

Adolescents, sexting and consent; a discursive approach

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## **Abstract**

Sexting is the interpersonal exchange of sexually suggestive, self-produced pictures/videos/texts. The present thesis employs a critical discursive psychology approach to explore the discursive constructions of the key stakeholders associated with adolescent sexting; adolescents, parents/carers and teachers.

The first study explores how adolescents construct sexting in relation to relationships, gender and consent/coercion. The study employs focus groups of 18 adolescents, aged 16-18. The findings indicate that sexting is constructed as a contested category. I initially introduce the interpretative repertoire (IR) of sexting as normal. However, adolescents also construct sexting as an ideological dilemma concerning power and popularity and open different positions regarding gender and sexuality. This study introduces the constructions regarding sexting consent/coercion, and the emerging ideological dilemmas in relation to justification of coercion.

The second study explores parental constructions of sexting regarding gender and consent, as well as parental monitoring. It employs 15 dyadic interviews with parents/carers of adolescents. I introduce the IR of adolescents as immature which entails constructions of sexuality and agency. This study showcases the antithetical positions that open in relation to gender. Moreover, it introduces the repertoire of sexting as victimisation and the dilemmic positions adolescents are interpellated to occupy regarding victimhood and gender. The discursive constructions of sexting consent constitute an ideological dilemma. Monitoring

produces conflicting repertoires, such as liberal and strict parenting. Finally, parents/carers constructed adolescents' engagement with sexting as an indicator of good/bad parenting.

The third study explores teachers' constructions of sexting and consent in relation to gender, and how teachers frame sexting education and monitoring practices. For this study, I conducted 30 individual interviews with educators of adolescents. Sexting is constructed both as a threat and an ideological dilemma. Varying positions opened regarding gender. Teachers framed adolescents as naïve and parents and schools as co-responsible for adolescent sexting. Here, I present the conflicting repertoires that emerged regarding consent, and the repertoire of sexting as a sign of times. Finally, I discuss the construction of sexting education as insufficient.

The present thesis contributes to knowledge by offering critical insight on the differences in the discursive constructions among the three key stakeholder groups. It offers a holistic understanding of sexting by situating it in a socio-political and historical context. The thesis discusses potential theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1.Introduction

Adolescent sexting is a phenomenon receiving significant attention during the past decade (Madigan et al., 2018), primarily due to public concerns regarding its potential consequences (Bragard & Fisher, 2022). Scholars indicate that consensual sexting can constitute a type of sexual experimentation. However, alongside such aspects of sexting regarding identity and relationship development, there is evidence of a negative element to the phenomenon, regarding consent and lack thereof (Lemke & Rogers, 2020). According to Englander (2015) out of 421 participants, 70% had experienced some form of coercion. Unsurprisingly, when sexting is coercive, the victims are left to deal with negative emotional consequences (Englander, 2015).

Several studies highlight that middle and high-school-aged girls are more coerced to sexting engagement within relationships than boys (Kernsmith et al., 2018). Moreover, girls often face sexting harassment by boys (Ringrose et al., 2012; Ringrose, et al., 2021). However, ideas regarding hegemonic masculinity leave boys who have been coerced to sext unable to deal with such incidents, and cause feelings of isolation (Hunehäll Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021). Moreover, girls who engage in sexting due to their partner coercing them are more likely to experience negative sexting consequences (Bragard & Fisher, 2022). Besides the interpersonal outcomes of sexting, there are also state-imposed, legal consequences. In the United Kingdom (UK), Section 1 of the Protection of Children Act (1978), indicates that it is an offence to produce, own or distribute suggestive visual material of individuals under 18 years old, even if it was created by them or with their consent.

Scholars suggest that parents and teachers need to address adolescent sexting. However, these groups are severely under-researched. Moreover, the family and school environment do not address gender and sexting-related issues (Ringrose et al., 2012). The

increasing technological use, contradictory findings, and context-sensitivity of sexting highlight the need for further research, mainly due to the growing demand for informed sexting education (Mori et al., 2019). Scholars highlight the increasing need for qualitative research to provide contextual insight into adolescent sexting, consent, and coercion (Barrense Dias et al., 2017). Thus, in this thesis, I explore how adolescents, parents/carers of adolescents and teachers discursively construct sexting. To achieve this, I employ a critical discursive psychology perspective (CDP) and examine gender and consent.

## **1.2. Deciding on a data corpus and methodological approach**

Through an extensive literature review on the subject, it became clear that there are three key stakeholders related to adolescent sexting. The first such group are adolescents themselves. However, parents and teachers are often invoked in the literature, with alarming messages urging affirmative action. The present thesis tackled the three key groups through separate studies.

The first study of this thesis explored adolescents' constructions of sexting and consent/coercion. As discussed in Chapter 2, the current studies are mainly positivist and scholars discussed the limited understanding of adolescents' sense-making and discursive constructions in current research. Current theory and methods employed in the gender and sexting consent studies seemed lacking; for example, failing to establish how societal constructions of gender affected the discursive production of sexting, and how gender performativity affected sexting expectations or conceptualisations. I wanted to explore not only the individual, micro discursive terrain, but also its macro elements and how adolescents reproduce notions of power. CDP, unlike other discourse-oriented approaches, explores the discursive terrain by employing focus groups and interviews as well as naturally occurring data (a point I will elaborate on in Chapter 3).

While exploring the literature, I realised that many studies interpellated parents of adolescents in the sexting terrain, often with advice on how to handle sexting incidents. However, I found limited studies about parents/carers, and most of them focused on the effects of monitoring. I decided to conduct a study which would focus on the meaning-making of parents/carers themselves, especially in relation to contemporary concepts regarding adolescent sexting, such as consent and gender. I wanted to acquire a contextual understanding of parenting and sexting that would connect the macro and micro elements. Moreover, I was interested in how power relates to consent and gender and is reproduced in the discursive terrain, therefore providing an ideological understanding of parenting and sexting. Since parents were already interpellated as the ones responsible for discussing sexting with adolescents, acquiring in-depth insight of the discursive terrain could lead to improved understanding of a vital key stakeholder group.

Finally, I was interested in conducting a study with teachers of adolescents. Educators, like parents, were also interpellated in the sexting-related moral panics rhetoric. However, there were very few studies on teachers/educators, and they mainly explored sexting as part of educators' media literacy. Thus, my doctoral thesis contributes a more complex insight in a particularly understudied area. I wanted to explore the meaning-making of teachers in relation to sexting, as it would provide us with novel insight, especially in relation to consent, coercion, and gender. Moreover, I wanted to explore how teachers negotiated not only the meaning of sexting but also sexting education, both for themselves and adolescents. I believed that insight to this key group could have practical and theoretical implications (a topic I discuss further in Chapters 7 and 8).

By employing these three different key stakeholders, I wanted to provide a holistic understanding of the discursive constructions around adolescent sexting. I aimed for an exploration of the context-sensitivity of sexting, which provides an understanding of how

different key stakeholders construct the discursive terrain around gender and sexting. I wanted to conduct research that would unpack the tensions between the existing discourses by providing insight to the discursive terrain of intergenerational meaning-making and the different conceptualisations of technology, consent, and gender.

During my initial engagement with sexting literature, I noticed that the existing body of research highlighted the gender dynamics underpinning sexting. However, studies on adolescent sexting had several limitations, the topic was novel and some areas were unexplored. Additionally, the approaches to gender issues were epidermic (further discussed in Chapter 2). Moreover, the literature was characterised by significant gaps concerning consent, coercion, and their gendered and power-related underpinnings. Finally, I determined that the literature regarding adolescents' sexting and the socio-cultural context of coercion was insufficient. I wanted to contribute and hopefully ameliorate the rhetoric in this area.

Around that time, I also became aware of Judith Butler and Foucault's work regarding discourse, gender performativity and power. Therefore, I wanted to explore how these notions influence sexting, gender, and consent/coercion. My feminist and political background also enriched my take in psychology; I thought that the gendered nature of sexting reflected the feminist motto "the personal is political". I additionally wanted to place emphasis in the meaning-making of adolescents themselves, instead of reproducing media discourses.

After familiarising myself with the sexting literature, I realised that what is needed is an approach combining the macro and micro constructions of sexting. I decided to employ Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP) (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). A topic with such gendered underpinnings would be better explored by a methodology combining the personal and the socio-cultural.

Moreover, during my PhD's early stages, I was interested in obtaining naturally occurring data. However, the sensitive nature of sexting and its surrounding legislative and safeguarding issues ensure obtaining such data is a complex process. As mentioned earlier, I wanted to explore my participants' meaning-making and constructions. I additionally discovered that sexting education research was limited. I initially planned to conduct research examining adolescent and teacher interactions during sexting education classes to examine how sexting is co-constructed, as much of the existing literature criticised sexting education. However, the pandemic made conducting such a study impossible, as it would require face-to-face data collection. I decided to explore teachers' constructions instead of sexting education lectures, as the lockdowns would render in-person lecture attendance an impossibility.

I decided to employ focus groups with adolescents and dyadic interviews with parents/carers as they would provide me with data that would allow these groups to construct their own meaning and focal viewpoints. Moreover, their interactive elements would provide rich, contextual datasets (further information regarding samples etc. in the methodology section). However, due to Covid-19, I had to conduct all doctoral studies online.

Therefore, the data corpus ended up including:

- 5 focus groups with adolescents aged 16-18
- 15 dyadic interviews with parents/carers of adolescents aged 12-18
- 30 individual interviews with teachers/educators/school staff of adolescents aged 12-18

### **1.3. Research questions**

After reviewing the literature, I decided on a main question for each study, with sample-specific sub-questions. These questions remained the same even after my data collection and analysis. The research questions for studies were as follows:

## Study 1

Research question: How do adolescents construct sexting?

Sub-questions:

- What is the role of sexting in adolescents' construction of relationships and intimacy?
- How does gender impact on sexting behaviour?
- How do adolescents justify, negotiate and resist coercive sexting?

## Study 2

Research Question: How do parents/carers of adolescents make sense, construct and negotiate the sexting behaviours of their adolescent children?

Sub-questions:

- How do parents frame and construct sexting?
- How parents construct their engagement with adolescent sexting and safety regarding protection from sexting?
- How are incidents of sexting contextualised in relation to gender?

## Study 3

Research Question: How do educators of adolescents make sense, construct, manage and negotiate the sexting behaviours of their students?

Sub-questions:

- How do educators/teachers frame and construct sexting and consent?
- How do educators/teachers construct their role in relation to adolescent sexting?
- How do educators/teachers construct the education and monitoring practices related to sexting and the protection of their students?
- How are incidents of sexting and consent contextualised in relation to gender?



#### **1.4. Theoretical position**

In this thesis, I employ critical discursive psychology (CDP). Further details about CDP can be found in Chapter 3. Scholarly work on sexting is underdeveloped with regard to the culturally available gender-related constructions and the element of consent. Moreover, research has not pinpointed how sexting discourse is located within the broader socio-cultural context and which ways of talking about sexting were culturally dominant compared to others. Few studies on the topic explore the discursive constructions about sexting and even fewer manage to combine the macro constructions of sexting with the micro, everyday discussions around it. Part of the contribution of this thesis to the field of sexting, consent and psychology is the employment of a complex, nuanced, constructionist approach in a novel topic.

#### **1.5. Overview of the thesis**

In the present introduction, I have explained my thesis' ideological, conceptual, and methodological decisions and origins. This section will provide the reader with a brief overview of the thesis in relation to its chapters.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review. It critically addresses gaps and academic understandings of sexting concerning gender and consent. Here, I discuss definitional debates and the need to define sexting through the prism of consent. I present the prevalence findings and argue that qualitative approaches appear to further pronounce them. This chapter emphasises the context-sensitivity of sexting and approaches sexting consent and coercion critically; existing studies are unclear on how sexting norms are negotiated and do not provide insight into the contextual gendered power relations of coercive/consensual sexting. Moreover, it highlights the need to explore how consensual/coercive sexting is discursively constructed and reproduced and emphasises the need to address the micro/macro elements of sexting. I additionally present the limited literature on adolescent sexting in relation to

parents/carers and teachers. Finally, I elaborate on the conceptual and methodological gaps of the literature. Chapter 2 addresses the lack of polyphony in the samples explored and situates my research amongst existing studies.

Chapter 3 provides a methodological, ontological, and epistemological background to the thesis, as it explains CDP, its theoretical basis and analytical tools. I briefly explain elements of my approach such as Foucauldian notions of power and post-structuralism. I further justify my data collection decisions and selection of participant samples and explain how I designed and developed the vignettes used in Study 1. Chapter 3 entails a discussion of the challenges I encountered while undertaking research during a global pandemic and how they influenced my research design.

Chapter 4 answers the research question “How do adolescents construct sexting?”. I present how adolescents construct and negotiate sexting consent, coercion, and the impact of gender in their rhetorical production. To achieve this, I draw data from focus groups/mini-focus groups with adolescents. The repertoires that emerge regarding adolescent sexting are ideologically conflicting and frame sexting as both normative and negative. Furthermore, this chapter tackles sexting power in the adolescent peer group and explicates the gendered positions that emerged. I discuss how adolescents construct consent, coercion, and how these constructions are dilemmatic and harbour victim-blaming notions. The chapter ends with an evaluation of the findings regarding broader socio-political contexts. It addresses new positions that need to be opened for adolescents regarding sexting and ways to move ahead about consent training/activism.

Chapter 5 answers the question “How do parents/carers of adolescents make sense, construct and negotiate the sexting behaviours of adolescents?”. I explore parental conceptions of sexting and contextualise sexting within gender through 15 dyadic interviews with carers/parents of adolescents. Parents/carers introduce interpretative repertoires

concerning agency, power, and maturity. Therefore, this chapter elaborates on the conflicting positions that these repertoires open regarding gender and discusses them within a socio-historical context. I introduce the “sexting creates victims” repertoire and the positions it opens about notions of victimhood; I present the existing ideological dilemmas and positions as related to gender. The chapter entails a discussion of how old versus new understandings of gender, sexuality and desire materialise online. I then evaluate the findings in relation to gender performativity, feminist theory, and the limitations of existing positions. Finally, I propose ways to navigate the emerging complex discursive constructions.

Chapter 6 examines the same dataset as chapter 5. However, it addresses parental discursive constructions of consent and how parents/carers construct safety, monitoring, and engagement with sexting. Consent is constructed as an oxymoron, as according to parents/carers, fully informed consent cannot exist due to the possibility of non-consensual distribution. Here, I present the polarised repertoire that emerged regarding parental sexting monitoring. Parents/carers navigate two positions; the “liberal” and the “strict” parent. A third position, this of the compassionate parent, opens to navigate this dilemma. I then discuss the interpretative repertoire (IR) “performing parenting” whereas adolescents’ involvement in sexting is constructed as an indication of one’s parenting. This is followed by an evaluation of the findings, and suggestions regarding potential solutions to such dilemmas.

In chapter 7, I answer the research question “How do educators of adolescents make sense, construct, manage and negotiate the sexting behaviours of their students?”. I further explicate how teachers/educators construct and frame consent, sexting education, and incidents of sexting related to gender. The dataset explores 30 interviews with teachers and educators of adolescents aged 12-18. The first IR that I discuss presents sexting as a societal threat and the second IR presents sexting as good, bad, and normal. I showcase the gendered

positions that open, the dilemmatic positions that girls are interpellated to occupy and their construction as the “other” to their male peers’ desire. The results further indicate that teachers define sexting education as insufficient and sexting as a sign of the times. I then juxtapose the three conflicting interpretative repertoires regarding sexting consent/coercion. Teachers position themselves and parents as having a duty to discuss sexting with adolescents and employed the IR of adolescents being constructed as naïve. I evaluate the findings by theorising the constructions regarding gender, power and consent and the possibilities of novel positions. Future implications concerning sexting education for both teachers and adolescents are discussed.

Finally, Chapter 8 constitutes the thesis conclusion. I summarise the findings and the significance of my studies. This chapter compares the conceptual discursive differences regarding sexting, consent, and gendered positions. I speculate why differences exist by examining inter-generational understandings of sexting, discourses around technology and heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 2010). Here, the discursive patterns are situated in a socio-historical background and then discussed in relation to feminist and consent activism/history. I then compare differences to past literature and discuss the implications of my research for practice and policy. Finally, I discuss my thesis limitations, highlight my contribution to knowledge and potential future research endeavours.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1. Introduction: sexting

The present thesis explores adolescent sexting. Sexting is the “interpersonal exchange” (Doring, 2014, p. 1) of sexually suggestive, self-produced texts, photos or videos through technological means such mobile phones, computers and via applications (e.g. Snapchat) or social media (Chalfen, 2009; Doring, 2014). Sexting is a relatively novel concept as the first time the term was included in Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary was during 2012 (Merriam-Webster, 2012).

Sexting is primarily linked to adolescents due to media stories conveying moral panics regarding suicide cases resulting from sexting disclosures (Draper, 2012). In a meta-analysis by Madigan et al. (2018), it was estimated that the mean prevalence of adolescent sexting was 27.4% for being on the receiving end of sexting and 14.8 for sending sexts, with prevalence rapidly escalating in the past few years and as adolescents age (prevalence will be further tackled in section 2.4.).

Sexting can constitute a medium through which adolescents achieve identity and relationship development. However, there is evidence of a negative element to the sexting phenomenon, especially regarding consent and lack thereof (Lemke & Rogers, 2020). Sexting, when coercive, has significant negative emotional consequences (Englander, 2015).

In this chapter, I review the literature. I discuss sexting definitions, what counts and does not count as sexting. This chapter tackles the outcomes and prevalence of sexting. The existing research on sexting and coercion is discussed in relation to gender and I offer a critical approach to the current studies. Moreover, I discuss the findings of parental and teachers' perceptions of sexting, as well as sexting education. Finally, non-heteronormative sexting is briefly tackled, and I then situate the present study.

## **2.2. Defining sexting**

### ***2.2.1. What counts as sexting: boundaries, formats, modes and means***

Sexting can occur across several different formats, but the existing definitions vary. Some scholars define sexting as the exchange of pictures (Mitchell et al., 2012; Temple & Choi, 2014). Others define sexting as the combination of texts and pictures/images (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Rice et al., 2014). Few researchers include videos as a potential medium for sexting, and usually in combination with other means (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017).

When it comes to transmission, every study used sexting definitions such as “an online, electronic, or virtual activity through the Internet and mobile phones” (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017, p. 551). However, some studies distinguish between posting the sexts online, such as on social media sites (further discussed in sections 2.4.1. and 2.5.) or direct messaging someone. Wolak and Finkelhor (2011) distinguish between “experimental sexting” (sexting to flirt) and “aggravated sexting” (which might involve minors being abusive to each other/coercively forwarding sexts).

According to a systematic review examining the existing studies’ sexting definitions (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017), the key parameter they vary on is the media used to send sexts. Regarding the words used to describe sexting, most scholars use definitions including terms as “sext, sexting, sexy, sexually explicit/suggestive, or sexual content” (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017, p. 551). Multiple studies include terms such as “nude or naked and partially nude/naked” (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017, p. 553), whilst only a few studies describe the sexual characteristics of a message (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). Recent qualitative studies indicated that adolescents vaguely recognize the term sexting yet use the term “nudes” (Barrense-Dias, Suris, & Akre, 2019). This “heteroglossia” could be alarming, as it reflects

that the existing academic vocabulary does not meet the adolescent one. Using a different term could influence reported prevalence rates and make them less accurate.

Additionally, it may suggest that academic research is alienated from adolescent discourse and does not always resonate with adolescent reality (Setty, 2021). Indeed, young people indicate that sexting is a definition usually reported by the media and adults (Lucero et al., 2014). Consequently, several academics have called for qualitative research that will provide insight into how adolescents define/construct sexting in relation to the contextual factors under which it takes place (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017).

