Furthermore, digital images and digital technologies are increasingly integrated into people's sex lives. Digitally mediated sexual intimacy that involves imagery—'sexting', 'sexual selfies', 'sex tapes', webcamming, or amateur pornography—is a common part of contemporary sex lives (Amundsen, 2020; Gesselman, Druet, & Vitzthum, 2020).

As these technologies have become more commonplace, so has recognition of the potential risks and dangers they pose, including non-consensual sharing of imagery (sometimes called revenge pornography) and other forms of online sexual harassment and abuse (Henry et al., 2020; Henry & Powell, 2016; Henry, Powell, & Flynn, 2017b). In this paper, we explore the impact of the awareness of such risk on adults' experiences of creating, sending, and/or receiving digital sexual images. Our aim is not to determine how people manage or try to mitigate risks; rather, we explore ways people make sense of risk and how this informs and shapes

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practices of digital sexual imagery use. In doing this, we hope to develop a nuanced approach to understanding how people navigate risk in the context of pleasures and benefits.

## Danger, 'Slut' Shaming, and Possibilities for Pleasure

Recent decades have seen an increasing media focus on the sexualised use of digital technologies, with concerns about 'sexting' (creating or sharing sexual and nude images), particularly amongst young people, and 'revenge pornography' (non-consensual sharing or uploading to websites of sexual or nude images) attracting most attention (Angelides, 2013; Henry et al., 2017b, 2020). Anxieties about digital sexual imagery sit alongside, or within, broader messages about online safety, including scams or deception occurring through hook-up and 'dating' apps and online harassment, stalking, cyber bullying, and 'trolling' (Backe et al., 2018; Tiidenberg & Van Der Nagel, 2020). There is an emerging educational, legal, and regulatory response to these concerns aiming to establish mechanisms for prevention and legal redress for victims of online harm and image-based abuse (Henry et al., 2018). However, the rapidly changing, globalised, digital environment means this is a complex task. The law is often playing 'catch-up' with current practices and technologies, whilst jurisdictional regulation or legal action can have limited reach internationally (Farrell, Shackleton, Agnew, Hopkins, & Power, 2022; Henry, Powell, & Flynn, 2017a; Yar & Drew, 2019). The challenges and limitations of regulatory and legal responses to online harms have meant public education on digital sexual imagery tends toward self-restraint messages, such as 'no sexting is safe', and health promotion and media messages often frame digital sexual image making as inherently risky (Albury & Byron, 2018; Albury et al., 2017, 2020).

Critical scholarship has highlighted the ways in which risk discourses within media or educational messaging have produced digital sexual self-imagery as a politically salient, modern 'sex problem' (Albury et al., 2017, 2020; Angelides, 2013; Tiidenberg & Van Der Nagel, 2020), within in which people engaged in these practices are perceived to be naïve and vulnerable, irresponsible, or malicious. Risk messaging also often draws on gendered and conservative sexual moralising to warn about risk involving sexual exchange or exposure of naked and sexual images (Albury et al., 2017; Ravn et al., 2021). For instance, young people are warned to avoid sexting and digital pornography in order to prevent humiliation, damage to future employment, and potential legal consequences (Angelides, 2013; Hasinoff, 2013), whilst adult women are warned of reputational loss and vulnerability to

harassment if their personal sexual images are exposed—the implicit message being that exposure of their naked or sexualised bodies would implicate them as 'slutty' or somehow less worthy (Amundsen, 2020; Setty, 2019). Whilst men are less vulnerable than women to public shaming (Paasonen & Sundén, 2021), many men are aware that they can quickly be labelled a 'creep' if they present as too forward, too explicit, eager, or aggressive in online encounters, yet they also feel pressure to adhere to conventional masculine presentation in online spaces (Ravn et al., 2021; Waling & Pym, 2019; Waling et al., 2022). Critical analysis of discourse surrounding digital sexual practices is not intended to discount the genuinely harmful impact that unwanted sexual exposure or harassment online can cause to victims. Rather, it draws attention to the ways perceived risks from new technologies intersect with gender inequalities and attitudes toward sexuality.