A considerable body of literature explains sexting in relation to the level of involvement and the role one adopts when engaging in it. Scholars dichotomise sexting as active (sending photos or forwarding photos) or passive (receiving photos either through an individual or through an intermediary) (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017), while some studies examine both yet distinguish them (Kopecky, 2012; Temple & Choi, 2012). Additionally, there is an ongoing debate on whether non-consensual dissemination of sexting to other parties besides the intended receiver is considered sexting. Several studies clarify that sexually suggestive images must be self-produced/self-depicting, while a few studies have relied on forwarding as part of the definition (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). However, the possibility of explicit material shared with third parties was identified by a few scholars as a risk separate from the act of sexting itself (a point I will further develop in section 2.5.2.).

Despite a decade of sexting research, sexting definitions continue to be debated among academics. Sexting is an everchanging topic due to its technological nature (a point further elaborated in 2.4.1.), and it may differ depending on cultural and personal definitions. However, academics must start researching sexting by emphasising adolescents' meaning making, constructs and contextual factors that underpin them. Finally, as discussed in section

2.5., it is crucial to explore sexting based on the element of consent. Scholars highlight the need to separate the consensual creation of the photo from the creation without the consent or knowledge of the subjects and its distribution (Powell & Henry, 2014).

### ***2.2.2 What is not sexting: sextortion, cyber flashing, revenge porn and image-based abuse***

Due to the definitional issues of sexting and the constant emergence of new academic knowledge on it, defining sexting includes clarifying the terms that are not, or should not be, classified as sexting. The scholarship that emerged during 2019-2021 differentiates sexting from non-consensual distribution due to its differences in prevalence and effects it can have on victims (Van Ouytsel et al., 2021). Thus, the term image-based abuse is nowadays widely used by scholars (Harder, 2021).

The term image-based abuse represents a spectrum, including several practices related to non-consensual dissemination and production of private sexually suggestive photographs/videos etc. Examples could be revenge porn, sextortion and “upskirting” (McGlynn et al., 2017). The term image-based abuse emerged to highlight how multiple forms of abusive online practices sometimes overlap as existing legal and discursive categories do not critically explore the variety, forms and severity of the existing types of abuse. A spectrum centred around a “common characteristic” allows the similarities of various types of violence to be examined, with significant discursive and socio-legal potential outcomes (McGlynn et al., 2017, p. 28).

McGlynn et al. (2017) suggest that through this label, the field can move further from such state constructed forms of abuse and explore the differences and similarities between the different types of online aggression. Forwarding sexts without consent is often defined as image-based abuse due to the negative consequences for the victim (Van Ouytsel et al., 2021).



The continuum of image-based sexual abuse holds multiple benefits as it represents the variety of types of non-consensual production and dissemination of private sexual images (McGlynn et al., 2017). Sexting should be differentiated from revenge porn and image-based abuse, as they can be a potential consequence of sexting, not its equivalent (Mckinlay & Lavis, 2020). Sexting does not necessarily imply abuse when it is consensual (Van Ouytsel et al., 2021). Whilst sexting has an interpersonal element in the exchange of sexually suggestive materials, revenge porn involves a former partner distributing or posting consensually created private sexual materials of their former partner(s) without said partners' consent (McGlynn et al., 2017).

Sexual extortion, known as sextortion, should also be differentiated from sexting. Sextortion is defined as “threats to expose sexual images to coerce victims to provide additional pictures, sex, or other favours” (Wolak et al., 2018, p. 72). Therefore, the image might have been a by-product of coercive or consensual sexting, but sexting does not have the blackmailing element post the exchange or the threat to disseminate the photo (Wolak et al., 2018).

Finally, an emerging discussion aims to define cyber flashing, alternatively known as unwanted “dick pics” in cyberspace lingo. It is defined as “sharing sexually explicit images via digital technologies to unsuspecting or non-consenting recipients” (Freeman, 2020, p. 2). Cyber flashing might share the coercive elements aspect with coercive sexting. However, as mentioned, the receiver is unsuspecting, and often the sender can be anonymous. Rather than having an element of interaction, it is an activity akin to indecent public exposure in cyberspace (Freeman, 2020). As evident from the definitions above, coercive/non-consensual sexting does belong to the continuum of imaged based abuse and shares many commonalities with it. However, the section above raises further questions regarding consensual and coercive sexting (discussed in sections 2.4.1 and 2.5.1.).

The lack of clear definitions of sexting could be attributed to sexting's novelty. However, the definitional inconsistency reflects more significant issues in the literature. Different definitions produce different findings (Ricketts et al., 2015). It additionally reflects the need for further qualitative studies that explore how adolescents themselves construct sexting, especially concerning consent and context (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). Moreover, further research is required to explore whether the differences in the meaning-making of adolescents regarding sexting differentiate them from key stakeholders such as parents/teachers.

### **2.3. Outcomes of sexting**

Whilst the outcomes of sexting are not the main scope of the present thesis, they indicate its contextual nature. As Lemke & Rogers (2020) suggest, consensual sexting is an activity of exploring one's sexuality, a digital activity akin to kissing. Del Rey et al. (2019) found that sexting did not cause short-term negative emotions; instead, sexting engagement was related to active emotions such as satisfaction. However, the literature on sexting outcomes has methodological and definitional inconsistencies, such as different definitions of sexting, different age samples, lack of contextual information or lack of differentiation between sending and receiving sexts, that can produce different answers and results (Doyle et al., 2021). Multiple studies seek to establish correlational, negative factors associated with sexting. While these can be useful findings, they do not examine any positive constructs that cause sexting engagement.

Experiencing dating/relationship violence was more likely for adolescents who sexted, regardless of gender (Doyle et al., 2021). Moreover, there have also been links established between sexting and the likelihood of being cyberbullied (Doyle et al., 2021). However, as Doyle et al. (2021) mentioned in their systematic literature review, the link is not causal. Therefore, further research is needed. It is here that qualitative research

illuminates such incidents. According to Setty (2019; 2020), bullying often happens after sexting photos are shared. This finding highlights a significant problem of the current literature; studying what happens when a photo is shared does not provide insight into sexting, but one of its potential consequences (Crofts et al., 2015). Thus, the study highlights one of the potential negative consequences of sexting.

When it comes to mental health, a systematic review conducted by Doyle et al. (2021) showed a link between anxiety and depression and sexting. However, as the research body begins to differentiate consensual sexting from coercive sexting, the outcomes seem to vary. According to Wachs et al. (2021) pressured and coercive sexting are positively related to self-harm and depressive symptomatology. Yet consensual sexting was not related to such results. Similarly, Lu et al. (2021) indicate that consensual sexting is not related to issues in relation to mental health. However, sexting due to pressure was related to hostile behaviour. Depression was associated with being on the receiving end of unsolicited sexting messages. Lu et al. (2021) suggest that sexting did not cause negative emotional impact; however, sexting involvement was associated with positive emotions. This brief overview of the studies exploring the outcomes of sexting highlights the importance of studying the overall topic and all its aspects- whether consensual or coercive. Qualitative research indicates that the consequences are highly gendered. While for boys sexting is a status and confidence indicator, girls are perceived as “sluts” (Ringrose et al., 2012; Ringrose et al., 2013; Setty 2019).

The incidents often explored in the sexting literature, such as cyber flashing/unsolicited photos, cause females to be upset and lead to self-stigmatisation. However, males suggested that it was a process of “trying their luck” for them. There is a conflicting element in how girls experience sexting; whilst they think it is good for their self-esteem, they often feel negatively as young males stop communicating with them once they

have sexted (Setty, 2019). While girls get criticised by their peers for engaging in sexting, boys use sexting as a bragging ritual that reinforces homosocial and hegemonic status (Ringrose et al., 2012). The consequences for girls are often reproduced on the pre-existing gender inequalities, and their sexts are often a medium for sexist comments; a point further elaborated in sections 2.4.3. and 2.5.1. (Hunehäll Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; Ringrose et al., 2013; Salter, 2016).

### ***2.3.1 Legal outcomes***

Sexting has state-imposed legal consequences. In the UK, according to Section 1 of the Protection of Children Act (1978) it is an offense to show, possess or disseminate visual material of individuals under 18 years of age, even consensually created. The police often treat such incidents as safeguarding issues, however, it could lead to adolescents facing prosecution (Reeve, 2017; Salter et al., 2013). The legislative and academic discourses have reduced sexting to an empowerment/victimisation domain that does not account for its gender-sensitive elements. For example, they do not account for the often coercive, gendered pressures underpinning sexting. They frame sexting as an overall societal problem instead of exploring its underlying power structures (Rollins, 2015; Salter et al., 2013). Little is known regarding the impact of such measures. According to Walker et al. (2013), adolescents consider the illegality and danger involved in sexting to be exciting. However, in Strohmaier et al. (2014) the potential legal consequences prevent adolescents from sexting and function as a protective factor.

## **2.4 General prevalence**

There is ongoing scholarly debate regarding the prevalence of adolescent sexting rates (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Klettke et al., 2014). To date, there has been little agreement on how many adolescents engage in sexting. Field (2019) conducted a narrative review examining 52 studies conducted in the past 5 years. The results suggest that engagement in

adolescent sexting in the United States ranges from 5% to 29%. The rates were different in studies in other cultural contexts. For example, in an Australian study, sexting percentages reached approximately half of the participants (Patrick et al., 2015). By examining an indicative systematic review sexting prevalence was estimated from approximately 7% to 27% (Cooper et al., 2016). Another review undertaken by Barrense-Dias et al. (2017), examining studies conducted during 2012-2015, suggests that the prevalence rates of sexting for young people aged 10-18 ranged between 0.9% and 60% in both active (sending/showing) and passive (receiving/being asked to engage in) sexting.

Even when researchers dichotomise sexting as active versus passive or sending/receiving sexts, the figures fluctuate (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017). Madigan et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analytic review of 39 studies, consisting of a sample of approximately 110,000 participants. They suggested that 14.8% of adolescents have sent their own sext whilst 27% had received one. According to a systematic review by Klettke et al. (2014), 15.64% of adolescents have been on the receiving end of sexually suggestive photos, whilst active sexting was estimated at 10.2%. According to a longitudinal study by Temple et al. (2012) 28% of adolescents indicated they had sent self-depicting sexual images via phone messages or email while 31% reported they had requested a sext. 57% of adolescents had receive requests to engage in sexting. In a recent systematic review and meta-analysis by Handschuh et al. (2019), the prevalence of sending a sext ranged from 5% to approximately 40% and the prevalence of receiving a sext ranged from 20% to 54%.

#### ***2.4.1 Approaching prevalence critically: a commentary***

The inconsistencies in the prevalence statistics have been attributed to the sampling differences in the studies. For example, size of samples, socio-economic status, sampling methods, instruments/scales used, reference periods and more (Cooper et al., 2016). However, a repeated suggestion by scholars is that prevalence varies due to the existing

studies, which fail to provide us with a consistent definition and conceptualisation of sexting. For example, some studies use mostly images in their definition, while others use texts or videos; the media used tend to affect the prevalence reported (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). Moreover, the percentages differ concerning whether the user sent or received a sexting message, whilst some studies included the distribution of the sexting message in the definition (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). A few studies use different media (e.g., apps, internet, social media) or have different conceptualisations of what we mean by sexually explicit (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). Moreover, the studies are conducted in different cultural contexts, and social norms could differ (Baumgartner et al., 2014). However, it should be highlighted that the definition of sexting, besides the medium or the motivation, is an ever-changing concept. The novelty of the phenomenon is one of the factors that might influence such conceptualisations and thus, statistics. However, I also propose that due to its novelty, one of the reasons that the prevalence statistics have such discrepancies is the conceptualisation of consent (or lack thereof) in sexting (sections 2.2. and 2.5.).

To understand the prevalence statistics, one has to consider the socio- historical context of sexting. The internet is characterised by ephemerality and temporality (Kofoed, 2017). Several applications and media have emerged in this millennium's early 10s and early 20s. Academics are still identifying, defining and differentiating types of online communications and, as a result, image-based abuse (further elaborated in sections 2.2.2. and 2.5.2). Moreover, Internet/technology use is becoming increasingly prevalent, especially amongst young populations (Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2018).

As this thesis is unfolding, we are also facing an idiosyncratic cyber-historical era, during which we are navigating challenging dynamics. Generation X, a term that refers to individuals born from 1965 to 1980, is one of the last few generations that did not grow up on the internet, and they use it for informative/practical purposes (Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-

Sanchez, 2020). However, the generation after them, also known as millennials, uses the internet more often, with their proficiency often constituting them digital natives (Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2020). Thus, the prevalence statistics will change as new generations emerge and grow up online. For example, in their systematic literature review and meta-analysis, Handschuh et al. (2019) suggest the recent research findings regarding prevalence are showing higher sexting engagement compared to the lower prevalence of earlier studies. This reflects a new problem: the research needs to stay up to date constantly. The youth's applications and the definitions/emergence of new forms of online intimacy or aggression are constantly evolving at an accelerating pace. Yet, this creates new research and practice possibilities.

This reflects a highly westernised, ableist and classist understanding of the online world, as many individuals from minority backgrounds or low socioeconomic status do not have access to the internet (Dolcini et al., 2021). Moreover, the statistical differences could reflect this context-sensitivity of sexting (discussed in 2.4.3 and 2.5.1.)

#### ***2.4.2. Age and prevalence***

While the adolescent sexting literature is characterised by equivocal results in various aspects, extensive research shows that age plays a pivotal role in adolescent sexting engagement. Notwithstanding the methodological differences in the existing studies, a consistent finding is that as age progresses, more adolescents engage in sexting (Dake et al., 2012; Madigan et al., 2018). According to a review by Klettke et al. (2014), age is significantly associated with an increase in sexting engagement. Sexting is more common in stages such as late (17-18 years old) and middle (14-16 years old) adolescence (Yépez-Tito et al., 2019). In Spain, active sexting was estimated at approximately 3.4% at 12 years old and then 36.1% at 17. The relationship of sexting and age shows a consistent trend (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017; Handschuh et al., 2019). This trend could further explain the difference

in prevalence statistics; studies that recruit younger adolescent samples will show significantly less participation in sexting.

#### ***2.4.3. Gender, prevalence and the qualitative explanations of the phenomenon***

Research on the topic of gendered prevalence tends to produce equivocal results. Multiple studies suggest that boys are significantly more likely to engage in sexting (Marume et al., 2018; Strassberg et al., 2013; Wachs et al., 2017; Yépez-Tito et al., 2019). However, a number of studies showcase similar prevalence regarding the production and distribution of sexting material on the gender binary (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017; Ricketts et al. 2015). Furthermore, various scholars suggest that females sext more (Martinez-Prather & Vandiver, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014).

According to Baumgartner et al. (2014), the variance in the gendered prevalence of sexting research can be attributed to cultural contexts. In multiple countries, such as Italy and the UK, boys tend to engage in sexting more than girls. However, in some countries, such as Norway and France, girls tend to sext more. In numerous countries, such as the Netherlands, both genders sext at equal rates. Such prevalence rates could be attributed to each country's sexuality/gender roles.

Multiple quantitative studies have attempted to shed light on the conflicting gendered prevalence findings. Girls receive more requests to sext compared to their male peers (Atwood et al., 2017). Young males tend to request sexts while girls tend to be on the receiving end of sexting messages from strangers and to receive requests and pressure to sext (Burén & Lunde, 2018). Liong and Cheng (2017) concluded that current gender roles allow males to be sexual and oppress females. Other studies have attempted to examine the correlation between peer group beliefs and female sexting engagement. For example, among



participants who believed that their most well-liked peers did not sext in the past year, females were more likely have engaged in sexting (Maheux et al., 2020).

These differences concerning gender echo many of the points raised above. Most of the aforementioned studies were cross-sectional; thus they do not necessarily explore the aetiology of the findings, and were characterised by different sample sizes/populations which might differ in relation to cultural or gender norms (Atwood et al. 2017; Burén & Lunde, 2018; Liong & Cheng, 2017).

Such studies provide a good starting point as to whether a gender difference exists yet fail to capture its aetiology. Positivist approaches ensure that gender differences can be detected. However, they do not provide us with a nuanced understanding of how gender unfolds in situ or how do adolescents practice gender through sexting. For example, many of the practices associated with masculinity are situated in everyday life. Therefore, highlighting who is more likely to be asked for sexts does not account for the power structures gender creates and how it is performed and reproduced in the discursive terrain (Wetherell & Edley, 1998). Additionally, such studies assume masculinity and femininity as binary, stable concepts. They do not conceptualise gender as multiple practices that are inherently related, often due to the patriarchal ideological imposition of gender that constitutes females the Other. Moreover, there are also issues regarding the prevalence in sexting tackled above (see sections 2.4. and 2.4.1.).

To resolve such issues and shed light on gender and sexting, further qualitative studies illustrate the gendered double standards of the adolescent peer group, suggesting that the gendered prevalence creates complex power dynamics online. Ringrose et al. (2013) adopted a feminist approach and conducted single-sex focus groups and follow up interviews with 35 adolescents, aged 12-13 and 14-15, out of which 18 were male and 17 female. They explored

adolescents' past and present secondary education experiences and analysed their online posts on Facebook and Blackberry. The results provided valuable insight into the gendered nature of sexting. Girls framed being asked for sexy photos as a compliment. However, they had to negotiate such requests as sending them would label them as “skets”, which is an insult similar to the word “slut” (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). For boys, such images were capital/currency in their peer group: they showed them to their peers to obtain social status, which could be considered image-based abuse. Participants often criticised both girls and boys for sexting. However, young females were characterised as unintelligent for engaging in it. The responsibility for the sexting images was heavily attributed to females, even if it was boys taking photos of (their) female partners. Females were also constructed as having to be emotionally resilient at the prospect of facing threats. However, the study explored various practices that are not necessarily sexting, such as posting sexy photos on social media.

Ringrose & Harvey (2015) observed the Facebook profiles of 35 young people in the 13–15 age bracket. They additionally conducted interviews and focus groups. They asked adolescents to navigate them through their online/phone practices. They conducted a combination of methodologies such as ethnography, while using co-production with adolescents. Their findings highlighted the pressures females face in cyberspace; if they showed off by posting their photos, they were called attention whores or “skets”. However, the rules of what made someone a sket were also complex. For example, being available to see someone’s cleavage constituted them a sket. Female body parts were understood as a medium for public surveillance. Boys often asked girls for pictures, but if girls performed “sexiness” intentionally, they were characterised as lacking self-respect. Yet, girl-on-girl aggression also manifested through the employment of the word sket. For boys, showing/getting images of girls was a homosocial exchange, whereas the male groups' trust and admiration is perceived as more important than the girls' trust.

Whilst girls faced reputational damage for producing sexy photos, boys faced reputational rewards. However, this performance of masculinity could be counteracted by humiliation about their penis size. The findings also highlighted the complicated nature of negotiating refusal, as adolescents and especially girls, employed inventive sexting refusals. For example, girls often replied with humorous pictures when asked for naked photos. It should be highlighted that some males were critical of the non-consensual dissemination of photos and framed it as problematic and sexist.

Another recent study by Ringrose et al., (2021) explored image-related sexting in UK adolescents aged 11–18. They conducted small focus groups with 144 young people (55 males, 88 females and 1 gender-fluid adolescent), with the majority being aged 15 and under. They explored sexting and consent through feminist discourse analysis. Girls often reported blocking boys who asked them for sexts or not reporting them, constructing such incidents as something they had to get used to. The “boys will be boys” rhetoric was normalised in the adolescent groups.

The girls reported being sent “dick pics” in a transactional fashion, where boys were expecting them to send sexting images in return. They also reported that boys exerted pressure and did not care about girls’ pleasure in such exchanges. Boys normalised the idea that they are inherently/naturally more sexual, and this is why they send such pictures. The interviews indicated that boys understand consent but ignore it to obtain photos by adding pressure through the threat of a potential breakup. Showing received nude photos was framed as common and a popularity currency for young males. Boys recruited through an elite private school were more likely to consider future consequences.

Moreover, in cases where the images were sent around the school, whilst boys faced a few consequences when they sent “dick pics”, girls faced severe reputational damage for

sexting. Boys were aware that the sexting economy was emerging due to notions of masculinity and justified it due to being young and thus not being mature enough to be trusted. There was an understanding of the harm non-consensual sharing can cause, but they placed the responsibility of creating the content on girls. Finally, boys protected their peers when they became abusive and weaponised the “boys will be boys” rhetoric to place the burden of the sexting material on girls.

These sexting studies provided some initial insight into the dynamics of the peer group. It is evident by the results that sexting is inherently related to gender and power dynamics. The methodologies were novel for the subject in question, as they further enhanced the understanding of gender in relation to sexting, providing some aetiology to the existing quantitative studies. However, all of these studies appeared to study not only sexting per se, but other types of online intimacy and aggression (further discussed in section 2.2.2.) Moreover, the context-sensitivity of sexting in relation to relationship status or other forms of interpersonal interactions remains unexplored, whilst the findings focus on the heteronormative conceptualisation of relationships. It is also noteworthy that the participants were particularly young, and as mentioned in section 2.4.2., they are less likely to engage in sexting. The samples also consisted of separate focus groups that are not mixed and thus cannot account for the interactive elements in how sexting roles are discursively negotiated.

However, they managed to map the initial ideological basis and discourse of the existing norms in relation to the online peer group. Despite their limitations, the studies above and others of their kind were ground-breaking in providing sexting researchers with the information that sexting and gender created power imbalances, but most importantly, that sexting is not always consensual.

## 2.5. Sexting and coercion

As mentioned earlier, researchers highlighted the importance of examining sexting in relation to consent. Alarming, a body of research suggests that sexting is often a product of pressure or coercion. The AP-MTV survey study (2009) suggested that 61% of adolescents have been coerced into sexting. According to Englander (2015) only 30% of adolescents sext fully consensually, whilst a 12% indicated they always felt coerced and never sexted consensually (Englander, 2015). The remaining 58% felt partially pressured or coerced. The percentage of respondents who had experienced coercion was around 70%.

64% of adolescents sexted to make their partner happy, whilst 18% sexted out of fear or because they had no choice. Participants who were pressured to sext were more likely to engage in sexting due to feeling that they did not have a choice. Both males and females who refused to engage in sexting suggested they did not feel comfortable taking the risk. Pressured sexters feel worse after sending the picture than voluntary sexters (Englander, 2015). Sexting under severe threat or extreme fear appeared to be relatively uncommon- out of the adolescents that did not want to engage in sexting, 23% experienced some serious threat. Out of the partially pressured adolescents, only 9% faced a threat or were afraid (Englander, 2015). It should, however, be highlighted that the study was conducted on a college population, and multiple participants were adults (Englander, 2015). Moreover, researchers accessed incidents of sexting that were self-reported and recalled from their adolescent years, which makes the percentages reported prone to a level of bias.

In a relationship context, the percentages of coercion appear to decrease; in another survey study by Kernsmith et al. (2018) 12% of adolescents in relationships were coerced to engage in sexting, whilst only 8% admitted to perpetrating coercive sexting. However, as the researchers themselves highlight, the survey and self-reported data they collected do not provide in-depth insight into the contextual nature of sexting coercion. Additionally, they did

not tackle the sex of the participants, and thus, the gender and sexuality dynamics were not explored.

### ***2.5.1. Gender and coercion***

Another consistent finding is that coercive sexting is a highly gendered phenomenon. Girls are often more coerced in relationships than boys (Kernsmith et al., 2018). Boys are twice more likely to perpetrate coercive behaviour (Smith-Darden et al., 2017). In Englander's (2015) study, all the participants that felt coerced, were female. Males were twice more likely to sext consensually.

Interestingly, males were also likely to feel pressure while simultaneously wanting to send a sext (Englander, 2015). Van Ouytsel et al. (2021) suggest that young males experience more pressure to send and request sexts compared to young females. The studies regarding gender and coercion are mainly survey studies, thus lack a more contextual understanding (Englander, 2015; Kernsmith et al., 2018). As Kernsmith et al. (2018) suggest, their survey could not capture the role of sex in their research, or whether same-sex relationships offered a different contextual ground in relation to sexting. Indeed, surveys are characterised by such pitfalls. Qualitative methodologies provide more in-depth data in such phenomena and often explore the context that surveys fail to address, revealing nuances about the topic in question (Safdar et al., 2016).

Thus, during the end of the last decade, research started exploring sexting coercion through qualitative approaches. Van Ouytsel et al. (2017) employed 11 focus groups that were single sex and consisted of 57 adolescents, 15-18 years old, in Belgium. They employed thematic analysis to examine the perspectives of adolescents regarding sexting. They discovered that girls were perceived as more likely to receive pressure and were afraid that if they did not engage in sexting, their partner will break up with them. Females were also

constructed as more likely to sext because their boyfriend insisted. A similar study was conducted by Monks et al. (2019), who conducted ten focus groups. The participants were 68 Australian adolescents aged 13 to 14 years old, out of which 39 were female and 29 male. Their approach was thematic analysis, and the findings suggested that girls face even more pressure if they do not engage in sexting.

Some of the findings further highlight the gendered coercive dynamics in relational contexts and the peer group. Lippman and Campbell (2014) conducted a mixed-methods approach with 43 participants who completed open-ended questionnaires in focus groups, offering an analysis of data collected during 2009. Their approach used Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) framework for analysing qualitative data to explore thematic categories. They suggested that girls sext to not lose the romantic interest of their partner or due to wanting to avoid potential social challenges (e.g., shame and social exclusion) (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Similar results were reported by Ringrose et al. (2012): girls are the gender most affected by coercive sexting, as boys often harass them. Yet gender-related problems were not recognised by their peers, family and educational environment. The gendered double standards prevented girls from expressing sexual desire while post-sexting refusal they faced pressure and threats. While female sexts were considered popularity currency for males, they could be ostracised from their peer group if they did not engage in sexting, as they were not deemed masculine enough. Due to these findings, the researchers encourage more research on the role of boys in relation to sexting (Ringrose et al, 2012).

Additionally, females believe that engaging in sexting is inherently required of them to maintain romantic involvement (Setty, 2019). Setty (2019) conducted focus groups and individual interviews with adolescents 14-18 in the UK. They adopted a symbolic interactionism take, mixed with the methodological principles of grounded theory. However,

as they highlight, their study focuses on female heterosexual contexts, and more research is needed on how boys construct and negotiate socio-cultural understandings of sexting.

However, gender norms can affect boys negatively. Hunehall Berndtsson (2021) conducted a thematic analysis study on 8 interviews and 5 focus groups, collected through a Swedish secondary school. They focused on male adolescent sexting and consent. Their findings suggest that notions of hegemonic masculinity leave boys experiencing sexual violations, such as receiving unsolicited sexually explicit photos by females, yet being unable to deal with them, causing feelings of loneliness and isolation. Boys suggested they were unsure how to handle female unsolicited sexual pictures. Whilst boys did realise that such experiences were humiliating for girls, they could not comprehend similar situations they experienced as such. For example, in the dataset, a boy subjected to sexting abuse was not perceived as a victim but a perpetrator and was alienated from his peers (Hunehall Berndtsson, 2021).

Thomas (2018) explored the challenges adolescents experience when deciding whether to send photographs. They explored 462 online stories regarding young females facing dilemmas when sending nude photos and employed thematic analysis to analyse them. Females received contradictory messages, whereas they were told to send pictures and refrain from sending them. They indicated that girls sent photographs in hope of getting into a relationship with their receivers. However, girls were also coerced into sending photos through persistent requests, anger, and threats by their male peers. Often girls complied in such coercion as an attempt to navigate this aggression, as refusal resulted in receiving further pressure or threats. Other strategies were not present, indicating that “females do not have tools to navigate challenges” (Thomas, 2018, p. 192).



Similar results were found through feminist, critical participatory action research and workshop interviews in New Zealand, through collaborating with small groups of 28 girls, aged 16-17. Girls suggested they face pressures both to sext and to not sext. These pressures were reproduced both on a personal and societal level. They were mixed with traditional understandings of relationships and postfeminist constructions related to empowerment through sexuality. Girls also reported that they were often pressured to engage in sexting, and the requests were pushy and difficult to escape. Boys begged them to sext or sent them more images as a way of insisting to sext (Thorburn et al., 2021).

Similar results were discovered by Setty (2019). When receiving unsolicited photos, male adolescents were mostly worried regarding child pornography accusations. When it came to coercion young females described receiving requests to send images, often followed by an unsolicited image, with refusals resulting in aggression. Such requests can be more subtle, with boys attempting to convince girls that they can trust them. If these attempts do not work and the young female rejects engaging in sexting, the young male might abandon her. The adolescent peer group normalises sexting and violations of consent from young males towards young females. The responsibility to manage risk effectively fell mostly on girls. However, not all the constructions were coercive, as some participants described sexting as pleasurable for both parties, and a manifestation of trust or interest (Setty, 2019).

### ***2.5.2. Sexting, consent, coercion: a critique of the literature***

As mentioned above, adolescent sexting is not completely negative. Anastassiou (2017) reviewed multiple studies and concluded that sexting can be a source of relief of sexual frustration, experimentation and even a fun activity between friends. Thus, the term sexting should not inherently reflect negative practices.

Yet, in the (recent) body of literature regarding adolescent sexting, the way sexting consent or lack thereof is situated varies significantly. Moreover, a recent surge in the literature has started differentiating between consensual sexting and non-consensual sexting (Hunehäll Berndtsson, 2021; Lu et al., 2021). This further raises questions regarding how consensual and coercive sexting are conceptualised, discursively constructed and reproduced. However, the existing literature is characterised by a level of complexity when it comes to such issues, likely due to the novelty of sexting and image-based abuse and its derivative distinctions.

A few studies tackling consent discuss non-consensual dissemination as non-consensual sexting (Pampati et al. 2020). For example, Barrense-Dias et al. (2020) differentiate between non-consensual sexting and pressured sexting, yet often use both terms in their review. Other researchers frame their studies as exploring sexting, yet include unsolicited images (Hunehäll Berndtsson, 2021; Lu, Baumler & Temple, 2021). Van Ouytsel et al. (2021) use the term pressured sexting.

The importance of defining coercion in sexting appropriately is not just an issue of terminology; it reflects the whole body of literature. As Salter et al. (2013) suggest, the lack of distinction makes aggravated sexting incidents minimised, as it frames them as faults in one's judgment due to "raging hormones" and de-contextualises the violence that characterises these incidents.

Even in articles that study non-consensual image sharing and not sexting per se, image sharing is juxtaposed to consensual sexting. Naezer & van Oosterhout (2021) juxtapose consensual sexting, which they consider a form of self-determination and a type of sexual experimentation, to the non-consensual sharing of images.

Similarly, Wachs et al. (2021) highlight that consensual sexting might pose risks but is not a problem per se. Instead, the focus should be on other issues such as pressure, blackmailing, or the non-consensual dissemination of messages. Wachs et al. (2021) still associate sexting with dissemination, which as mentioned earlier, should be differentiated. However, they highlight that there is little research on the relationship among various types of sexting, such as “consensual, non-consensual, and pressured sexting” (Wachs et al., 2021, p. 1), their outcomes, and whether gender and sexuality play a role. Moreover, Wachs et al. (2021) tried to differentiate between consensual and coercive sexting by suggesting that

“When sexting is performed voluntarily in the absence of pressure and blackmailing, and the sexts are not forwarded without the consent of the person who produced the sexts, most scholars refer to it as consensual sexting. Aggravated sexting, on the other hand, involves the presence of harmful intention toward someone who shares sexts or forces someone to share sexts. This form of sexting involves two different types, including non-consensual sexting and pressured sexting. The sharing of sexts without permission is referred to as non-consensual sexting. Sometimes sexting is the result of pressure by a partner or friend to send sexts, referred to as pressured sexting” (Wachs et al., 2021, p.2).

Wachs et al (2021) are critical of the words “aggravated sexting” as they suggest that rape is not framed as aggravated sexual intercourse. It is also suggested that sexting terminology is addressed in a gender-focused context. Such distinctions could highlight that it is not just a dyadic form of aggression, but it involves a number of people and oppressional structures, which do not protect those involved. Scholars also indicate that the appropriate terminology is a good approach to creating preventative methods to minimise harm, instead of moralising or victim blaming. Therefore, we should tackle the significant issue of consensual behaviour versus sexual gendered aggression. Similarly, Ringrose et al. (2021)

suggest that individuals working in education should also update the language they use in relation to online sexual relationships and propose a terrain that differentiates between consensual and abusive incidents.

Here, I want to address my agreement with Wachs et al. (2021). The terminology must be clear when it comes to coercion. Sexting should be radically differentiated from other forms of abuse such as revenge porn. The non-consensual label, the pressured label or the aggravated label do not appear appropriate. Similarly to the use of the words rape and sexual coercion, we should refer to such incidents as “sexting coercion”. The labels non-consensual, pressured or aggravated sexting essentially refer to coercion. For example, when referring to sexual violence, aggravated sex only manages to minimise such incidents by not using the word rape. I also oppose the vague classification of sexting coercion as image-based abuse, as it takes away from the power dynamics and the sub-context of such incidents. Sexting should be partially differentiated from image-based abuse and coercive incidents of sexting, and indeed, qualitative research that involves key stakeholders could perhaps further allow us to define it.

There are numerous observations from the aforementioned studies. The quantitative survey studies provided insight into the overall phenomenon of coercion, highlighting its extent and gendered nature. The qualitative studies provide nuanced insight into the gendered dynamics of sexting coercion and provide us with some understanding of adolescent experiences in the peer group. Such approaches are truly exploratory. However, multiple questions remain unanswered. One of the methodological issues of the studies highlighted above is that they employ thematic analysis (Hunehäll Berndtsson and Odenbring, 2021; Lippman and Campbell, 2014; Thomas, 2018). Thematic analysis can often lack the post-structuralist approach that other qualitative traditions have. Such studies often treat the information adolescents provide in relation to gender as a resource rather than a discursive

performance that is affected by the socio-political context (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Whilst this provides a rich insight, the micro and the macro elements of the analysis remain unanswered.

Thus, it is not yet clear how these norms are conveyed, negotiated and perpetuated. The existing body of research does not provide insight into the contextual power relations of coercive or consensual sexting. Moreover, it is unclear how gendered identities are constructed or negotiated through sexting, and how identities are formed and play out in the peer group. It is thus unclear how the gendered nature of coercion in sexting is conveyed through interaction and whether ideological dilemmas exist in relation to the contextual nature of sexting. Simply put, we do not know what the ideological terrain of coercion in sexting or of gender/coercion in sexting is.

Finally, it is unclear how gender is performed through sexting negotiations. Whilst there is a lot of emphasis on coercion, there is no clear conceptualisation or exploration of consent, especially in relation to gender. Due to the different conceptualisations of consent and coercion in the literature, an understanding of the discursive terrain, as well as clearer concepts are needed, based on the key stakeholders' understandings.

## **2.6. Parents**

Dominant discourses of sexting in academic literature are accompanied by often alarming advice calling parents to action (Jeffery, 2018). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2016), advises close parental monitoring of adolescents' social media use to prevent risky online behaviours. Parental mediation is often dictated as a panacea to adolescent sexting risks, yet its effectiveness is questionable. Whilst many parents are technologically proficient, they often struggle to understand teenage cyberspace affordance and how ephemeral technologies affect the online and offline socialisation of their children. This results in

different lived experiences in participation in digital reality (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

### ***2.6.1. Parenting and adolescent sexting***

Recent literature highlights parents' pivotal role in adolescents' sexting engagement. The low frequency with which adolescents digitally communicate with parents is positively associated with being the receiver of sexts (Wolfe et al., 2016). Moreover, if an adolescents' phone is part of a family contract, they are 60% less likely to be receivers of sexts—as such contracts enhance potential supervision (Wolfe et al., 2016). However, such studies are cross-sectional surveys and thus, causality cannot be assumed. Another cross-sectional correlational study indicated that adolescents were less likely to participate in sexting if they had good relationships with their parents, whereas those with low parental attachment were more willing to (Atwood et al., 2017). As Atwood et al. (2017) suggest, analysis of cross-sectional data does not permit causal claims. Therefore, it is important to explore the socio-cultural context. Similarly, according to a survey by Houck et al. (2014), at-risk youth who engaged in sexting suggested their parents were more likely to be approving of sexual behaviour. Parental involvement seems to also be a protective factor when it comes to perpetration of sexting (Smith-Darden et al., 2017).

Baumgartner et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal study exploring online risky behaviours, including searching for potential sexual partners, and sharing sexually explicit material or even personal data to online acquaintances. The sample consisted of 1762 Dutch adolescents in the 12-18 age bracket. The results indicated that adolescents engaging in risky online behaviours originate from less stable households. Baumgartner et al. (2012) suggest that adolescents lacking real-life gratification seek it online. It is noteworthy that the study explored online sexually risky behaviours and tackled sexual online communication with

strangers. However, it is not clear whether it was grooming or sexting with other adolescent; thus, not tackling sexting itself.

### **2.6.2. Monitoring and mediation**

It has been established that family relationships influence adolescent sexting engagement. Consequently, academics, educators and policy makers often call parents to action with sporadic advice regarding monitoring of adolescents' internet usage (Angelides, 2013). However, studies conducted on parenting and sexting mediation suggest difficulty due to varying parenting styles. For example, Vanwesenbeeck et al. (2018) differentiate between two ways of mediation strategies in relation to sexting; active mediation, with parents attempting to discuss social media and their drawbacks with their children, and restrictive mediation, which attempts to control children's social media access and activities.

Ahern et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study examining parental knowledge and perspectives of child/adolescent risk behaviours with 30 parents of young people aged 10–17, employing a survey influenced by “Flanagan’s critical incident technique” (Ahern et al, 2016, p. 6). Results indicate that multiple parents are aware of the concept of sexting; one in three suggested that their child knew a friend who was considering/had engaged in sexting. 37% of parents indicated discussing sexting with their child/teen and more than half of parents reported not having discussed high - risk behaviours, including sexting.

However, while 80% of parents indicated they can recognise symptoms of engagement in risky behaviours, no one correctly identified sexting-indicative behavioural signs. When asked to describe monitoring strategies, 1 in 4 reported that they were currently not monitoring potential risky behaviour. Half of parents indicated that they would be unable to detect whether their child found managed to violate Internet safeguards (Ahern et al., 2016).

When asked about potential approaches upon discovering their child/ adolescent was engaging in risky behaviours, many of the parents suggested they would talk to their children (40%) or set up restrictive consequences as punishment (27%). 43% of the participants who suggested consequences, would restrict or monitor the child/teen's social media use. In the next significant category, confronting the child, parents suggested determining facts to adolescents. Seeking help accounted for 19%, whereas 14% described discussion with third parties such as teachers or parents (Ahern et al., 2016). However, it should be highlighted that the study explored a number of risky behaviours not limited to sexting, thus its specific applicability is unclear.

Douglas et al. (2021) conducted a survey study to explore parents' mediation and monitoring of the social media usage of their adolescent children. Whilst parents were willing to monitor or discuss online safety with adolescents, sexting was the least discussed topic. Similarly, Widman et al. (2021) conducted a survey study showing that less than 1 in 5 adolescents indicated they discussed sexting with parents. However, both studies were survey studies and provide no insight into the contextualisation of parental understanding of sexting or the aetiology of low discussion rates. Moreover, as Widman et al. (2021) suggest, there are no standardized assessment tools to capture adolescent sexting behaviours, which could affect results. It is crucial to explore the context of sexting-related parental discussions (Widman et al., 2021). Similarly, Douglas et al. (2020) suggest that the sample mainly consisted of white women, with males consisting approximately 15% of the sample, which could perhaps constitute it non-representative.