Sitting alongside this research is an emerging body of scholarship exploring the significance of digitally mediated intimacy in contemporary friendships, dating, and intimate relationships (Attwood et al., 2017; Döring, 2009). With respect to digital sexual imagery, this scholarship has attended to the ways smartphones enable people to share images that express sexual desire, pleasure, or affection, and support intimacy and sexual satisfaction (Dredge & Anderson, 2021; Gesselman et al., 2020; Murray & Campbell, 2015; Watson et al., 2021), whilst opening new possibilities for romantic and sexual relationships, and everyday connection and presence over distance (Madianou, 2016; Murray & Campbell, 2015).

In this paper, we report findings from a qualitative study in which we interviewed Australian adults about their experiences of creating and sharing digital sexual images. We aimed to explore the ways people have integrated sexual self-images into their sex lives and relationships and to understand the benefits or pleasures this affords. However, we were also mindful that risk and shame discourses associated with digital sexual images are not inconsequential for people's engagement in these practices. Awareness of risk may, in fact, have profound effects on the ways people choose to engage with digital sexual imagery and how they feel about it. As such, we aimed to explore how people related to discourses of risk and safety as part of practices of digital sexual self-image creation and sharing.

## Approach

We approached this study using Nygren and colleagues' (2019) understanding of 'doing risk', which draws on Butler's concept of gender as constituted performatively. Nygren et al. (2019) argue that risk is not an objective reality to be revealed or understood through scientific research. Rather, perceptions of what constitutes 'risky practices' or 'at risk'

individuals are produced through the ways we talk about, and respond to, notions of risk in research, in the media, in education, in policy and so forth, in the context of normative ideas about gender, sexuality, age, class, culture, and other structures and processes. Discourses of risk shape, in part, people's experience of these practices and of themselves in relation to digital sexual practices. Risk is, therefore, performative; it is something that is produced in action and interaction, as Nygren et al., (2019, p. 87) explain:

From our perspective, the act of, for example, not walking home alone at night because of fear of sexual assault, is the doing of risk at the same time as it constitutes respectable femininity. Not performing according to expectations causes anxiety and even fear . . . , a fear that might be greater and more significant than considering a particular risk, since it is related to subjectification and self-identity.

For our purposes, this framework enables us to make sense of the ways risk discourses relating to sexualised use of technologies are informed by (and reinforce) gendered and sexual stereotypes and inequalities, and to explore how people navigate this in the context of their experiences of sexual pleasure and romantic connection. Our intention is not to downplay or disregard the harm that can be caused by image-based sexual abuse or non-consensual sharing of sexual images. Rather, it is to understand how people relate to the potential for these things to happen as part of their sexual experiences.

A note on language: whilst we recognise that the term 'sexting' is often not used by people in everyday life to describe their practices (Crofts, Lee, McGovern, & Milivojevic, 2016), we use the term in this paper for brevity to refer to creating and sending nude or sexual self-images.

## Methods

We report on in-depth interviews with 23 Australian adults aged between 25 and 75 years. Participant recruitment was conducted via a combination of paid Facebook advertising and word-of-mouth promotion through the researchers' networks. Participants were eligible if they lived in Australia, were aged 18 years or older, and had some experience with the creation of sexualised, nude, or erotic images of themselves. Interviews were conducted by one member of the research team in 2020. Australian coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic restrictions required all interviews to be conducted either via phone or video (Zoom). Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 min, depending on the length of each participant's responses to the questions. Participants were asked to recount their experiences creating, sharing, and/or receiving amateur sexual imagery, outline their motivations in creating images, describe their relationships with people with whom they shared images, explain the language they used to talk about

self-made sexual imagery, and depict the settings, spaces, and social contexts in which they created and shared images. Participants were also asked about their awareness of potential risks associated with digital sexual imagery and how they responded to these. Finally, participants were asked about their perceptions of media reporting on sexting and amateur pornography and how this related to their own experiences. This study received ethics approval from the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics committee (HEC19432).

## Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and verified. Data were inductively coded using Clarke and Braun's (2018) approach to thematic analysis (see also Braun & Clarke, 2019). We reviewed and coded the data through a framework informed by our theoretical approach to the research topic, attending to the relationship between risk and participants' descriptions of their practices, their feelings about their practices, and feelings about themselves in relation to this. Three members of the research team independently coded the data and discussed findings, checking for consistency and differences in their interpretations of data in order to develop themes (Clarke & Braun, 2018). These themes were further refined through research team discussions and the process of writing and sharing notes, memos, and preliminary drafts of this paper. As themes were developed, researchers revisited data that had previously been analysed with newly identified, or more sharply defined, themes in mind, a method of constant comparison often used to ensure rigour in qualitative data analysis (Boeije, 2002).

## Participant Characteristics

Of the 23 participants, three identified as either gay/lesbian ( $n=1$ ) or bisexual ( $n=2$ ), whilst the rest identified as heterosexual ( $n=20$ ). One participant identified as non-binary, and the rest used 'male' ( $n=12$ ) or 'female' ( $n=10$ ) to identify their gender. No participants identified as trans or gender diverse. Most participants were aged in their 40 s and 50 s ( $n=14$ ), with a smaller number in their 30 s ( $n=5$ ), 20 s ( $n=3$ ), and 70 s ( $n=1$ ). All participants resided in Australia. Participants were asked to describe their ethnicity. The majority ( $n=13$ ) used terms that indicated a Caucasian Australian background, e.g. Australian, Australian-Caucasian, and British-Caucasian. Other participants identified as Chinese ( $n=3$ ), Asian ( $n=1$ ), Eurasian ( $n=1$ ), Indian ( $n=1$ ), or a mix of ethnicities, such as 'English Italian' ( $n=4$ ). No participants identified as First Nations people. All participants had received a post-secondary school education, with 12 having an undergraduate qualification, 10 a postgraduate qualification, and one a TAFE/technical training diploma.

## Findings

Practices of creating and sharing sexual imagery were described by participants in terms that were largely relational and framed sexual image sharing as a form of mutual exchange, sexual play, flirting, or building sexual tension with another person. Even though viewing photographs or videos was at the centre of these experiences, participants also spoke about sexual gratification and eroticism that came from the process of exchanging images or in creating an image and waiting for a response. Awareness of risk sat within this. Participants knew that sending sexual or nude images left them vulnerable to potential harm or unwanted exposure, and this in part shaped their perception of these practices and experiences, including expectations of reciprocity (mutual exchange of images), perceptions of trustworthiness in others, and feelings of intimacy or eroticism. These broad themes are discussed in more detail below.

### Images as Communication, Connection, and Sexual Play

The process of creating and sharing digital sexual images was described by participants as sexual connection and erotic play. Some participants spoke about exchanging images with people they had met online through dating apps (people not known offline), whilst others only created and sent images in the context of an ongoing offline relationship. This included two participants who communicated using sexual imagery with long-distance partners. Two participants spoke about sending nude or sexual images of themselves or other people (such as screen shots from commercial pornography) to certain friends with whom they had no offline sexual relationship but who enjoyed the erotic exchange. Whatever the context, the experience of creating, receiving, and watching self-created sexual images was about sexual communication or play. It was a practice afforded by the simplicity of creating and sharing digital imagery—the digital camera, the small device, Internet connectivity, apps, and messaging services. For example, the timing of a digital image exchange, in which there is a delay between sending an image and receiving a response, amplified the affective experience of these practices for many participants, as Joseph explained:

There is a sense of excitement from both sending and receiving ... First of all, I would spend a good 10, 15 minutes finding the image, cropping the image, and then posting it. Then, I get this excited anxious feeling of, you know, you see the little head icon drop and you think, 'Oh yeah, they've seen it'. And then you wait for the response, and you think how long will it take for them to respond? ... It becomes like ... an evolving chain reaction, you know, like a tennis match

... And that again provides a sense of excitement, you know, a sense of mystery, intrigue ... All those emotions and feelings come to play when that happens, yeah. (Joseph, age 48, male, heterosexual)

Participants also described how basic digital technologies (a laptop, the Internet) allowed them introduce sex into everyday exchanges or activities. Linda, for example, described the way the camera's gaze from her laptop eroticised her mundane morning bathroom routine:

I'd just put the laptop on the little seat in the bathroom and go and have my shower. And I'd come out and I'd be fussing around getting ready for work or whatever I was doing that day. And so, he'd kind of see me from about just under my boobs down to just below my arse. So, he got all pretty much the good bits. And we'd just be yakking away while I cleaned my teeth and did my hair ... So, he got to see a fair bit of my time naked. (Linda, age 56, female, heterosexual)