Few studies have attempted unpacking how monitoring and mediation affect sexting engagement. Strict parenting has unwanted results; the punitive monitoring approach is potentially counterproductive, with parental supervision increasing risky online activities (Sasson & Mesch, 2014). Evidence suggests a correlation between the high occurrence of



restrictive parental monitoring/mediation and willingness to sext. This link could be attributed to adolescent rebellion to parental restriction yet pronounces the benefits of healthy child-parent relationships (Atwood et al., 2017). However, these studies do not explore sexting separately. They explore it under “risky online behaviours,” such as pornographic consumption. Moreover, the survey nature of these studies and their findings should be interpreted with caution, as causality is uncertain.

Similarly, as Confalonieri et al. (2020) suggested, parents imposing rules on the content adolescents consume shaped negative attitudes towards and decreased engagement with sexting. Parental awareness regarding adolescents’ activity and social circle results in reduced sexting engagement. Yet this form of parental knowledge does not affect the awareness regarding sexting-related risks. Inversely, parental control for both genders was directly linked with negative attitudes towards sexting. There was a weak association of parental control and negative perceptions of sexting. Adolescent disclosure was associated with higher sexting engagement (Confalonieri et al., 2020). Furthermore, according to a quantitative study by Yopez-Tito et al. (2020), parental control is not causal to sexting and does not mitigate potential engagement.

Most of the studies exploring monitoring and sexting are quantitative; as the body of literature is new, few studies are conducted. As Confalonieri et al. (2020) highlight, their study does not explore context, consent and coercion. They suggest future research should investigate context, coercion, and how gender socialisation and performativity affect parental monitoring and adolescent sexting. Future studies should obtain more nuanced understandings of sexting, especially regarding relationship status. Qualitative research will help further academic understanding of parenting and sexting, especially regarding content and gender (Campbell & Park, 2014).

### ***2.6.3. Parental mediation and gender dynamics***

The effects of parental monitoring depend on gender dynamics. Family support appears to relate to a reduced possibility of sending sexting material for both genders; however, that is the case for boys sexting with friends and girls sexting with online peers (Burén & Lunde, 2018). Similarly, only boys with overprotective/controlling fathers remain significant in voluntary sexual online exposure. This indicates that parental bonding does not solely explain the variance of voluntary sexual exposure online (Jonsson et al., 2014).

Females are often more monitored than males regarding their online lives (except for online content rules) (Confalonieri et al., 2020). Yet, parental mediation, quality and prevalence of communication did not play a significant role in females. For males, only rules on contents were associated with adolescent sexting (Confalonieri et al., 2020). Moreover, female participants have higher odds of their parents accessing their profiles and discussing privacy settings (Romo et al., 2017). Some of the studies on sexting are cross-sectional; for example, Romo et al. (2017) highlight their study could only assess associations between variables. They suggest that motivation for sexting and parental monitoring needs further qualitative research (Romo et al., 2017).

Amongst 250 female adolescents, age was a predictor of engagement in risky sexting, while family communication was a negative predicting factor. Family flexibility and age could positively predict experimental sexting. Moreover, aggravated sexting could be positively predicted by family enmeshment (Bianchi et al., 2019). However, Bianchi et al. (2019) highlight that their findings were based on correlational data and causality cannot be assumed. They further suggest that other variables should be further explored, such as the impact of sexualised media models and the family or individual vulnerability to societal and cultural contexts.

As mentioned above, many parenting and sexting studies are correlational surveys or examine associations between variables, especially gender-related. Researchers call for a contextual understanding of sexting (Klettke et al., 2014; Setty, 2019). Moreover, there is no research with a constructionist epistemology. The field lacks understanding of how social norms and contexts influence parental monitoring. As seen in section 2.5.1., recent approaches to sexting have begun identifying it as a highly gendered phenomenon. However, qualitative studies are limited, and parental safety and coercion are largely under-researched. Similarly, no research exists on the macro-understanding of how such phenomena affect parental micro-understanding. There is a discrepancy in the technological understanding of power and coercion between key stakeholders.

#### ***2.6.4. Parental perceptions***

Very few studies have been conducted on parental perceptions of sexting, and even fewer are qualitative. As Charteris et al. (2018) suggest, approaches like discourse analysis can provide insight into the parental constructions of adolescent lives; an understanding which reflects a broader pattern of discourses perpetuated by media and society. Charteris et al. (2018) conducted discursive analysis on two interviews with parents of adolescents. The two dominant discourses regarding adolescent sexting are antithetical; children are portrayed either as innocent, shocked by sexting, or knowing; both innocent and sexually knowledgeable. Parents are worried about the male gaze, the gendered double standards and slut-shaming. They worry about the culture of blackmail and cyber-harassment that exists in disappearing media such as Snapchat, which they construct as surveillance devices and a way to elicit sexual images (Charteris et al., 2018). However, the sample of the aforementioned study was relatively small, as it consisted of two female parents. Perhaps, a more significant sample that would be richer in terms of gender and parenting roles, such as caregivers, could be more representative of parental rhetoric. Barrense-Dias et al. (2017) examined the

differences in adolescent and parental definitions of sexting. Young people and their parents create different meaning-making on what constitutes sexting, with clashing linguistic descriptions. Adolescents describe it with suggestive words such as “sexy, erotic, flirtatious, and naughty” (Barense-Dias et al., 2017, p. 2362). Parents use “explicit terms such as “risqué content,” “sexual intercourse,” “pornography,” and “sexual insults”.” (Barense-Dias et al, 2017.p. 2362). Parents were less likely to perceive text-oriented sexts as sexting and to discuss pornographic content as its definition. Adolescents used suggestive terms as potential sexting content. However, both parents and students agreed that sexting had to be a personalised, consensual peer activity. It was perceived as a risky behaviour that could be harmful, yet causing harm was not its intended end-goal. However, the study explored and juxtaposed teachers as well, often grouping parents and teachers and contrasting them to adolescents. Additionally, they explored definitional issues, which leaves questions such as how sexting is conceptualised in relation to gender, and what parents’ constructions regarding safety are.

One of the limitations of such studies is that they account for nuclear, heteronormative understandings of parenting, neglecting non-traditional families, single parents, step-parents or caregivers. This has only been challenged by Fix et al. (2021) who during 2012-2013 conducted one of the few qualitative studies that explore caregivers’ perceptions and responses in relation to sexting. They conducted 10 focus groups with 92 parents and caregivers of adolescents aged 14–18 years old. Nonetheless, focus groups included only eight caregivers per location, as this number of participants constitutes the ideal size for focus groups. They used grounded theory to approach the data.

Fix et al. (2021) found that parents highlighted the permanency of the material. They constructed engaging in sexting as normal, or with concern about its frequency. Caregivers suggested that sexting could be a result of parental neglect. They expressed concerns

regarding peer influence and the over-sexualised images portrayed in media. Caregivers mentioned that they often have to initiate conversations regarding sexting as adolescents do not discuss it. However, most conversations were about abstinence. Caregivers also suggested that conversation amongst adolescents and their peers might protect girls from engaging in sexting, as teens often discuss its gendered consequences. They believed that adolescents rarely discuss sexting with teachers, regarding it as solely tackled in sex education. Girls were also constructed as sexually more aggressive than boys. Furthermore, caregivers juxtaposed the past with the present, constructing the emergence of technology and such phenomena as problematic.

Yet existing literature is limited. Multiple existing studies tend to be cross-sectional surveys which provide us with an initial yet vague understanding of the relationships between parenting and sexting. There are criticisms for the qualitative tradition in relation to parenting and sexting. Whilst these studies manage acknowledging parental understandings of the double standards concerning sexting, this body of research fails to explore how they engage with current parental discourses regarding sexting and how safety is constructed. Moreover, the existing qualitative studies have failed to address how adolescents' gender affects monitoring and mediation practices and constructions of safety and sexting. Research needs to move to an understanding that connects the macro with the micro elements.

Parental/caregiver identities, as well as the power dynamics between parents and children are constructed and reproduced in the discursive terrain. Thus, the existing literature is not providing us with an ideological understanding in relation to parenting and sexting.

## **2.7. Teachers and sexting**

Due to the moral panics and consequences of sexting, academics interpellate teachers in the sexting rhetoric, often with advice on how they should handle cases of adolescent sexting in schools (Lemke & Rogers, 2020; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). Yet very few studies

have been conducted on teachers with regards to adolescent sexting. Most of the existing studies do not examine adolescent sexting and teachers' constructions of it. However, they classify sexting as a co-category of problematic online or offline behaviours in educational contexts. For example, Thomas et al. (2013) conducted a quantitative study to explore what teachers consider as potential obstacles to classroom mobile phone use. One of the perceived challenges was sexting (24.4%). A similar study was conducted by O'Bannon & Thomas (2015), indicating that a high number of participants were worried regarding all the barriers of using mobile phones in the classroom that have been identified in the literature e.g., cheating and cyberbullying. However, twice as many pre-service teachers (individuals training to become teachers) were concerned about adolescents' access to inappropriate content and sexting. A few studies conducted on teachers explore sexting in the context of using internet/computers in the education system and media literacy (Nguyễn et al., 2014; Tomczyk, 2019). However, sexting itself was not explored.

Throughout the brief history of sexting scholarship, teachers and sex education are often proposed as a solution to its consequences (Dake et al., 2012; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). However, the topic is highly understudied, perhaps due to its novelty. Very few studies exist on the understanding, perceptions and constructions of sexting from a teacher perspective. Moreover, the existing, narrow body of research is characterised by a few limitations that hinder our understanding. Many of the studies are conducted in non-UK populations (Nguyễn et al., 2014; Tomczyk, 2019), and thus we have a limited understanding of such phenomena in a UK cultural/educational context. The existing studies are limited, not exploratory and suggest that teachers discuss a concept that is already framed negatively. For example, in Thomas et al. (2013) and O'Bannon and Thomas (2015), sexting was already framed as a barrier to the classroom activities. Moreover, sexting was not studied on its own, but was briefly brushed upon and was clustered with other explored factors (O'Bannon & Thomas,

2015; Thomas et al., 2013; Tomczyk, 2019). As a new scholarly endeavour, there has not yet been an inductive approach to understanding how teachers themselves construct such a novel topic. Therefore, the attempts to derive understanding through researcher-conceived measurement tools are premature.

Indeed, only one study in the field explores teachers' understanding of sexting. Barrense-Dias et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study and compared the opinions of 32 young individuals aged 16-21 youths and 29 adults, out of which 11 were parents and 18 were teachers. They employed focus groups and thematic content analysis to explore the definitions of sexting in Switzerland (FGs). They suggested that many teachers were unaware of the term sexting or the fact it could include text messages. Teachers and parents questioned the cyber safety of online applications more than young people, and considered blackmail, harassment and non-consensual dissemination of sexts as part of the definition of sexting. This was antithetical to adolescents' perceptions, as they defined coercive sexting as harassment.

However, in Barrense-Dias et al. (2019) teachers and parents were often grouped as adults in the findings whenever their perceptions were of similar nature. Thus, teachers' understandings of adolescent sexting are insufficiently explored, as they did not provide the field with a detailed scope of the issues teachers face or their constructions of gender and sexting. Moreover, Barrense-Dias et al. (2019) explored issues around the definition of sexting. Whilst this provides an excellent attempt to solve the definitional issues discussed in section 2.2. there are key questions that remain unexplored. Focusing on teachers' definitions and how they complement or contrast to parents and adolescents' constructions, leaves important aspects of sexting unexplored, e.g., context sensitivity and power hierarchies as seen in section 2.5. Finally, despite the latest literature highlighting the influence coercion

and gender play in understanding sexting, there is currently no research on teachers and sexting that is exploring their meaning making of gender and coercion.

## **2.8. Sexting education**

Sexting education is identified as a potential solution to issues emerging from adolescents' sexting (e.g., Kopecký, 2012; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). However, sexting education research is limited, and the existing content has been criticised through theoretical contributions and empirical data. Safe sexting education would involve teaching adolescents about the potential outcomes of engaging in sexting yet equipping them with the information needed in order to alleviate them (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Yet, as Phippen (2012) indicates, sexting is often discussed by watching a film without any conversational opportunity, while adolescents would prefer more participatory roles in such initiatives. Moreover, many attempts at sexting education contain messages of abstinence which are deemed ineffective; adolescents often do not adhere to them, and they perpetuate shame (Albury et al., 2017). There should be more focus on adolescents and issues of identity/sexuality and emphasis on consent, especially affirmative, that is not androcentric (Ringrose et al., 2019). Further emphasis on deconstructing the double standard that being sexual is normalised for boys but pathologised for girls is needed (Albury et al., 2017).

Döring (2014) studied abstinence-oriented messages by exploring ten educational campaigns. All of them covered various sexting risks: legislative, social, educational/ future career consequences, and potential abuse (e.g., grooming). The campaigns emphasised the negative emotional reactions that sexting can cause. They primarily addressed girls as risky sexters, emphasised abstinence, victim-blamed and suggested that sexting leads to being groomed. Half of the campaigns discussed third parties by tackling anti-forwarding and anti-bullying messages (Döring, 2014). Scholars highlight that such initiatives do not respond to



adolescents' needs, such as issues tackling gender inequalities, consent, and coercion (discussed in sections 2.4.3 and 2.5.1.).

Jørgensen et al. (2019) explored the sexting views of fourteen (seven male, seven female) white British students, aged 13-14, as well as 14-15. The participants discussed a case during which a girl solicited a sexually explicit photo of a 14-year-old male, and then forwarded it. The findings suggest that students are keen to learn about such topics and wanted regular sexting education in the curriculum. However, they reported they only had one assembly in school for this topic. They opposed the existing forms of sexting education, suggesting that such lectures should be regular/monthly as an open discussion. Female participants proposed separate lessons depending on gender, as they suggested that boys do not respect them. There was little consensus amongst the participants over whether parents or teachers should be involved, and adolescents felt uncomfortable discussing such issues with them.

York et al. (2021) studied pastoral care staff (coordinators) working in schools and stakeholder organisations on educating adolescents in relation to sexting in Ireland. They conducted individual interviews with the representatives of four organisations responsible for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools. Moreover, they were also conducted with three pastoral coordinators in 3 secondary schools to explore their school's sexting education and incident responses. They conducted focus groups with 17 adolescents (10 females and 7 males), aged 16–17 to explore perceptions of sexting (York et al., 2021). Organisations emphasised child safety: sexting should be avoided as its sexual abuse and selfish gratification. Similarly, the pastoral coordinators did not support sexting behaviour. Both participant groups suggested that adolescents are vulnerable and lack the awareness to assess risk. Both groups considered educating adolescents to make sexting-related informed decisions as an inherent part of their role. The majority of stakeholder organisations

highlight the illegal nature of sexting. However, they acknowledged that sexting could be flirtatious. All the staff coordinating pastoral care suggested they had dealt with incidents of sexting; their main concern was protecting adolescents and preventing such incidents.

However, young participants reported a low number of RSE lectures with no detail. They were willing to learn about such issues yet stated they preferred conversations with individuals that were informed about how young people conceptualise sex to assemblies. Boys highlighted that sexting either was discussed as keeping safe online or never discussed in schools. Girls felt the provided information did not clarify concerns. Adolescents did not perceive sexting resources as realistic and criticised them for victim-blaming girls. No adults described their teaching as deconstructing gender double standards; their main points encouraged abstinence and negative outcomes. Whilst the study was novel and provided a different understanding of sexting education, the sample and approach were heavily heteronormative, neglecting any LGBTQ insights, and the facilitators of sexting education were relatively few, perhaps not allowing saturation.

According to Setty (2019), adolescents who abstained from sexting criticised the need for sexting education. Whilst initially, they supported abstinence-based education, they suggested that this was directed towards reckless adolescents. They, however, criticised adults for promoting fearful rhetoric. Setty (2019) emphasises the need to explore power dynamics, social inequalities, adolescent perspectives on sexting education and how a human rights approach could be adopted instead of abstinence rhetoric.

The little critical and feminist work on UK sexting education produces polemic results. Zauner (2021) conducted a case study which assessed the discourses of three UK educational campaigns. They used media discourse analysis, exploring the text concerning socio-cultural phenomena and ideology. They suggested that such campaigns legitimise victim-blaming towards women as, instead of highlighting the violent nature of image-based

abuse, they focus on restricting female sexual expression. They also perpetuate the status quo that facilitates male perpetrated violence while holding females accountable for the violence they face. This silences the gendered nature of image-based abuse, denying survivors autonomy and preventing safe sexting.

The aforementioned studies indicate that neither adolescents nor academics currently approve the existing sexting education. Despite the findings highlighting the need for schools to improve their approach, teachers, who are often responsible in school settings, and their own needs regarding sexting education have not been explored

## **2.9. Non heteronormative sexting**

LGBTQ sexting has been widely ignored in the literature, which primarily focuses on the power dynamics between males and females in heterosexual contexts. Yet recent survey studies suggest that sexual minority adolescents sext more (Gómez-Guadix et al., 2017; Gómez-Guadix & Incera, 2021; Kim et al., 2020). These results are broadly consistent regardless of the cultural context or participants' age group. Such findings were evident in Nigeria (Olatunde & Balogun, 2017) US (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016) and Ireland (Foody et al., 2021). Yet, such studies leave several questions regarding consent and coercion unanswered.

In a study conducted in Mexico by Rodríguez Otero (2020), 15.82% of the sample had been coerced into sexting, whilst 10.75% had been blackmailed, and 8.86% were teased afterwards. Van Ouytsel et al., (2019) administered surveys and questionnaires to 3,109 Dutch adolescents between 12-15 years old. When it came to sexual minority adolescents, 12.3% had sent a sexually suggestive photo, while 31.6% had been on the receiving end of one. 14.4% had sent sexting imagery due to pressure, whereas 15.9% had received a sexting image that someone else had forwarded. Adolescents in sexual minorities showcase higher rates of requesting and being requested suggestive material, as well as of sending or being

pressured to send sexually explicit imagery. No significant relationship was found between sexual orientation and forwarding sexting images. Consensually receiving, sending and requesting sexting images, was more prevalent among sexual minority participants than heterosexual individuals. However, the studies lack in-depth exploration of how gender identity or the relationship context affect sexting.

Moreover, Needham (2021) explored the sexting understanding of teenage GTBQ (gay, transgender, bi, questioning) boys (aged 14-18) and their reflections on the associated intent and risks. They employed mixed methods and surveyed 119 participants whilst interviewing 12 G(ay), B(i), T(ransgender), Q(uestioning) adolescents. The results indicated that participants did not identify with the term “sexting” and used “sending nudes” instead. Sexting was framed as normalised, determining a relationship status, and participants highlighted requesting a nude picture jokingly albeit with serious intentions. Other participants mentioned direct messaging as initiating an online discussion with someone that you will not meet physically, for pleasure or as a courtship process. Of the 119 participants who identified as GBTQ 38.6% sexted actively and 26% sexted passively. However, the study explored sexting by defining it as only images, and thus the study explored a specific medium, leaving other forms of sexting (e.g., sending texts) unexplored.

When it came to the qualitative findings of Needham (2021), all participants identified the risk of images being shared and emphasised its long-term and legal impact. While young men often felt self-confidence after an image was shared on social media, some felt betrayed and used afterwards. However, homosexual boys sexted as a way to validate their body adequacy. They also talked about limited potential partners in their social circle and hence the need to sext online.

Moreover, homosexual and bi-sexual adolescents suggested that they sexted to improve relationships. Gay adolescents stated they sexted to feel “wanted”, with 23.8% considering sexting as flirting. All male participants indicated sexual arousal resulting in masturbation as a key element to sexting. When it came to aggravating factors, only 3.3% of the GBTQ participants reported that they had engaged in sexting as a form of exchange or favour. These favours were contextualised as a proem to sex. However, as the author highlights, it was unclear whether texts were employed to coerce or a consensual prelude to sex. Finally, participants suggested that their schools did not acknowledge the issues resulting from sexting and sexuality.