Participants tended to describe their experiences in terms of the excitement or eroticism in the exchange. For many, this was also linked to excitement in the uncertainty of how the sexual images of their bodies, or expression of their sexual desires, would be received. For some, this sense of vulnerability pushed sexual boundaries in ways they found exciting and satisfying. As Michelle's description below illustrates, sending an image, for her, built a sense of sexual agency marked (or brought about) by competing emotions of excitement and uncertainty:

I guess, like, a little bit of power. It is a bit brave, I think, to [create and send an image], so you feel kind of a bit brave, but also quite anxious because you're, like, are they seeing this photo the way I'm seeing it? ... But receiving is, I guess, very exciting for me because, well, partly because there's that sort of trust where you're, sort of, exposing yourself to each other. So, there's that excitement. And that excitement of that person trusting and also, yeah, the visualness of it I enjoy. (Michelle, 35, female, heterosexual)

For Christy, sexting or making videos challenged her sexual boundaries as it allowed her to engage in sex practices not otherwise available, shifting her sense of self as she became more comfortable with practices that she considered risqué:

I guess [with sexting] you have some nice erotic moments and a bit of self-pleasure ... And yeah, I think a bit, for me being able to change my mind-set a bit. I think I would've felt I was more conservative than that. And yeah, it's nice to kind of stretch yourself a bit and go 'Oh, I actually am now quite comfortable with that', within assuming you've got a level of, a

small level of trust built up already. (Christy, age 51, female, heterosexual)

For participants, sexual imagery operated as a form of erotic communication that was not separate from, or a precursor to, other forms of intimacy, but was part of connecting with another person sexually. Digital sexual practices also offered unique possibilities for pleasure and intimacy due to the function of technologies themselves which, for example, delayed the timing of sending and receiving an image or offered the capacity to look at oneself on screen and enjoy the process of constructing a sexual image. These experiences of pleasure and eroticism provide important context for the following sections in which we focus more directly on the ways risk discourses shaped participants' experiences.

### Affective Responses to Risk

Cautionary tales of non-consensual exposure of others' sexual images were common in participants' explanations of the ways they understood risk, although none had experienced such exposures themselves. Participants recalled stories they had read in the media, anecdotes they had heard, or experiences of friends being publicly shamed:

I have heard, like in the past, there was, particularly in our area, there was a thing all over the news that someone had got hold of a whole heap of videos that people had done and was going to expose people, you know, send them to partners, send them to husbands all that kind of stuff, but yeah, so that ... made me think wow, wow, yeah, it, that was quite a while ago, but that sort of made people sort of go, oh, maybe it's not as safe as we think it is. (Laura, age 48, female, heterosexual)

Participants reported many strategies for avoiding unwanted exposure of their images, including cropping their faces or other identifying features and storing data offline. However, management of data or images was a minor theme in participants' narratives about risk. More often, they described the significance of trust and reciprocity in risk management. Receiving an image from someone was an indication that the person was willing to share vulnerability, which was considered a sign of trustworthiness:

I suppose that's one of the reasons why reciprocation is an important thing for me with this. So, I trust you to send you my photos, but for me to do that and get enjoyment out of it, I need to know that you trust me as well [by sending yours]. (Michelle, age 35, female, heterosexual)

The significance of reciprocity was recognised by heterosexual male participants as important for demonstrating their trustworthiness to women:

I think it's quite important in the sense that it really shows how much we trust each other, and I really, really value that. If my partner agrees to have those photos and videos done, it really shows a great deal of trust in me, which I think really helps the relationship. (Emil, age 45, male, heterosexual)

The significance of that decision to trust someone became part of the affective and relational experience of sharing images, often producing an enhanced sense of intimacy. Participants spoke about this as a positive outcome of sexting:

[Exchanging images] can make two people closer together; like, it can make you more intimate ... I think it's both because, like, this sort of thing isn't something I would do with just anyone ... I think it does bring you together because it is like this special thing that you've done together and you are – it's like a huge amount of trust, I mean, like there was a huge amount of trust. (Jodie, age 42, female, heterosexual)

For some participants, the perceived taboo nature of pornography and the risk of exposure were part of the erotic appeal in creating sexual imagery, particularly videos:

There's something about seeing yourself, sort of like, live on that little LCD screen that it reminds you that you're, kind of, doing something a little bit naughty. And it adds to that kind of – how can I explain this – I suppose filming yourself there's that kind of forbidden thing about it. (Joe, age 51, male, heterosexual)

Risk discourses shaped the ways participants experienced image exchange as a practice of trust and intimacy or eroticism. The urgency and significance of trusting relationships were enhanced in a situation where sexting could be regarded as dangerous. In the next section, we look more closely at the complexity of participants' responses to risk discourses, revealing the ways individual participants critiqued them, whilst also retaining beliefs about individual responsibility.

### Digital Sexual Imagery in Mainstream Media

Most participants were sceptical about mainstream media portrayals of digital sexual imagery (mostly focused on sexting) and regarded as hypocritical the ways that media stories often evoked shame and included warnings of risk and danger to create sensationalist headlines. Elijah, for example, described media reporting as hyperbolic and cynical:

[There] will, of course, be trashy magazines and newspapers on celebrity sex, and celebrities leak some stuff, and they will profit on it massively ... And then, they'll sort of sell it too, [and it will be] glamorised and maybe even slut-shaming, normally shaming the female and – but they'll sell it ... And then, there'll do massive scare stories about kids getting involved in it. (Elijah, aged 43, male, bisexual)

Several participants commented that the media's focus on negative stories did not accord with their personal experiences, and also offered few positive solutions to the dangers represented other than shame or worry, as Tomas noted:

I think it [the media] makes people worry – I think it causes them to, sort of, rethink making those images, or making those productions or whatever. I think it, sort of, changes their perceptions in thinking that what they're doing is a bad thing, or it's not a standard thing other people do. (Tomas, age 26, male, gay)

Participants took a critical stance on the ways media reporting can shame users, as Tomas's comment indicates. However, in the absence of more positive representations of sexting or other strategies for challenging or reframing shame, participants also spoke about risk in terms of poor decision-making and poor judgement of those people being reported on in media. As Arun's response below shows, he was critical of the overall negative media reporting on sexting but saw individual responsibility (not being 'stupid') as the explanation:

I think [the media is] very negative. So long as you're with somebody you care about, it's not actually harming anybody. You're careful you don't burn yourself. The media highlight on one or two people who are being really stupid about it and they jump on the sensational ... So, that it's all sensational headlines and [how it] should be banned and all the other bits and pieces. In reality, it's pleasurable and does no harm. (Arun, age 58, male, heterosexual)

Similarly, Sarah told a story of a friend whose pictures were shared without her consent, acts which Sarah perceived as embarrassing and shameful for her friend, but for which she ultimately thought the friend was responsible due to a poor decision to trust her boyfriend:

One of my best friends I know takes pictures of herself all the time and sends them. And she's been in a situation where the guy's shown other people that she knows, not distributed it online but definitely shown people within their social circle. And I think that's really sad for her, but then I think why would you trust him? Don't trust him, don't send him that, he's not to be trusted. (Sarah, age 42, female, heterosexual)

Safety in Sarah's mind rested on the ability to know whom to trust, with blame attributed to poor judgement of the woman who naïvely trusted her boyfriend. This approach was reflected in several participant narratives. Good judgement was posited as the solution to manage risk. However, participants were not always clear what such judgement involved. As we explore in the next section, shame extended beyond sexual shaming to include the fear of being shamed for not having good judgement.