Academics have highlighted the importance of context and sexual orientation in relation to sexting. Kurup et al. (2021) and Kim et al. (2020) highlight the importance of assessing the sexting peer context and the coercive or relational elements. Indeed, in qualitative research by Garcia Gomez (2019) heterosexual teen girls formulated discursive constructions that criticise the practices of non-heteronormative/queer women whilst assuming that queer relationships often imitate heterosexual ones (García-Gómez, 2019). However, it should be highlighted that the study was conducted on pre-teens.

The emerging literature on LGBTQ adolescent sexting provides us with fruitful findings, yet several questions remain unanswered. For example, despite current qualitative results, the meaning-making of adolescents concerning LGBTQ sexting and power hierarchies bears examination. Sexting is dependent on societal norms and understandings around gender and sexuality. Thus, the literature does not examine how these are socially reproduced. Instead of focusing on the micro elements or the prevalence of LGBTQ sexting, more research is needed on how ideas related to sexuality are reproduced and how the micro connects with the macro in the peer group. Currently, there is no knowledge of the established repertoire(s) adolescents hold in relation to LGBTQ sexting and how the subversion of heterosexual gender roles is reproduced in the adolescent life. It is unclear how

adolescents construct meaning with regard to LGBTQ sexting, especially compared to heterosexual sexting, and which sexting practices adolescents associate them with.

Sexting and covid

## **2.10. Covid-19, sexting and gender**

The present research took place during the emergence of Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns/restrictions. As a result, the present thesis unfolded during the Covid-19 context, which, in some ways, affected the research context. For example, during Covid-19, parents were more lenient regarding the time their children spent online (Suris et al., 2022).

Moreover, according to Doring (2022) in the USA, media discourses framed sexting as a way to get sexual without the risk of Covid; however, that was not the case for adolescents due to its legislative issues. Whilst numerous studies were conducted during the Covid-19 lockdown era, few sexting studies conducted during 2019-2022 contextualise sexting in relation to Covid-19. Moreover, few studies conceptualise Covid-19 as a basic pillar in their study.

The few studies on adolescent sexting that employ the context of Covid-19 as a strong element of their research question tend to produce conflicting results. For example, Englander (2021) suggests that adolescent sexting increased only 2% during Covid-19. Similar findings were also mentioned by Hu et al. (2023) who explored young adults' engagement in sexting. Yarger et al. (2021) suggest that most adolescents kept sexting at the same rate during the pandemic as they did pre-pandemic and were more likely to not sext compared to adults. Yet, the existing body of research further pronounces the context sensitivity of sexting; the same nuances that existed pre-Covid-19 seem to influence prevalence during Covid-19. For example, Nelson et al. (2020) suggest that sexual minority adolescents engaged in more sexual behaviours online, yet sexting was one of the factors explored. Moreover Maes & Vandebosch (2022) suggested that 40% of their participants engaged in sexting with girls

being more likely to sext due to experiencing pressure from partners. As discussed in sections 2.3. and 2.4.1., sexting is context-sensitive. Whilst the pandemic affected the context as described above, the entire history of sexuality, gender and sex both online and offline has a long-standing socio-historical and political basis that is not easily subverted (De Beauvoir, 1989; Renold & Ringrose, 2011; Ringrose & Renold, 2010)

The pandemic disrupts gender related historical and material conditions (United Nations, 2020). However, the history and context of gendered aspects of consent and coercion has been ongoing. It is noteworthy that the pandemic made gendered oppression more prominent (United Nations, 2020). As a result, whilst some of the context of sexting might have changed due to lockdown restrictions, it is likely that the pre-existing gender norms remain the same during the pandemic (Maes & Vandebosch, 2022). As Lordello et al. (2021) suggest, gender is an important component of sexting that influences its practices, and thus, the context of the crisis is not the focal point of investigation.

### **2.11. Situating the present study: contributing to the literature**

Despite the growing number of quantitative studies exploring sexting, the results are inconclusive and inconsistent. Whilst a few studies (section 2.5.) have tackled coercive sexting, what is missing is adolescents' conception of coercion and consent. Lu et al. (2021) and Barrense-Dias et al. (2017) have highlighted the need for qualitative research that explores sexting and will consider situational and contextual factors. Moreover, complex, socio-political understandings of sexting are needed (Burkett, 2015; Drouin & Tobin, 2014), to explore the pressures and expectations of contemporary gender roles. Finally, the existing literature raises questions regarding the constructions of sexting in adolescent relationships. As a result, the first study of this thesis will explore the construction of adolescents' sexting and their meaning-making regarding intimacy. It will additionally explore their meaning-

making of gender, its impact on the constructions of sexting and how they negotiate and justify consensual/coercive sexting.

Moreover, there are very few studies on parents/carers and adolescent sexting despite them being considered key stakeholders. The existing studies are surveys which cannot assess the contextual richness of sexting. For this reason, researchers call for qualitative research, especially in relation to parenting, consent and gender (Campbell & Park, 2014). Despite the few findings on coercion and consent from an adolescent perspective, there are no studies on this when it comes to parents' and carers' constructions. Thus, the present study will contribute to the literature by exploring how parents and carers make meaning of sexting, in relation to consent, coercion and gender. Moreover, a study that explores their constructions in relation to safety and monitoring is missing from the literature. Therefore, this study will attempt to tackle the questions the existing literature raises by exploring how parents/carers construct sexting, consent and coercion, how they contextualise it in relation to gender and how they frame their role in relation to monitoring.

Furthermore, teachers' construction of sexting has been widely understudied (see section 2.7.). Further qualitative research is needed in relation to sexting in educational settings (Anastassiou, 2017). The few existing studies interpellate teachers in pre-conceived and often negative concepts. Thus, a study exploring teachers' construction of sexting, gender, consent/lack thereof would significantly contribute to the literature, as educators are key stakeholders to adolescent sexting.

The move with the present research is to take a holistic approach to analysing sexting. Therefore, the present thesis will explore the competing constructions of sexting, gendered dynamics of engagement with sexting, as well as consent and coercion, from the differing perspectives of the key stakeholders. As a result, it will provide an understanding of how



three different key stakeholders construct the discursive terrain around gender and sexting; providing insights into heteroglossia of populations that are intergenerational and have different conceptualisation of technology, sexual relations, consent and gender.

As mentioned earlier, very few qualitative studies have been conducted on the topic (Anastasiou, 2017), and even less focus on discourse; they treat language as a “resource” and not as a “central topic” by which they could examine the ways key stakeholders construct sexting (Wetherell & Edley, 2014). Studying sexting is a critical activity due to its gender and power elements. Critical discursive psychology (CDP) treats gender not as a fixed construct but as practices that are performed and reproduced (Edley, 2001). Thus, by employing CDP and focusing on the making of meaning around sexting I aim to discover how bodies are governed, how consent is negotiated, and the potentially conflicting constructions around it (Wetherell & Edley, 2009). CDP differs from other discursive approaches by focusing on participants doing identity work and exploring the maintenance of oppressive social relations (Wetherell & Edley, 2014).

The present thesis employs different methodological aspects to explore the following 3 different samples of key stakeholders:

Adolescents aged 16-18

Parents/carers of adolescents aged 12-18

Teachers/educators of adolescents aged 12-18

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.0. Introduction**

The present chapter will introduce the studies I conducted for my doctoral thesis and elaborate on their theoretical and methodological rationale. In this thesis, I employ Critical discursive psychology (CDP, Edley and Wetherell, 1999) and therefore, I briefly introduce CDP and its theoretical basis. This section is followed by a brief introduction of discourse analysis and the philosophy behind speech act theory. I explain what CDP is and contextualise its origins and evolution. I then employ a justification of why CDP was used in the present thesis/with the current topic and provide a brief discussion on feminism, gender and CDP. Moreover, I tackle the philosophical underpinnings of my participant selection and justify the study design. Finally, I elaborate on the ethical issues I faced and then illustrate my analytic procedure.

### **3.1. The Turn to language: Theoretical basis of CDP**

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the linguistic turn emerged in Western philosophy. This phenomenon eventually influenced the social sciences and their related disciplines (Deetz, 2003). In simple terms, these fields started focusing on language, how people relate to it and form versions of the world through discourse. A byproduct of the linguistic turn was Discourse analysis (DA), an approach that can be broadly defined as the analysis of language, rhetoric or even semiotic events (Carver, 2002). However, the interdisciplinary emphasis on language and the plurality of discursive approaches render a single definition of DA challenging to produce (Carver, 2002). In this thesis, I employ the strand of DA known as critical discursive psychology. In this chapter, I will discuss it in relation to my thesis.

### **3.2. Austin, Speech act theory and discourse analysis: the theoretical and historical basis of CDP**

The discursive psychological tradition in the UK is heavily influenced by the language philosopher J.L. Austin, who produced speech act theory. Austin suggested that sentences are not just descriptive per se; they have a more performative function.

Interpersonal communication consists of speech acts, sentences that "do things", perform actions and can transform reality (Potter, 2001). For example, the sentence "I declare war on the Philippines" has severe practical implications as it signifies the start of a war. He named such sentences performatives due to their performative nature (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Austin further stated that performatives can only be performed correctly under certain conditions, called felicity conditions. This term refers to conditions that cannot be violated (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The idea that ties felicity conditions with a discursive analytical (DA) perspective is that DAs place utterances in a societal context, where certain beliefs are required for utterances to perform their function. This theory approaches discourse through a psychological lens (Potter, 2001); discursive psychologists evolved the speech act theory by bridging the gap between the material and social elements of language by accompanying it with empiricism (Billig, 2009). Discourse analysis in psychology was further developed in 1987 when Potter and Wetherell published their book "Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour". By employing anti-realism and constructionism, they developed a methodology that explores how society, phenomena and events are created through discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

DA explores how individuals manage and achieve certain functions such as apologies, emotions, claims, complaints through the use of language. DA treats language as action: talk "does" things, and people perform actions through talking, depending on the context (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In DA, discourse is "constructive and constructed" (p. 200) (Wetherell et

al., 2001). For example, self-representations can be constructed through a plethora of formulations, and thus examining language includes variation, depending on what the speaker is trying to achieve (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

The same concepts, individuals and phenomena can be described in multiple ways, and there will be variations in individuals' accounts. DAs explore the flexibility/multiplicity of these variations, the way discourse is formulated and how it is being used (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). When people speak, they place concepts/individuals in evaluative social positions-and not always intentionally. DAs suggest that the analysis of the sequences of talk and variations in accounts should consider the context in which they are produced. Finally, DAs suggest that objects and concepts are formulated in the discourse instead of being omnipresent (Wetherell et al., 2001).

The subsequent development of Potter & Wetherell's (1987) variation of discourse analysis led to two schools of thought. The first one, also known as discursive psychology (sometimes referred to as the Loughborough School), draws more heavily on principles of conversation analysis. Consequently, it emphasises on sequential and interactional elements of talk and the analysis of naturally occurring data (Seymour-Smith, 2015; Taylor, 2014). The second one is named Critical Discursive Psychology (Edley, 2001).

### **3.3. Critical Discursive Psychology**

The term Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP) originates from the work of Margaret Wetherell. She used this term to describe a "synthetic approach" to analysing discourse that investigates power dynamics in large social contexts (Taylor, 2014). CDPs analyse interactions and the discursive resources that form the bigger societal pictures (Taylor, 2014). CDP combines micro and macro elements; it explores both the fine grain elements of speech and the broader socio-historical elements of discourse. It is the intersection of the discourse in

everyday life and the political aspects and sub-terrain of discourse (Wiggins, 2016).

Wetherell (1998) draws her arguments from post-Marxist political theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe. Thus, CDP is influenced by social postmodernism and post-structuralism (a point I will further tackle in section 3.8.3.).

As a result of its post-structuralist theoretical pillars, CDP approaches identity as something that is accomplished within specific contexts and discursive terrains. However, it is an approach that highlights that reality is not entirely constructed from the beginning in each conversation (Edley & Wetherell, 1999). Instead, CDP recognises that interactions and sequences occur in socio-historical contexts (Locke & Budds, 2020). Thus, the interpretive repertoires individuals employ are provided to them by culture and history (Edley, 2001). When individuals produce speech, they are invoked into making choices based on the constructions available to them by society; yet some discursive formulations are used more often and constitute what is perceived as common sense, both individually and socio-culturally (Edley & Wetherell, 1999). CDP is influenced by Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Bates, 1975); it adheres to the theoretical stance that we are ruled by ideologically dominant beliefs that become cultural assumptions and what we consider common sense or social reality (Edley, 2001).

For example, CDP recognises gendered practices as a form of collective habitus and highlights that they are ideologically perceived as dominant and consequently become a routine. Thus, whilst individuals can construct themselves as they want to, they rely on a collective historical version that provides them with the affordances of what can be said (Edley, 2001). In CDP, identities are not just statements. Instead, they are negotiated, collectively co-produced and dependent on power relations. Yet, identities are not simply theoretical but also related to material conditions and socio-political privileges or lack

thereof. As a result, the discursive reproduction of such structures comes in various benefits and costs (e.g., power relations and imbalances) (Edley, 2001).

Consequently, CDP explores, yet also challenges, discursive conceptualisations of pre-established common sense and "normalcy". It questions the dominant understanding of power both within and outside psychology. More specifically, it explores prejudice and inequality in the very arguments/rhetoric in which they appear to be naturalised and perpetuated (Taylor, 2014). As seen above, CDP suggests that we are both producers and products of the discourse (Locke & Budds, 2020). Yet analysts are also interested in the often conflicting and antithetical relationship we have with language and the historical conditions behind this relationship (Edley, 2001). CDP is interested in how socio-political/cultural productions maintain and subvert identity (Edley, 2001). CDP does not view discourse and ideology as linear and instead embraces the idea that we can employ conflicting antithetical constructions to argue for different positions (Wiggins, 2016). For example, when referring to gender, Edley (2001) discusses that gender is performative, and therefore, gender identities are characterised by fluidity based on the context. Simply put, gender is discursively accomplished, and thus challenging the status quo can be a matter of discursive practices (Edley, 2001).

CDPs employ a broader interpretive framework than other discursive approaches (Locke & Budds, 2020; Wiggins, 2016). As a result, they are more open to collecting data through interviews and focus groups (Seymour-Smith, 2017). However, they are also open to working with naturally occurring data (for further information regarding the distinction between naturally occurring and contrived data, the reader is encouraged to read Speer (2008), Wetherell (1998), Locke and Budds (2020) and Wiggins (2016)).

### **3.4. Theoretical differences: differences between DP and CDP**

CDP is similar to Discursive Psychology as it focuses on how individuals construct versions of reality when speaking in various contexts and how identity can be accomplished in relation to the setting. However, it also differs, as it does not assume that reality is entirely constructed in discourse but pre-exists on a socio-cultural level (Edley, 2001). Instead, CDPs focus on how individuals draw their resources from the dominant cultural constructions they are provided with. CDP combines macro and microelements in its approach to discourse (Locke & Budds, 2020; Wiggins, 2016). It is a two-sided approach, as it captures the relationship between the individual and the discourse. It shows how everyday life is constructed around ideology (Edley, 2001). Consequently, contrary to other discursive approaches, CDP is less concerned with the sequential aspects of talk and more concerned with the broader talk patterns across the data set (Locke & Yarwood, 2017; Wiggins, 2016).

### **3.5. Foucault and CDP**

As mentioned in the sections above, multiple discursive approaches emerged from the establishment of DA in psychology. These approaches are often distinguished between bottom-up and top-down approaches. Bottom-up approaches use the data as a basis and do not focus on ideology. On the contrary, top-down discursive approaches focus on ideology, power, and socio-cultural contexts (Seymour-Smith, 2017). As a result, they draw on interpretative repertoires and socio-cultural narratives; thus, CDP is a top-down approach (Edley & Wetherell, 1997). Top-down approaches (including CDP) suggest that the analyst, whilst a member of society themselves, might be able to discover things in the data that ordinary individuals could perhaps ignore (Edley & Wetherell, 1997). Yet one of the CDP's theoretical principles is that this binary perception of discourse is wrong. For CDPs, language reflects both the individual elements of the conversation and the broader patterns of cultural understanding. The individual produces -and yet simultaneously is a product of- discourse

(Edley and Wetherell, 1997). CDP does not perceive the contradictions in the discursive terrain as something to resolve but as something to explore (Edley and Wetherell, 1997).

Multiple top-down approaches draw on the French philosopher Michel Foucault (Seymour-Smith, 2017). Foucault emphasises the politics of truth and, as a result, the discourse that constitutes the current truth. He examined the historical periods and how they provided the social conditions for knowledge to be reproduced. He employed the term episteme to indicate that in any culture there is a form of affordances in relation to knowledge; they can be noticed in certain historical periods and ground the truth and discourses (Foucault, 1970). Thus, Foucault did not believe in the existence of one universal truth; he instead supported the idea of regimes of truth. The discourse was the basis of the existing “truths”, and Foucault explored how such truths and knowledge were (re)produced through power relationships and structures in socio-cultural contexts (Seymour-Smith, 2017). More specifically, he was interested in what discourses the society reproduces as truth, their differentiation from what is considered false and the process through which these constructs are sanctioned

For Foucault, power is not linear; it circulates and formulates a net. Power relations exist in every social interaction. Power is productive as it formulates pleasure, knowledge and produces discursive formulations, e.g., the attempts to regulate sexuality through laws, tv programs etc (Hall, 2001). Foucault does not claim there are no dominant positions of power, but pays attention to the multiple localised domains of power. These conceptions of the micro-physics of power are applied to the body. Foucault placed the body in the centre of power/knowledge (further discussed in Chapter 4) (Hall, 2001). According to Foucault, the body is involved in politics and thus, it is dominated by power relations and produced by discourse (Butler, 1989). It is the discourse that produces knowledge and not the subject, and thus Foucault emphasised how the individual was constructed in various historical eras (Hall,



2001). CDP has been influenced by Foucault as it maintains the emphasis on the discourse and the socio-historical and political/power relations. This influence reflects on the concept of positioning (Seymour-Smith, 2017). CDP and synthetic discursive approaches are influenced by post-structuralism. This influence manifests by the tendency of these approaches to maintain the notion that meaning is everchanging. Meaning is also characterised by history-oriented discursive "clumps" and hegemonic articulations (Wetherell, 1998). Moreover, CDP is influenced by post-structuralism as it considers participants passive and active. They can present themselves as the source of meaning-making, yet they can be passive too, as they are not always the originating basis of the discourse (Wetherell, 1998).

### **3.6. CDP and sexting: a justification**

The combination of the exploration of the fine elements of discourse along with the socio-psychological/cultural elements which characterise CDP makes it ideal for studying sexting. As showcased in the introduction, contemporary qualitative and quantitative research indicates that adolescents' meaning-making of consent has been under-researched. Moreover, gender roles and consequent power dynamics are intertwined with sexting practices and perceptions. CDP explores both the micro elements of language and the arguments in the context they are produced (Edley, 2001; Locke & Budds, 2020). As a result, CDPs focus on issues related to gender (Edley, 2001; Locke & Yarnwood; 2017) and how they are constructed, as well as how hierarchies and hegemonic performances of gender are negotiated and resisted (Seymour-Smith, 2017).

Furthermore, the focus on the socio-cultural and political or historical aspects would be beneficial when studying the discursive constructions of the three groups of key stakeholders. CDP allows for an exploration of their discursive meaning production that considers their separate, idiosyncratic contexts. A more holistic approach of the discursive

and the extra discursive terrain will provide us with an understanding of how the key stakeholders position themselves in the discourse and their discursive ecologies in relation to gender and power. CDP is an approach that examines the cultural and social underpinning and resources of the discourse, thus it is context-sensitive (Seymour-Smith, 2017); as discussed in the introduction chapter, sexting and consent are by their nature context-sensitive and related to societal power imbalances and structures.