## Shame and Silence

Participants, on the whole, did not speak with friends about their practices of creating or sharing digital sexual imagery, and some were keen to keep their digital practices secret. In fact, although many participants assumed sexting or making sexual videos is common amongst adults, most participants were not aware whether their friends did this. One participant, Emil (age 45, male, heterosexual), stated that one of his motivations for participating in this study was to find out if his practices were 'normal', noting when asked if he spoke to friends or family about digital sexual practices, 'I don't share at all'. Participants indicated that they chose not to speak about their digital sexual practices as they feared others would think they were foolish or irresponsible for sexting when the risks are so well known. As Lia said:

Years ago, I think Vanessa Hudgens – the actress in 'High School Musical'? – she sent like a nudge to Zac Efron, and then it got leaked and everyone found out and she was all of a sudden, like, shamed for doing that. And I feel that that's, kind of, the implication that media give when like people sext. Although [sexting] does happen, I feel like people don't talk about it ... like, I don't talk about it with my friends. My friends don't really talk about it with me. I don't really know if they do it or not. (Lia, age 27, female, heterosexual)

Similarly, Christy (age 51, female, heterosexual) said that she did not talk about her practices because, 'It goes back to that sense of, oh well, it's [sexting] not a bit dirty, but you know, that it's a foolish thing to do'. Participants were well aware that 'you should not do this' was the strategy most commonly advocated to manage risk:

I think it's definitely different because more often than not I think you hear about images of women. And they're told, well, you shouldn't do that. (Michelle, 35, female, heterosexual)

Although participants assumed sexting was common and provided this study with nuanced accounts of their own practices and experiences, the only other stories on sexting they had to hand, based on experiences of other people they



knew or had heard about, were ones of unwanted exposure and public shaming. Consequently, participants were concerned about being judged as irresponsible or exercising poor judgement in sharing sexual images, in addition to their concerns about unwanted exposure. Discourses of risk and shame served mainly to create silence on digital sexual image making.

## Discussion

Risk and safety messages about digital sexual imagery often mirror public health messages that emphasise harm whilst promoting individual responsibility for avoiding risky situations (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Albury et al., 2017; Angelides, 2013). Our aim for this paper was to explore how participants felt about discourses of risk and safety in relation to digital sexual practices, and the ways knowledge of risk discourses shaped their actions, experiences, and feelings about their practices. We wanted to capture the breadth of people's digital sexual experiences or the ways in which individual strategies to deal with sexual risk and safety are developed in the context of seeking pleasure, human connection, or other experiences (Albury, 2018). Our participants provided complex accounts of handling risk and safety in which risk interacted with, and was productive of, pleasure, trust, reciprocity, and connectedness. For many participants, trust and intimacy were related to their sense of risk, not something that occurred despite risks. In these online settings, the development of a sense of intimacy was often accelerated and amplified because, given potential risks, it was so significant to the exchange.

The complexity in the ways people experience pleasure and manage risk has been widely recognised in sexuality and sexual health research (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2011; Vance, 1984), as well as in more recent studies of people's management of online safety (Pym et al., 2021). Pleasure and risk are not mutually exclusive. In sexual or romantic encounters, people often use many strategies to balance, hold, or sometimes foreground, emotional and physical risk as part of enhancing eroticism, pleasure, and connection (Bollen & McInnes, 2004). The challenge for researchers, educators, or policy makers is to acknowledge and explore this complexity and not reduce people to irresponsible subjects, or disregard or denigrate pleasures, that draw on risk or danger (Vance, 1984).

Contemporary research on sexual health education and promotion has emphasised the ineffectiveness of fear-based messaging and its potential for stigmatising affected communities or individuals (Fairchild et al., 2018). People will be better equipped to enjoy safe sexual relationships if they develop a sense of agency and the confidence to talk with potential online partners about sex and safety,

so they can clarify what they do and do not want to do (Cense, 2019; Fine, 1988). However, individual, fear-based messaging is often the approach taken to address complex, gender-based, structural violence. For example, as Hall (2004) observed, gender-based sexual assault is often regarded as an intractable problem to solve due to structural inequality. Approaches to rape prevention that focus on risk reduction for individual women (e.g. advising women to avoid walking alone at night) are more achievable for sexual assault prevention, in the short term, than creating structural change. However, such strategies often come at the expense of women, instilling victim blaming and shaming of women who do not adhere to prevention messages. The Internet is often perceived in similarly complex terms with digital image-based sexual risk and abuse embedded in broader cultures of gender-based and sexual violence (Henry & Powell, 2016), whilst the digital environment—global, amorphous, and often underground—is complex and difficult to regulate using conventional processes, such as legislation or standard law enforcement (Henry & Powell, 2016; Henry & Witt, 2021; Jurasz & Barker, 2021). Consequently, people using digital technologies to explore their sexual interests are forced to choose between not using these technologies or exploring them and trusting the people they encounter there, despite knowing this is far from risk-free.