Finally, as Edley (2001) suggested, by examining the discursive constructions and how they are socially situated, one can perhaps challenge the status quo through discursive practices. As CDPs suggest, the reproduction of discursive structures comes in various benefits and costs. The present thesis can provide some initial theorisation of how the existing discursive constructions can have theoretical and some “material” (in the form of social injustice) consequences.

### **3.7. CDP, sexting and feminism**

My take on psychology is essentially feminist; much of CDP explores issues of gender and identity from a feminist perspective (Locke & Yarwood, 2017). As further elaborated in Chapter 7, I believe that in the historical context of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of feminism, a female sexuality has not been individually conceptualised, and society is still widely operating under the male gaze. We are still defined through the male and women are still the Other, whilst non-binary individuals are defined as the Other to the binary (further discussed in chapters 4,5,6). Female sexuality and emancipation are still conceptualised and are still historically recent; to paraphrase Slavoj Žižek (2013) we feel free because we lack the discursive frame to express our unfreedom.

Due to the concerns mentioned above, the feminism I employ in this draft has post-structuralist elements. I am heavily influenced by Butler (1988); thus in this thesis, I will

tackle gender performativity. Here, gender is perceived as a constructed identity, a repetition of certain acts depending on the socio-historical context and thus the possibilities of gender can be found in the subversion of such acts. Such understandings of gender appear to be intertwined with CDP; as Edley (2001) suggests, gender is performative and identities are fluid.

### **3.8. CDP: Analytical tools**

#### ***3.8.1. Interpretative repertoires***

The concept of IRs was introduced by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984), who studied how interpretative procedures were reproduced in specific contexts to showcase actions and beliefs through discourse. Potter and Wetherell (1987) established IRs as a “register” of terminology on which individuals draw to characterise phenomena, people or situations around them. IRs are the post-structuralist depositories through which people construct the world; blocks they use to build interactions in domains of the social life (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). They are a familiar set of arguments and characterisations based on shared understanding (Edley 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Interpretative repertoires are a range of resources one can borrow from to navigate the social world. Yet these resources are already provided by history as they consist of socio-cultural common sense/knowledge (Edley, 2001).

Interpretative repertoires do not set or predicate the contexts; they are the resources people rely on within contexts to accomplish various verbal tasks (Charlebois, 2015). They are often present in jokes or figures of speech (Nortio et al., 2016). For example, according to traditional repertoires, females are the primary caregivers of children, whilst men are primarily financial providers. A contrasting example of a more modern IR is both females and males co-performing these roles (Charlebois, 2015).

Interpretative repertoires play a pivotal role in CDP, as they signify the overall socio-political context of the discourse. As Edley (2001) suggests, they reflect socio-cultural history. By understanding the ways individuals talk about phenomena, people or events, their discursive set of limitations and possibilities is reflected. Thus, we can vaguely understand the discursive terrain by noticing what is said about a subject (Edley, 2001). There is no standardised way through which interpretative repertoires become evident in an analysis-and there are no strict guidelines on identifying them. One can attempt it by familiarising themselves with the data set-usually by collecting the data themselves and transcribing them, practising repeatedly and noticing similar lines of arguments or ways to speak about a particular subject amongst their participants (Edley, 2001; Locke & Budds, 2020).

### ***3.8.2. Ideological dilemmas***

Billig et al. (1988) suggest that the dilemmatic aspects of thinking are not easily defined and emerge through the development of arguments during conversations. They draw attention from simply studying the individual to the social pre-conditions which lead towards individual thought. They suggested that whilst psychology had a long tradition of studying the arguments and the process through which participants decided amongst dilemmas, psychologists did not focus on where they obtained their argumentative knowledge from. This knowledge is often available through concepts of history, culture and ideology. Different cultural and economic conditions produce dilemmas that are highly based on ideology.

Billig et al. (1988) challenge the Marxist conceptualisation of ideology which emphasises the ideological dominance of the benefits of the bourgeoisie. Instead, they focus on the individualistic aspects of it which characterise western society. They suggested that people face dilemmas because they often adhere to a theoretical ideology that contrasts the ideology of everyday life; intellectual ideology is how things should be, whilst lived ideology is how one orients to their day-to-day life. Yet people are not passive subjects to ideology but

active thinkers. To further elaborate, intellectual ideology is a more philosophical, idealistic set of beliefs. Lived ideology is the knowledge of everyday life; it is what constitutes common sense and it is parallel to what many theorists have in the past described as culture. Lived and theoretical ideologies are basically formalised and non-formalised forms of consciousness, and yet, they contain many antithetical and often conflicting arguments. Lived and theoretical ideologies are often contrasting ideas incorporated in the way everyday life is structured (Billig et al. 1988; Edley, 2001). Ideological dilemmas are often employed to represent various cultural schemata of these conflicting forms of knowledge in a conversation.

Some ideological dilemmas in the contemporary rhetoric regarding intimate partner violence towards women are often "why doesn't she pack her stuff and leave" and "she made her bed she will sleep on it" (Towns & Adams, 2009). Whilst the first one implies a sense of agency and independence and the ability to look after oneself, it emphasises more individualistic beliefs. It additionally implies she is weak for not leaving. The second one appears to present a more passive image, implying that the woman is doomed to live with her abusive husband. It is entirely antithetical to the first element, as initially she seems to act to her own decision and self-interest and now has to deal with the consequences of it, implying that by choosing the relationship, she chose the violence and she should passively stay and accept her fate (Towns, & Adams, 2009). If she stays, "she's not resilient enough to leave", but if she leaves "she chose him, she should stay and deal with the consequences of her choice".

### ***3.8.3. Subject positions***

Subject positions emerge from the Althusserian approach to ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 2014). Althusser was a prominent Marxist French philosopher. He suggested that ideology creates and constructs subjects by placing individuals into

positions—the way people process and perceive the world and themselves is based on ideologies and discourse. According to Althusser, people were both produced and subjected by/to discourse. Althusser introduced the concept of interpellation; Interpellation is the procedure through which a position is open for an individual through the discourse (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

An example of interpellation is past military USA campaign posters (“we want you to join the army”). By using the word "you" people are being called as individuals, and they are additionally being positioned by this utterance. A gender-related example is the "It's a boy/girl" announcement, which positions the baby as such (Butler, 1990). Individuals do not just encounter pre-existing rhetoric; they are defined in the moment the discourse is produced, and they simultaneously consume it (Edley, 2001). The concept of interpellation is influenced by post-structuralists, who perceive subject positions as constructed in the discourse. The agent is constructed by a plurality of (often unrelated to each other) discourses which are constantly displaced. Identities are usually constructed by pre-constituted discourses and can be read by the prism of their relevant rhetoric (Wetherell, 1998)

Davies and Harre (1990) state that the individual emerges, is constituted and reconstructed during social interactions. One's identity is an everchanging concept, depending on the positions made available to them in the discourse. Within the stories we say, there are different discursive formulations, moral judgments and subject positions. Selfhood is characterised by plurality and multiplicity (Davies and Harre, 1990).

When individuals speak and act through a position, they invoke the history of them being placed in multiple different positions. Positioning could be unintentional; individuals could believe that this is just the way someone talks about a specific topic. Moreover, positioning is not linear. Instead, individuals operate in two different functions in

conversations; constructing the storylines and adhering to the logic of the context of the topic discussed. By assigning roles in stories, we thus position people (Davies and Harre, 1990). Often, in conversations, cultural history and stereotypes (e.g., mother/child) might be invoked as a resource from which we draw. Such stereotypes might be interpreted differently by individuals and can also be resisted (Davies and Harre, 1990). Subject positions are the ideas about identity that emerge as an individual is speaking, and because speech is fluid and everchanging, the identities are affected by it and become everchanging too. Identity, however, does not simply passively submit to discourse; it is the by-product of the individuals' mastery of the language.

Consequently, we often pose ourselves (or others) as subjects in our own discourse through positioning (Edley, 2001; Goodman, 2017). Positioning gives us the agency to consider ourselves as choosing our place in a conversation, depending on the storylines we are familiar with. This way, we can incorporate our own lived experiences and thus our own understanding of characters and storylines in these stories (Davies & Harre, 1990).

In CDP, subject positions are based on the idea that identity is not fixed and stable. This analytical tool emphasises when and how identities are employed in a conversation (Goodman, 2017). Therefore, subject positions are the concepts that tie interpretative repertoires and discourses in the formation and construction of one's idea of self or others. (Edley, 2001). The ever-changing nature of positions is dependent on the cultural and political context and implications and make broader interpretations of the data based on the analysts' own socio-cultural understanding (Seymour-Smith, 2017).

### **3.9. Choosing participants; drawing on philosophy, literature and politics**

Heteroglossia (multilingualness) is a term that originated by Mikhail Bakhtin (1935) and his work "Discourse in the Novel." Heteroglossia describes the existence of

multiple variations of language simultaneously in one linguistic code. Language does not imply a pre-existing individuality; it is the product of the languages used in multiple social contexts coming together. Heteroglossia depicts the different dialects that exist in one language and individuals' attempts to reclaim it and appropriate each others' ideas. The different ways people speak might be a product of gender, geo-political and socio-cultural differences. The plurality in various formats and aspects of speaking is indicative of the circumstances and rules of the socio-cultural context. The concept of heteroglossia explains why it would be beneficial to explore how sexting is discursively constructed by adolescents, parents/carers and teachers/educators. This thesis will attempt to explore the discourse of the key stakeholders and how a recent phenomenon, prevalent in the latest generation, is becoming discursively constructed by adolescents, parents/carers and teachers.

My initial interest was in adolescent sexting and consent/lack thereof, thus, I decided to explore adolescents' constructions. When reviewing the literature, I noticed a lack of approaches exploring adolescent discourse regarding consent. As I was interested in the gendered and power aspect of sexting, I attempted to recruit adolescents that self-identified as any gender. Moreover, I decided to recruit adolescents 16-18 as research suggests that it is the age range most familiar with sexting. One should also determine their corpus while considering its “political” aspects (Leudar et al., 2008). The introduction chapter presents an issue of lack of vocalisation of consent issues around sexting. In approximately a decade of research, researchers have only started to acknowledge adolescents' constructions, especially in relation to coercion pre sexting as opposed to non-consensual dissemination of images. It is common that the educational and psychological discourse leaves adolescent constructions and meaning making unattended (Doring, 2014; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021), whilst popular culture frames adolescent sexting as deviant (McGovern & Lee, 2018).



Similarly, as mentioned in the literature review, parents and teachers were additionally invoked in multiple media and academic articles as the ones responsible for helping adolescents. However, an overall lack of vocalisation was present in the case of parents/carers. Moreover, the generational gap made it more difficult for them to be accustomed to technology. Therefore, I found it concerning that parents were invoked into the carer position; I realised that the current generation of parents could be less technologically proficient compared to their children (Akçayır et al., 2016). Thus, I was interested in their meaning-making in relation to such phenomena, especially as they came from a different techno-historical era and context. Finally, there have been a few academic attempts to discuss sexting education. However, there is no research on teachers' meaning-making. Therefore, I decided to explore teachers as they were often invoked into similar carer positions as parents.

The final reason for the choice of participants was the differences and similarities in their discursive productions. My interest also lies in comparing the discursive productions of these different key stakeholder groups. Their different status and socio-cultural and techno-historical/generational understanding provided rich insight into the context-sensitivity of the discursive productions related to adolescent sexting.

### **3.10. Study design/objectives**

My thesis consisted of three different yet complimentary studies with different research objectives and key stakeholders. In this section, I will elaborate on the design of my studies. I will also justify my choice of joint interviews and focus groups. Finally, I will additionally elaborate on the rationale of choosing my participant samples.

#### **Study 1**

The first study explores the following research question and sub-questions:

- How do adolescents construct sexting?
- What is the role of sexting in adolescents' construction of relationships and intimacy?
- How does gender impact sexting behaviour?
- How do adolescents justify, negotiate and resist coercive sexting?

The dataset of this study consisted of one focus group (FG), 3 mini FGs (consisting of 3-4 participants) and one dyadic interview. The study included 18 UK based adolescents aged 16-18. Each FG was conducted through Microsoft Teams (MT) and lasted approximately 1 hour. The FGs were audio-recorded via a digital recorder. I offered £10 Amazon vouchers as compensation, funded by the BPS Social Psychology Section through the Pump-Priming and Dissemination Fund. Vignettes were used to facilitate conversation and avoid disclosures of personal incidents due to ethical issues (further discussed below). A semi-structured interview schedule was constructed based on the topics I aimed to address and the vignettes (appendix section A.3.).

## **Study 2**

The second study explored the following research questions and sub-questions:

Research Question: How do parents/carers of adolescents make sense, construct and negotiate the sexting behaviours of their adolescent children?

Sub-questions:

- How do parents frame and construct sexting?
- How are incidents of sexting contextualised in relation to gender?
- How parents construct their engagement with adolescent sexting and safety regarding protection from sexting?

-How parents construct sexting consent and coercion?

I explored these research questions by employing dyadic interviews (joint interviews consisting of 2 individuals) with parents of adolescents aged 12-18. Alternatively, in cases of single-parent households or when the other parent was not available, I also interviewed carers of adolescents or adults with care responsibilities such as family friends who looked after the kids or relatives with duties akin to parenting. My dataset consisted of 15 dyadic interviews (N=30), lasting approximately one hour each. The joint interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and were audio-recorded via a digital recorder.

### **Study 3**

The third study explored the following questions:

-How do educators of adolescents make sense, construct, manage and negotiate the sexting behaviours of their students?

As well as the following sub-questions:

- How do educators/teachers frame and construct sexting and consent?
- How do educators/teachers construct their role in relation to adolescent sexting?
- How do educators/teachers construct the education and monitoring practices related to sexting and the protection of their students?
- How are incidents of sexting and consent contextualised in relation to gender?

For this study, I conducted 30 individual, semi-structured interviews (N=30) with educators of adolescents (aged 12-18), or school staff that had sexting education related duties (such as safeguarding officers with insight into the PSHE curriculum). The interviews lasted approximately an hour, were conducted via Microsoft teams, and audio recorded via a digital

recorder.

### **3.11. Methodological decisions and justifications**

#### ***3.11.1. Recruiting participants online***

Due to the lockdown restrictions that emerged out of Covid 19, I resorted to the cyberspace for the recruitment of participants. Moreover, as I do not originate from the UK and thus due to my immigration-related limited network, recruitment through word of mouth was challenging. As a result, I decided to recruit via social media, through creating leaflets which explained my study and contained my contact details.

For the first study, I initially attempted to recruit from schools. I compiled a list of the schools in the East Midlands and contacted them via email. However, schools were not responsive, mainly due to their pandemic-induced increased workload, as well as the sensitive nature of the topic. Therefore, only the first focus group was recruited through a school in the East Midlands. The rest of the recruitment happened through social media. I initially created leaflets with the details of the study and posted them online. The main domains I recruited from were Facebook groups for young people e.g. A level Facebook groups, gaming groups, hobbies related groups etc. I additionally created video advertisements of the study that were posted on Tik Tok, which is a new social media application. Finally, I asked various acquaintances to post the study on their Instagram pages.

For the second study, I asked acquaintances to post the leaflet advertisements I created on social media. Moreover, I additionally posted the study in parenting fora such as Mums Net, as well as social media such as Reddit, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. A few participants participated after seeing the study on Twitter. A significant part of the recruitment for this study took place either through word of mouth and acquaintances, or Facebook. More specifically, I posted in over 100 Facebook groups for parenting, groups for

parents or step-parents of adolescents, communities related to festivals or hobbies, community/neighbourhood related groups. The recruitment for the second study lasted for more than a year, as many parents/carers found the topic challenging.

Finally, for the third study, I posted the study on Twitter; I used hashtags related to teaching, tagged teaching related accounts who then reposted my study and had acquaintances reposting the study advertisement. The vast majority of the recruitment took place via Facebook; after obtaining admin permission I recruited through a variety of teaching groups, groups related to teaching PSHE or other related subjects such as History teachers, Maths teachers etc.

### ***3.11.2. Conducting data collection through Microsoft teams: a justification***

During my post graduate studies, a global pandemic emerged. Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdowns caused significant difficulties in conducting interviews and focus groups face-to-face (a topic I will discuss in section 3.12.). Many universities and professional bodies encouraged online data collection in response to the pandemic. Due to the time restrictions of the PhD program and for health and safety reasons, I also decided to conduct all my studies online or via telephone interviews. Therefore, I had to re-design my pre-existing studies to conduct them through Microsoft Teams (a topic I will discuss below). Moreover, I recruited participants through acquaintances and social media (Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram, Reddit) by posting leaflets of my study and video advertisements.

The change to online data collection has both advantages and disadvantages. For example, online FGs might have a few disadvantages (e.g., if someone does not use their camera, the researcher cannot observe non-verbal cues, and many technical issues can emerge). However, one of the main difficulties with focus groups is arranging a time to meet. As adolescents still attend school and sometimes work, their free time is limited. As a result,

conducting focus groups was a beneficial solution. Through online FGs I could recruit participants from multiple places in the UK (Calvo-Valderrama et al., 2021). Similarly, phone and videoconferencing interviews, allow recruitment from a wider geographical perspective (Irani, 2019; Knox and Burkard, 2009). As Knox and Burkard (2009) suggest, phone interviews are fast, cost-effective, and the lack of interviewer effects might help the participant feel they can disclose more. Moreover, videoconferencing interviews offer scheduling flexibility and allow the participant and the researcher to engage in the process from their own familiar environment (Irani, 2019).

### ***3.11.3 Conducting focus groups: the process and a justification***

To conduct focus groups, I followed the guidelines on interviewing provided by Turner III (2010). Based on their suggestion, I designed open-ended questions and highlighted that participants could respond on their own terms. I worded the questions clearly and neutrally; however, due to my feminist perspective, I asked several gender-related questions. I additionally ensured I included follow-up questions or prompts in my interview schedule, so I could receive optimal responses from participants and ensure they understood the FG questions (the FG schedule can be found in section 1.3.).

In discursive psychology, interviews and focus groups have been the source of methodological tensions. They are often considered contrived and research generated data but much less so in CDP, which often favours focus groups and interviews (for further information, the reader can engage with Taylor (2014), Wiggins (2016), Speer (2008) Wetherell (1998)). As Goodman (2017) stated, both contrived and naturally occurring data are good options, as long as one justifies them.

Focus groups are group work and thus provide rich, interactive data. More specifically, in sex-related feminist research focus groups carry many benefits. They allow

the participants to prioritise their own constructions and preferred words for sex (Wilkinson, 1998). The interactive elements of focus groups provide us with nuanced responses and offer contextual data with negotiation elements, as participants can contradict each other.

Moreover, the researcher can explore how meaning can be co-constructed and the way inequalities are constructed when participants speak (Wilkinson, 1998). Focus groups also highlight the affordances of the "normative discourses"; what is perceived as the widely accepted rhetoric around specific topics (Smithson, 2000).

#### ***3.11.4. Joint interviews with parents/carers; a justification***

Since I adopt a feminist perspective and the role of gender is essential to sexting, I wanted to explore how gender affected the ways parents/carers discursively negotiated sexting. Joint interviewing offers the opportunity to reduce “traditional” gender norms that can be evident in one-to-one interviews (Seale, et al., 2008).

Joint interviews, also known as dyadic interviews, are a data collection technique during which the researcher interviews and interacts with a participant dyad (Polak, & Green, 2016). Joint interviews accumulate both the benefits of focus groups and individual interviews; they maintain an interactive nature whilst providing space for detailed narratives, which can be lost in focus groups. Joint interviews offer a number of advantages, some of which include its interactive nature, which itself can be studied by the researcher, and the rich data the interaction itself generates (Polak & Green, 2016). Participants have the opportunity to comment on each other's accounts which provides the researcher with rich perspectives; as individuals interact, we obtain access to their shared experiences and meanings (Zarhin, 2018). Whilst dyadic interviews are not extremely common in psychology, they are often employed when interviewing family members with pre-existing relationships (Morgan et al., 2013).

For the reasons above, and as I believe the interactive nature of the joint interviews will provide me with more authentic interactions, I decided to conduct dyadic interviews with parents/carers of adolescents (the dyadic interview schedule can be found in the appendix section B.3). Dyadic interviews let participants reclaim control more than individual interviews, as they are free to co-construct their own version of reality (Morgan et al., 2013).

### ***3.11.5. Individual, semi-structured interviews; a justification***

Individual interviews are one of the most common means of collecting qualitative data, as they provide rich, contextual information on the negotiation of meaning (Alshenqeeti, 2014). In the present study, I employed a semi-structured interview design with teachers of adolescents (the interview schedule can be found in appendix section C.3). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to have a set of questions in order to probe the interviewee's answers. Researchers exploring under-researched topics would benefit from individual semi-structured interviews as such topics pose difficulty in obtaining data, due to their sensitive nature (Fylan, 2005). As mentioned in Chapter 2, teachers have been a very understudied population, adolescent sexting is a challenging and often sensitive topic and thus, the interviews provided me with rich data on their constructions.

The guidelines I followed in conducting interviews were simple: good qualitative interviews are rich in detail, and the researcher is there to mainly listen. Therefore, interviewees should feel at ease and talk freely (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Moreover, as Alshenqeeti (2014) suggested, participants were encouraged at the end of the process to express further thoughts on the topic that they did not have the chance to tackle otherwise.

### ***3.11.6 Developing vignettes for adolescents; justification and the design process***

During the focus groups with adolescents, I employed vignettes. The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021) highlights the need to protect participants, which amplifies



when the research topic is sensitive. The present thesis presents a multi-layered continuum regarding ethics, as issues of sexuality/sex-related activities can be sensitive. For example, researching sexting in relation to coercion and consent makes ethical issues more idiosyncratic. Moreover, disclosures of adolescent engagement in sexting raise legislative and child protection issues. Consequently, researching these topics can result in many issues, ranging from distress during the data collection process to potentially disclosing information causing legal implications. Therefore, I had to think of a way to minimise harm and protect those participating.

Vignettes are often perceived as a potential way to minimise harm to the participants. Their benefit is that by focusing on a third person or a story, rather than the participant or their own lived experiences, beliefs/constructs are easily explored; there is a desensitising element in discussing hypothetical scenarios (Barter & Renold, 1999). To construct my own vignettes, I followed the guidelines suggested by Bradbury-Jones et al. (2012) who suggest researchers should construct vignettes based on four pillars: data origin, the structure of the vignette, the production of realistic vignettes and the vignette being suitable to the participant group.

Regarding the development, multiple sources can be the basis of the vignettes such as previous studies on a topic, literature reviews, and experiences of individuals (Ulrich & Ratcliffe, 2007). Therefore, I decided to develop what is known as the composite vignette, which draws on a combination of examples emerging from different sources (Spalding & Phillips, 2007). This was an excellent way to distort the identifying details of some of the examples used and maintain naturalistic elements based on authentic experiences whilst maintaining the novelty of the approach.

I created two vignettes, one based on a cis heteronormative couple and one on an exchange of a homosexual couple; as Quayle and Cariola (2019) highlighted, novel sexting studies should attempt to include an LGBTQ related vignette. For the first vignette, I used one of the few LGBTQ cases of sexting I found on the news, where the adolescents were forcibly "outed" to their classmates. For the second vignette, I used some adolescent insights in past studies (McGovern et al., 2016). The cases/studies I based them upon in both the vignettes involved distressing details. Therefore, I did not include these, and I changed a few details so the original sources could not be identified (see appendix section A.3).

As a second consideration, Bradbury-Jones et al. (2012) draw attention to the format of the vignettes. I adopted a narrative style as I believe it fitted the scope of the study more than other formats. They additionally advise on the length of the vignette, suggesting that brief vignettes ameliorate the attention and understanding of the participants. They further commented that 200–300 words are ideal for adolescents. Therefore, I made mine as short and simple as possible and restricted myself to the proposed word limit.

The third concern is the realistic nature of the vignettes. A longstanding debate in qualitative research is that whilst individuals might respond to one thing during the interviews/focus groups, their actions or meaning-making in reality could be very different (Barter & Renold, 1999; Jenkins et al., 2010). However, their de-contextualisation from the actions which would take place in real scenarios can be beneficial. For example, in sensitive topics like sexting, it allows the discussion to take place without the participants having to disclose personal incidents/ their own course of action. Moreover, by synthesising vignettes based on real scenarios, participants are called to comment on realistic dynamics (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2012).

Finally, the fourth suggestion highlights that vignettes need to be easily understood. Furthermore, the language employed must be appropriate to the participants' educational background, age and socio-economic status. Therefore, I attempted to use simple expressions and language, which was proofread by my supervisory team, which consists of native English speakers. Furthermore, I sent the vignettes and their accompanying question to a native female 17-year-old adolescent, who peer-reviewed my documents for clarity of expression.

### ***3.11.7 Participants and design***

As seen earlier, the selection of the data corpus, participants and study design resulted in three separate studies. The present section summarises the design of each study, and describes the characteristics of the participant samples.

#### **Study 1**

Study 1 consisted of 1 focus group, three mini focus groups and 1 dyadic interview. The sample consisted of 18 adolescents, aged 16-18. Out of the 18 participants, 15 were female, 2 were male, and one was gender non-binary. One of the participants (Theo) self-identified as neuro-divergent (self-identified nonverbal autism). As a result, instead of participating in the FG verbally, they replied through the Microsoft Teams chat and due to the format of their replies Jeffersonian transcription was not applicable.

**Table 1**

| FG number     | Nickname | Age | Gender |
|---------------|----------|-----|--------|
| Focus group 1 | Nicole   | 18  | F      |
|               | Mindy    | 17  | F      |
|               | Anna     | 16  | F      |
|               | Felice   | 16  | F      |
|               | Sarah    | 16  | F      |
|               | Isabelle | 17  | F      |
| Focus group 2 | Abby     | 17  | F      |
|               | Jasmin   | 17  | F      |
|               | Marcus   | 18  | M      |
| Focus group 3 | Theo     | 18  | NB     |
|               | Zena     | 17  | F      |
|               | Tania    | 18  | F      |
|               | Chloe    | 16  | F      |
| Focus group 4 | Georgia  | 17  | F      |
|               | Shanon   | 18  | F      |
|               | Charles  | 18  | M      |
| Dyad          | Emmy     | 17  | F      |
|               | Jennifer | 17  | F      |

## Study 2

Study 2 consisted of 30 participants, who were parents/carers to adolescents aged 12-18. Out of 30 participants, 19 were female and 11 male. 9 were working class, and 21 middle class (determined due to their profession). Out of the dyadic interviews, 8 participants were parents, whilst the rest of the sample consisted of a combination of parents and carers such as step-parents, partners, relatives or friends who helped with the adolescents' upbringing.

**Table 2**

| Interview | Participants             | Class            | Gender of Children | Relationship  |
|-----------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------|---|
| 1         | Chloe (F) Dan (M)        | Working          | 1 boy 1 girl       | Parents   |
| 2         | Georgina (F) Nate (M)    | Working          | 2 girls            | Parents   |
| 3         | Steven (M) Katie (F)     | Middle           | 2 girls            | Parents   |
| 4         | Lina (F) Peter (M)       | Working          | 1 girl             | Parents   |
| 5         | Beatrice (F) Charles (M) | B Middle-Working | 2 boys and 1 girl  | Co-parenting each others' children from past relationships together |
| 6         | Sasha(F) Nate (M)        | Middle class     | 1 girl             | Sasha is the biological parent, Nate Step-Parent/Carer              |
| 7         | Bill (M) Margaret (F)    | Middle           | 1 boy 1 girl       | Parents   |
| 8         | Lily(F)Tim (M)           | Middle           | 2 girls            | Parents   |
| 9         | Anna (F) Mary (F)        | Working          | 2 girls and 1 boy  | Parent (A) and co-carer/relative (M)                                |
| 10        | Tiffany (F) Robert (M)   | Middle           | 1 boy              | Parents   |
| 11        | Nancy (F) Phil (M)       | Middle           | 1 girl 1 boy       | Parent (Phil)-step parent to Phil's daughter and parent (Nancy)     |
| 12        | Martha (F) Nicole (F)    | Middle           | 3 girls/N/A        | Parents/friends helping each other                                  |
| 13        | Rachel (F)Jonathan (M)   | Middle           | 1 boy and 1 girl   | Parents   |
| 14        | Clara (F) Taylor(F)      | Middle           | 4 girls            | Parents but friends helping each other with carer responsibilities  |
| 15        | Barbara (F) Fae (F)      | Middle           | 3 girls 1 boy      | Parents but friends who help each other too                         |

### Study 3

Study 3 consisted of 30 individual semi-structured interviews with school staff/educators/teachers of adolescents (working with adolescents aged 12-18). 23 self-identified as female and 7 as male. The age range was 24-55. The variety of different specialisations, job titles and schools is detailed in the table below.

**Table 3**

| Int number | Name      | Age | Gender | Position  |
|------------|-----------|-----|--------|---|
| 1          | Mia       | 48  | F      | STEM teacher, College   |
| 2          | Nana      | 25  | F      | Geography teacher,<br>Secondary                               |
| 3          | Marianne  | 35  | F      | Computer Science<br>Secondary                                 |
| 4          | Nate      | 45  | M      | English Secondary school                                      |
| 5          | Lindsay   | 46  | F      | Science, 11-18 secondary                                      |
| 6          | Barbara   | 25  | F      | English, Secondary  |
| 7          | Eve       | 24  | F      | English, Secondary  |
| 8          | Sam       | 34  | M      | Maths, 16-19  |
| 9          | Elisabeth | 26  | F      | Science, Secondary school                                     |
| 10         | Bella     | 29  | F      | Maths, High school  |
| 11         | Fiona     | 29  | F      | NQT Science/PSHE<br>secondary school                          |
| 12         | Sharon    | 37  | F      | Assistant headteacher,<br>wellbeing                           |
| 13         | Nicolas   | 28  | M      | PT Neuroscience teacher                                       |
| 14         | Nikita    | 45  | F      | History/PSHE, Secondary                                       |
| 15         | Pipa      | 40  | F      | Special Education<br>Computer science                         |
| 16         | Hubert    | 42  | M      | History, Secondary  |
| 17         | Moira     | 51  | F      | SEND  |
| 18         | Felicia   | 49  | F      | Safeguarding officer,<br>Secondary humanities,<br>PSHE/Sex ed |
| 19         | Lily      | 29  | F      | Module Leader   |
| 20         | Freddy    | 45  | M      | Secondary<br>PSHE/Specialist RE                               |
| 21         | Flora     | 33  | F      | Head of PSHE  |
| 22         | Simone    | 44  | F      | SEND safeguarding lead  |
| 23         | Vina      | 23  | F      | Sociology, College  |
| 24         | Karen     | 55  | F      | Sociology and English   |
| 25         | Harry     | 29  | M      | Music school/private<br>lessons on instruments 4-<br>65       |
| 26         | Phil      | 28  | M      | History teacher PSHE  |
| 27         | Diane     | 27  | F      | Secondary school science                                      |
| 28         | Isla      | 42  | F      | Hospital education  |
| 29         | Charlotte | 25  | F      | Languages, secondary  |
| 30         | Hailey    | N/A | F      | Citizenship teacher   |

### ***3.11.8. On the language employed to describe participants' gender: a subversive approach***

It is noteworthy that the present thesis employs a variation of words to discuss gender, such as: females/girls/young women and males/boys/young men. It should be clarified that due to the critical and feminist aspects of the thesis, all the aforementioned words will be employed to refer to what is known as “gender”. It has been suggested that in scientific literature, the word “female” is often employed to reflect biological differences instead of gender. On the contrary, gender has been used to reflect socially constructed ideas regarding men and women (Clayton & Tannenbaum, 2016; Pryzgoda & Chrisler, 2000). Yet, over the past decades, feminist research seems to influence collective ways of “speaking” about issues relating to sex and gender. In the present thesis gender is partially conceptualised by the influence of Judith Butler’s (1990) work. More specifically, gender is conceptualised as something that is not consistent or fluid. Instead, it is a performance, a re-enactment and a collection of discursive accomplishments (Butler, 1990). Therefore, the present thesis tries to resist and subvert the vocabulary that has been ideologically dominant until now due to positivist conceptualisations of gender and sex (Fausto-Sterling, 2019). More specifically, it employs the word “female” as a signifier of resistance to the ideological hegemony of positivism that has been present in the social sciences (Strunk & Hoover, 2019; Wardell & Fuhrman, 1981): as Butler (1990) suggests, society often imposes gender as sex (Fausto-Sterling, 2019).

It is also noteworthy that the word “females” has been employed by politically conservative aspects of feminism to reflect physiological differences (Burke, 2022). As De Beauvoir (1989) and Frye (1978) suggested, the meaning of the word “woman” is often constructed by the dominant hegemonic patriarchal domains of oppression. As a result, I employ the words females/young women/girls and men/males/young men interchangeably to resist such understandings. I also do it to challenge hegemonic ideas of what “female” means



and to challenge biological essentialism; a number of theorists suggest that the dichotomy of gender and sex are essentialist a reductionist approach to a complex issue (Fausto-Sterling, 2019). This is employed to highlight the performative nature of not only gender but our socio-cultural understanding of sex in the cyberspace, a non-material domain, and to oppose positivist ideological hegemony in such context-sensitive topics.

### **3.12. Ethical issues and difficulties encountered**

#### ***3.12.1. Ethical issues***

It bears mentioning that in the UK, adolescent production and distribution of sexually suggestive material depicting underage individuals is illegal under the Protection of Children Act (1978). Sexting is a sex-related topic and the focus of this thesis is consent and coercion. These factors resulted in a plethora of ethical issues.

One such issue was that the illegality of adolescent sexting restricted me to exploring discursive constructions of perceptions instead of discourses regarding involvement in such practices. Confidentiality was a sensitive topic as limits were difficult to pinpoint; data was kept confidential, but if anyone disclosed their involvement in sexting or potential harm resulting from it, I had to report it to the authorities as a sexual offence. As the topics explored were sensitive, my participants might have felt distress during the focus groups or the interviews. Thus, I included leaflets that sign-posted them to relevant organisations if they felt upset or frustrated (see appendix section A.4.). Moreover, in focus groups and dyadic interviews, I had to add confidentiality clauses, reminding participants they should not disclose any identifying details of what was discussed in the research context to third parties. I had to be very explicit about the purpose and the procedure of the research with the participant. Therefore, I had to compose detailed ethical forms and repeat issues related to data usage, confidentiality and legislative concerns orally before the data collection. No elements of deception were included, and clarity was important.

### ***3.12.2. Issues encountered: research in the time of Covid-19, re-designing studies and recruitment***

Along with the expected PhD time restrictions and aforementioned ethical complications, COVID-19 emerged, causing worldwide self-isolation (initially voluntary and afterwards state-imposed). This constituted face to face data collection impossible. To avoid complete paralysis of my research endeavours, I decided to start my data collection by conducting study 2. I decided to proceed with Microsoft Teams (MT) data collection and recruited participants online, through social media and acquaintances. I requested that participants print and sign the consent forms and then scan/photograph them and send them back to me. If participants did not have access to a printer, a further option would be to ask participants to email the completed form back before the interview and explicitly say that they consent to participate in the research (or to verbally give/ record consent at the start of the interview).

Due to the pandemic's length, I then had to re-consider studies 1 and 3 while conducting study 2. I decided to conduct study 1 online, and followed the procedure outlined above. Moreover, I had to re-design study 3. My initial plan was to visit schools and record sexting education lectures; however, that could not be accomplished due to the pandemic. Therefore, I decided to conduct interviews with teachers. However, that meant that I had to re-design the study from the beginning and create an interview schedule and new ethics consent forms, which put further time-related pressure on my studies.

Recruitment also presented multiple issues. I attempted to recruit adolescents through schools by contacting over 100 schools in the East Midlands. However, schools either considered the topic inappropriate/challenging due to its sexual nature or had a significant workload due to Covid-19. As a result, I managed to conduct only 1 FG through an East Midlands educational institution.

Another difficulty that emerged was individually recruiting adolescents. To recruit participants, I created visual leaflets and video advertisements regarding my study and posted them on online platforms and applications. To further facilitate recruitment, I managed to get external funding by the BPS Social Psychology Section. The funding provided me with Amazon vouchers that I could use as incentives for adolescents' participation.

Even after recruiting participants, conducting the FGs was challenging. The participants had different schedules, and it was often difficult to manage to get more than three people at the same time. This resulted in mini focus groups. However, these difficulties ended up having a few benefits. For example, when it comes to online FGs, fewer participants (e.g., between 4 and 6 participants) provide more rich datasets than larger groups. Moreover, through online FGs I could recruit participants from multiple places in the UK (Calvo-Valderrama et al, 2021).

### **3.13. Analytic procedure**

All the interviews/FGs were audio recorded using a digital recorder. Once data were collected, I transcribed the material by using a simple version of Jeffersonian transcription (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In addition, I kept brief notes regarding the interviewees and the procedure after each interview. I followed Seymour-Smith's (2017) guidelines on conducting CDP research to analyse the data.

My initial familiarisation with the data came from transcribing it, and repeatedly listening to each recording to ensure adequate understanding of the dataset. I also spent significant time reading the transcripts. I performed a line-by-line coding either on the transcript or on separate papers assigned to each interview.

As Seymour-Smith (2017) suggests, when coding, I noticed patterns across the data that originated in my analytic observations. I noticed both the more delicate discursive work (e.g.,

extreme case formulations) and macro formulations that seemed culturally relevant (e.g., phrases such as "boys will be boys"). I then produced a data file including sections pointing out each pattern I noticed and the quotes accompanying it. I additionally produced a data file with my notes regarding IRs, subject positions and ideological dilemmas per study. Finally, I created handwritten maps regarding the overall patterns in each interview and how they relate to each other or how often they appeared. Based on the coding I performed previously, I paid attention to the prevalent constructions in the data set. I explored how the discursive subjectivities were constructed and discussed and what the discursive formations were doing.

CDP analysis and the skills that accompany it emerge through practice (Seymour-Smith, 2017). CDP analysis does not necessarily have specific steps, but happens through immersing oneself to the dataset and revising the patterns one found. Therefore, during my analysis, I paid attention to the context in which accounts are constructed and variability amongst the discursive constructions and affordances. I started by analysing the IRs, and then explored the subject positions. Finally, I mapped out the ideological dilemmas.

When writing up, I ensured I presented the context and included a detailed interpretation of the micro elements in the discourse. I then discussed the macro elements when evaluating the study. As Edley suggests (2001), IRs, subject positions and ideological dilemmas have to map out the discursive and material implications. I managed to do so through the aforementioned notes and maps per interview study. I have pointed out the implications at the end of each empirical chapter, embedding them in the wider socio-political and historical context. Consequently, I discuss how the dominant discursive formulations can be resisted as well as the positions that need to be opened.

## **Chapter 4: Adolescents' discursive constructions of sexting and consent**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings of my first study. In this chapter, I analyse focus group (FG) data and explore how adolescents discursively construct sexting and consent. I examine how these constructions open positions and dilemmas concerning gender, sexuality, power and coercion. I will initially present the interpretative repertoires concerning adolescent sexting. Moreover, I will discuss the ideological dilemmas in relation to sexting and consent that are present in the discursive terrain and their implications. Finally, I will discuss the positions that adolescents open regarding sexting and gender. This chapter will address the following question/sub-questions:

- How do adolescents construct sexting?
- What is the role of sexting in adolescents' construction of relationships and intimacy?
- How does gender impact sexting behaviour?
- How do adolescents justify, negotiate and resist coercive sexting?