Drawing from Nygren and colleagues' (2019) concept of 'doing risk', these findings show the ways in which notions of what it means to be safe or morally responsible online are integrated with participant's affective experiences—of eroticism or intimacy—and actions regarding trust and reciprocity. Participants were aware of the moral dimensions of online risk—evident in their judgement of other people for being naïve or stupid and their own fear of being shamed for sending sexual images. However, participants also held a critical stance toward portrayals of online risk and danger, particularly in relation to gender and media shaming of people who engage sexually online (Giritli Nygren et al., 2017). Narratives of trust and reciprocity were a strategy for managing these complexities whilst creating space for sexual pleasure. Being selective with who they trusted, or engaging in acts of reciprocity and seeking or expressing cues of trustworthiness when sharing images, was a strategy for participants to mitigate potential for unwanted exposure. This was by no means a foolproof strategy to prevent harm, and participants were not naïve to this, but it enabled them to hold knowledge of potential harm and still view themselves (in their own eyes and those of others) as responsible adults and ethical online sexual citizens. Participants could therefore embrace awareness of risk and concerns about irresponsibility alongside a critical awareness of media messaging, their enjoyment of risk and danger, and a sense of agency in their sexual practices. Within this nuanced and complex engagement with risk, participants both upheld and



challenged normative ideas about the relationship between sex, pleasure, safety, and responsibility.

Recognising this complexity may provide a way forward for opening conversations about the nature of online safety. In this study, participants were reluctant to talk to offline friends about their practices as they feared being judged or regarded as irresponsible. These findings would suggest that a focus on risk alone can contribute more to shame, silence, and avoidance of discussions on safety, than inviting conversations, online and offline, about risk and pleasure.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that participants in our study were not young people. Most of our participants were aged in their 30 s, 40 s, and 50 s and were all actively engaged in creating and sharing digital sexual imagery. We should always remember that the digital world is not the exclusive domain of young people.

## Conclusion

In this project, we explore risk relating to production and exchange of sexualised digital images not as an easily definable set of negative outcomes to be avoided, but as set of discourses and practices that shape the ways people make sense of, and engage with, digital sexual intimacy. In doing this, we were able to explore the multiple effects of risk discourses on people's experiences but also note a disengagement from those discourses in participants' online sexual lives. This is not to disregard the reality that the online environment can lead to significant harms for people in some circumstances and there is a need to educate people about ways to mitigate such harms. However, this education needs to occur with reference to the breadth of experiences people may be having online and also in ways that do not contribute to shame or silences about practices considered risky.

Recent decades have seen, to some extent, a shift from moralising or sex-negative sexual health promotion and education. This occurred largely in response to the HIV pandemic, in which successful HIV programmes involved social networks and sexual cultures of, first, gay and bisexual men and, soon thereafter, sex workers and other sex and gender minorities, and focused on creative and sex-positive approaches to health promotion and disease prevention (Brown et al., 2014; Dowsett, 2009, 2014; Dowsett et al., 2001). There has also been growing recognition of the significance of pleasure, desire, and human connectedness in comprehensive sexuality education, including consent-focused sexuality education (Allen, 2004; Gilbert, 2018). However, this approach has not often, yet, extended to digital sexual practices or education about online safety (Albury et al., 2017). Such technologies, especially those that involve sexually explicit imagery, are often uncritically framed in sexual health promotion and education as

only potentially dangerous and to be avoided (Byron, 2015; Hollingshead et al., 2020; Marwick, 2008; Tiidenberg & Van Der Nagel, 2020). Findings from this study confirm that an approach that emphasises risk and shame can adversely affect individuals and create a silence that undermines open conversation on online sex practices. Sex-positive approaches to digital safety are important, as is ensuring that producers and distributors of these and emerging technologies are accountable for safety, rather than responsibility resting only with individual users. As digital technologies evolve, their integration with human sexual intimacy will continue to change and develop in unforeseen ways. Any educational and regulatory responses to this evolution will require ongoing scrutiny and innovation to remain salient to the sexual experiences and desires of digital technologies users.

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## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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