The data I analyse originate from one focus group, 3 mini focus groups (focus groups with 3-4 participants) and one dyadic interview with adolescents (N=18). Further information regarding the sample will be found in table 1, Chapter 3. As this study used a vignette approach, the vignette characters (see Appendix section A.3. for the FG schedule and vignettes) occasionally feature in the data excerpts as Nick, Tom, Stella and John

### **4.2. Sexting and “sending nudes”: a contested category**

The first finding I discuss showcases the discursive tensions around the term “sexting” and how it constitutes a contested category. During the early stages of the focus group conversations, participants declared that sexting was not the dominant term that adolescents use. Instead, it was suggested that the phenomenon was often described through

words like “sending nudes”. Despite adolescents often challenging the term sexting, they were aware of its meaning. Some participants used it interchangeably with the term “sending nudes”. In half of the focus groups, participants declared that the slang term “sending nudes” was used instead of sexting and actively challenged the word “sexting”. Other participants did not address the term “sending nudes” directly and responded to the term sexting. Yet, they used “sending nudes” at various points during the focus group conversations. Without further context, the use of “sending nudes” can appear alien to academics and adults. However, it has gained cultural capital and recognition due to a wave of online imagery and jokes about sexting (Ringrose et al., 2021). Consider the excerpts below:

#### Focus group 2

1 **Anastasia** what does the term sexting mean to you(0.2)and how do  
 2 you call it  
 3 **Jasmin** just sending naked pictures to one another(.)or semi  
 4 naked(.)I’ve always called it sexting(.)I think that’s  
 5 the main(.)thing for it really(.)sending nudes(.)  
 6 stuff like that

#### Focus group 3

1 **Anastasia** so(.)what does the term sexting mean to you(.)do(.)do  
 2 you use the word sexting in general?  
 3 **Zena** (...)like I wouldn’t(.)I don’t know I’ve never heard the  
 4 word(.)I wouldn't think it's a massive thing  
 5 **Chloe** I agree honestly(.)I think in like our generation(.)  
 6 there's so many slang words for it(.)and nobody would  
 7 ever use the word sexting as like(.)are you going to  
 8 sext me and kind of(.)things like that?  
 9 (lines omitted)  
 10 **Chloe** because I know particularly(.)some boys are  
 11 congratulated for receiving nudes(.)and things like  
 12 that

In the first excerpt (FG2), Jasmin employs the minimiser (Pomerantz, 1984) “just” (line 3), perhaps to imply the simplicity of the meaning of the term sexting or to highlight that the meaning is prevalent and thus does not require further elaboration. She employs a first-person clarification (line 4) by suggesting that she has always called it sexting. The use of the

first-person pronouns makes the statement more subjective and denotes a sense of testimony and “primary access” (Wiggins, 2016) as the speaker is invoking their own experience. The employment of the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) “always”, in line 2, as well as her characterisation of the term sexting as “the main thing” aim to showcase the prevalence of the term. Extreme case formulations are often employed to legitimise claims, especially when an individual is performing a complaint, accusation, justification or defence. However, she proceeds to offer another alternative suggestion, the phrase “sending nudes”.

Yet, this construction appears different in the second excerpt (FG 3), where Zena suggests she has never heard the word sexting. The employment of the word “never” (line 3) constitutes an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986). It is accompanied by Zena’s lack of experience (lines 3-4) when acknowledging the word “sexting”. The extreme case formulation and Zena’s employment of the “I” pronoun aim to highlight the account she is providing and its accuracy. Zena provides a second assessment, suggesting that the word sexting is not “a massive thing” (line 4). She emphasises that through the phrase “I wouldn’t think”, hesitantly formulating the resistance to the term sexting as a personal opinion, perhaps in case it is wrong.

Zena’s statement elicits agreement from Chloe (“I agree”, line 5). The agreement is followed by the word “honestly” (line 5). The addition of the word honestly is perhaps evaluative to highlight the accuracy of the statement. Edwards and Fasulo (2006) suggest that honesty phrases (e.g., “honestly”) are used in first assessments. They work “with regard to their occurrence in the context of prior assessment-relevant stories or descriptions of persons or objects known to both parties” (Edwards & Fasulo, 2006, p. 370). It should be highlighted that Chloe offers an evaluation of the word sexting. She specifies that she talks about their generation’s slang (“our generation” line 5). The pronoun shift (from “I agree” to “our generation”) builds a collective consensus. The specification that it is a generational

vocabulary and the employment of the word “our” highlight that the terminology issue is a generational one. What is not said but is perhaps implied is that sexting is a terminology mostly used by older generations. There is an “us” versus “them” and “then” versus “now” framing of the term sexting that is implied here.

This inter-generational identity is enhanced by a double extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) (“nobody would ever”, lines 6-7), which emphasises the extent to which this generation does not use the word “sexting”. Chloe employs the words “nobody” and “would ever” (lines 6-7) to highlight how foreign the word is to them. The term “nobody” is an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) that further functions as corroboration, suggesting the existence of a collective agreement between teens regarding the terminology. This is followed by the employment of active voicing (Wiggins, 2016; Woffit, 1992), in which Chloe adds the word sext in a question, perhaps to suggest its lack of applicability or that it sounds foreign to her. A few questions later, as most of the participants, Chloe employs the words “receiving nudes”, without any further clarification of the term, which indicates its prevalence/normalcy amongst teens.

### **4.3. IR: Sexting as normal**

The majority of the constructions concerning sexting framed it as common, normative or even positive. Adolescents framed sexting as an act of curiosity and exploration, a substitute for sex, a way to maintain a relationship, and a way to be intimate without the drawbacks of physical intimacy. They declared that sexting was normal for their age group. They juxtaposed this sense of normalcy to the past, during which, as they argued, sexting was not a common phenomenon. However, adolescents also recognised that sexting had negative consequences, usually after my questions regarding the potential outcomes of sexting. Moreover, it was common for both normative and negative constructions to co-exist. In the following excerpt, the participants of FG 1 discuss why adolescents sext:



## Focus group 1

- 1 **Anastasia** so why do you think people your age(.)sext(.)each other
- 2 **Nicole** I think people would see it as a way of exploring their  
3 sexuality(.)as a way to have sexual intercourse with  
4 people(.)and potentially as a way to become more  
5 confident in their body
- 6 **Felice** I think it might be because we're not allowed to have  
7 sex at the moment(.)so it's a way if we are attracted  
8 we can see what we want
- 9 **Sarah** I think(.)it could be because it's kind of(.)become a  
10 normal thing for our generation so people engage in it  
11 because like they feel like it's normal to do so
- 12 **Isabelle** (muted) now(.)people don't really see any(.)wrong in it
- 13 **Anastasia** so what are the possible consequences of sexting(.) or  
14 if what you know(.)what are the positive consequences  
15 of sexting(0.2)anything you think
- 16 **Anna** I'd say ummm(.)a negative is if you don't know(.)the  
17 person(.)say you are in a relationship with them your  
18 breakup(.)he might use your photos or texts to shame  
19 you (.)with other people
- 20 **Anastasia** mhm
- 21 **Mindy** a positive might be that it discourages kind of younger  
22 people to have sexual intercourse and there's less kind  
23 of maybe teenage pregnancies or stuff like  
24 that(.)because they(.)choose to explore over social  
25 media and things like that(.)and through pictures  
26 rather than in person

In the excerpt above, all the participants formulate a script of sexting as a regular occurrence for adolescents. As Wiggins (2016) suggests, script formulations often entail words such as “would”. This can be observed in Nicole’s account (“people would”, line 2). Moreover, script formulations are used to frame behaviours as ordinary and even expected (Edwards, 1995). Another characteristic of script formulation is the employment of plurals; in almost all the participants’ accounts one can observe words such as “people” or “we” (lines 4,6,7,10,12). The employment of such plurals adds a sense of corroboration, a collective, in-group testimony. The script that is formulated here presents sexting as something young people do because they consider it normal and even beneficial. Nicole forms a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) in lines 2-5, whereas sexting is positively constructed as ameliorating

exploration, substituting sex and improving body image. Speakers employ three- part lists in order to make arguments more persuasive and complete (Jefferson, 1990). Felicia employs the pronoun “we” (line 7), invoking the ingroup adolescent identity and thus category entitlement. Felicia's account is more tentative, as she employs the words “I think” and “might” (line 6), perhaps due to the sensitivity of the topic and the invocation of sex. The tentative formulation could also be attributed to Felicia’s account counterarguing the previous participants’ formulations and thus could be an attempt to “save face” (Goffman, 1955). The invocation of the identity and the tentativeness function as a prelude to what is discussed afterwards. The next utterance discusses/tackles sex, and thus is constructed tentatively due to the taboo nature of the topic. Moreover, sexting is framed as an alternative to the “prohibition” of sex that adolescents experience, perhaps due to Covid 19 or their age. In a sense Felicia formulates sexting as a substitute for sex. Adolescents who are aware of their sexual attraction use it to explore their desires.

Similarly, Sarah’s account starts tentatively but follows the pronouns Felicia employs. In Sarah’s account, the employment of “our generation” (line 10) signifies a category in which the participants belong (this of a new/younger generation) and a category related activity (Sacks, 1992) which is the conceptualisation of sexting as non-deviant. Sarah then changes pronouns, from “we” to “they” (line 10) and employs the word “people” (line 10). In a sense, she is returning to a script formulation (Edwards, 1994) whereas nowadays, sexting, unlike in the past generations, is a normal activity. The repetition of the word “normal” (line 10 and line 11) emphasises that sexting is something ordinary for this age group. The specification of the generation and the discourse of normalcy form a script of what teenagers nowadays do. Even though it is not being said directly, it could be that this formation is a defence of sexting or a reply to the prevalent discourses in relation to sexting-especially those of older generations- presenting sexting as a taboo topic. This could be further enhanced by

Isabelle's addition. Despite no previous negative claims regarding sexting, Isabelle claims that "people" do not really see anything wrong with it; the word "people" builds a collective consensus.

Moreover, the addition of the word "now" implies a chronological change in the perception of sexting. Finally, when asked about the consequences of sexting, Anna frames the non-consensual distribution of photos as one of the potential consequences. Anna paints a very detailed scenario of these consequences, whereas the perpetrator of the distribution is male, a narrative that functions as a proem to section 4.5. However, Mindy provides a second evaluation through a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) that highlights the positives of sexting, such as avoiding teenage pregnancies, exploration, and discouraging sexual intercourse.

It was not uncommon for positive constructions of sexting to co-exist or be contrasted with their negative consequences. This can be showcased in the following excerpt, where I ask FG 4 the potential consequences of sexting:

#### Focus group 4

- 1     **Georgia** I feel like there's a lot of different consequences  
2             some(.)some people(.)for some people(.)there is no  
3             negative consequences(.)they enjoy it(.)is something  
4             that they feel comfortable doing(.)and essentially(.)  
5             it can lead to a long term relationship(.)I feel like  
6             there's a lot of negative consequences in terms  
7             of(.)you know(.) feeling obligated in the long term to  
8             continue engaging in you know sexting it can have a lot  
9             of negative impacts on mental health as well(.)in terms  
10            of your relationship can become sort of solely  
11            dependent on sexting(.)if you get what I mean
- 12     **Charles** I'd say it's mixed(.)as positives and negatives(.)some  
13             people it's more about getting closer with someone  
14             because then you just do like a relationship wise to  
15             get closer to someone(.)sometimes it's more a safe one  
16             but sometimes I feel like it can get of a of a  
17             tough(.)it can be a bit dangerous while you're exposing  
18             yourself to the internet and that can be very dangerous
- 19     **Olivia** I think it can be quite empowering for some people  
20             and(.) fine to do that(.)but I'd say the negatives kind  
21             of outweigh the positives and I don't(.)know I feel  
22             that I feel(.)to(.)I don't know like you can't really  
23             trust that much and it's easy to(.)it(.)to kind of get  
24             shared around like even with like things like Snapchat

25                   and how it kind of letting you know(.)like someone else  
26                   screenshot it's so easy to like do it kind of bypass  
27                   that easily share

What is noteworthy regarding this excerpt is how arguments regarding the negative aspects of sexting are formulated. Georgia initially employs the words “I feel” (line 1), perhaps signifying subjectivity. What follows is a disclaimer (line 1) which aims to mitigate her stance on the topic (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). Georgia emphasises the different outcomes of sexting, which foreshadows the complex argumentative thread that follows. Georgia proceeds to discuss the positive consequences of sexting. However, instead of directly outlining them, she mentions that no negative consequences exist (lines 2-3) for “some” people (line 2). The specification of “some” people works as a way to make the argument reasonable, as it is hard to debate that sexting is not beneficial for some individuals. This utterance is formed with particular hedging (Wiggins, 2016). Georgia creates a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of the positives (they enjoy it, they can feel comfortable doing, can lead in a relationship in lines 3-6). What was before formed as the experience of “some” people is now juxtaposed to the evaluation of the negative consequences, accompanied by the words “a lot”, indicating their perhaps higher prevalence.

Furthermore, the contrast between the evaluation of the positive and the negative consequences of sexting explicates Georgia’s discursive construction of sexting. There is a clear contrast between “some people” not facing negative consequences (line 2) and “a lot” of negative consequences (line 6), implying that negative consequences are more common than positive. It could be that talking negatively about sexting, or a negative evaluation is controversial in the adolescent peer group (which will be tackled in section 4.4. below). Georgia suggests a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of the negative consequences of sexting in lines 7-11. The three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) is emphatically presenting detailed scenarios of

sexting, mainly in a specific context of a relationship. Detailed scenarios provide the speaker with the entitlement to be asked about the phenomenon or to talk about it, which could further enhance the generational identity that was previously employed (Wiggins, 2017).

Charles suggests that sexting has both bad and good aspects (line 12). He suggests that “some people” (lines 12-13) tend to use sexting as a form of bonding activity in a relationship and paints a detailed scenario of a positive side of sexting in a relationship context. However, this is juxtaposed with the negative aspects of sexting. It should be highlighted that the negative aspects of sexting are discursively formed more tentatively than the positive ones, through the employment of the phrases “I feel” “it can get” “it can be” “a bit” (lines 16-17). Moreover, the danger of sexting has three evaluations: in the beginning, Charles forms it as “tough” “a bit” dangerous, and then “very dangerous” (lines 17 and 18). The tentative formation of Charles’ account regarding the negative aspects of sexting could potentially signify it is a sensitive topic (further enhanced by section 4.4. where discussing sexting is a “coolness” signifier).

Finally, Olivia begins her argument with a disclaimer “I think...fine to do that” (lines 19-20). What is particularly interesting is the employment of the evaluative phrase “fine to do that”. Similarly to the tentative formations above, this disclaimer functions as “a verbal device employed to ward off and defeat in advance doubts and negative typifications which may result from intended conduct” (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975, p. 3). Indeed, after the disclaimer, an evaluation follows: Olivia highlights that the negatives are more than the positives. It is noteworthy that particular hedging follows this statement by the repetition of the phrase “I don’t know” (lines 21 and 22), “kind of” (lines 20-21) and “I feel that” (line 22). Hedging often follows a dispreferred assessment (Wiggins, 2016). Therefore, it perhaps implies that framing sexting negatively could be controversial, or that the participants would not evaluate sexting negatively had I not asked regarding the consequences. Similarly to above, the formulation of the negatives appears to take place tentatively, perhaps due to my question setting the

parameters regarding the negative consequences. Olivia paints sexting as overly trusting someone-evident from the employment “that” much (line 23), suggesting that it is perhaps an excessive amount of trust that is entangled in the procedure, in such a level that it is almost risky. She then proceeds to paint a detailed script formulation of non-consensual dissemination, which aims to showcase the negative consequences of sexting.

While adolescents recognise the positive aspects of sexting, they also frame it as having negative consequences. However, the acknowledgement of the negative consequences could be attributed to my question, which sets up the parameter for positive/negative evaluations. Thus, adolescents might have not mentioned them had they not been asked about them. This could be the reason that the formation of the negative consequences appears to take place somewhat tentatively.

#### **4.4. Sexting, popularity and power; the ideological dilemmas of the adolescent peer group**

As mentioned in the previous section, sexting was typically framed as normalised. When participants were asked about consequences, it was framed in a negative fashion. However, as the focus group conversations progressed, the participants interpellated notions of power, popularity and lack thereof. Whilst sexting itself was normal, it was framed as dilemmatic and complex when it came to power and popularity. Adolescents often recognised the duality concerning sexting and framed both the decision to sext, or not to sext, as potentially harmful to popularity status. This construction was antithetical to the dataset's previously positive/normal constructions. An example of the dilemmatic notion of adolescent power in relation to sexting is elaborated by Mindy in the excerpt below, after I asked the participants regarding the outcomes of refusing to engage in sexting when the sexters are friends:

## Focus group 1

- 1     **Mindy** I think sometimes when people kind of refuse to engage  
2           in that kind of behaviour(.)there's a possibility they  
3           might fear that(.)instead(.)it would go around(.) that  
4           they're frigid(.)or they are(.)you know they don't  
5           participate in these things because they are weird or  
6           less popular or less cool and there's(.)kind of(.)a  
7           bit(.)stigma around both sides(.)being the person who  
8           behaves like that and being the person that doesn't  
9           behave like that(.)I don't think there's an  
10          option(.)which means you're completely free and(.)doing  
11          something wrong or right
- 12 **Anastasia** that's really interesting(.)can you elaborate on that  
13          (.)if you'd like
- 14     **Mindy** yeah(.)that's fine(.)I think that um it's very important  
15          in your younger years(.)to be the person that's trying  
16          things and experiencing things and growing up(.)when  
17          you're obviously you can do that in your own time(.)but  
18          I think there is a bit of pressure to grow up  
19          quickly(.)and to be mature and to you know do all these  
20          advanced things(.)because there's kind of competition as  
21          to who's done what(.)so(.)if you do these things wise  
22          people(.)wise people might kind of judge you and maybe  
23          think of things(.)because they will think that that's  
24          inappropriate or whatever(.)at the same time there is an  
25          element of respect(.)because you've done something that  
26          people are a little bit afraid to do sometimes(.)but if  
27          you're the person that hasn't participated in  
28          that(.)then you're not as kind of respected as some  
29          other people that have(.)because you're too frigid(.)or  
30          you're immature(.)or you're childish or you're not ready  
31          for that(.)and you can get judged for both choices

Mindy forms her construction of refusing to send nudes to a friend tentatively, through the employment of multiple words which signify subjectivity and minimise the statement or smoothen it (e.g., line 1 “I think” “sometimes”, line 2 “kind of” “there is a possibility”). Despite this tentativeness, Mindy proceeds to formulate the script by employing plurals such as “people, they” (lines 1,2, 4), which function as a way to present her account as factual and regular. In a sense, Mindy gives us insight into the norms of the adolescent peer group, the things adolescents “do”. Mindy constructs the consequences of refusing to sext as fear-inducing (“they might fear that” line 3). Adolescents here are positioned as afraid to

reject sexting, as it could result in loss of social capital and power imbalance in the peer group. This is further signified with the ideologically charged word “frigid”.

Moreover, Mindy constructs a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) to highlight the negative category related characterisations of not partaking in sexting and being frigid (weird, less popular, less cool, lines 5-6). While gender is not specified, the word frigid is often used for females (Scrine, 2017). The decision to not engage in sexting is constructed as stigmatising. Mindy constructs the ideological dilemma of adolescent sexting; there is no optimal option regarding the decision to engage in adolescent sexting or not. Both decisions are stigmatising; this can also be emphasised by Mindy juxtaposing “behaving like that” and “not behaving like that” (lines 8-9).

After my encouragement to elaborate, Mindy provides more insight into the adolescent power/popularity dynamics. She frames sexting as experimentation (line 16) and emphasises its necessity through the words “very important” (lines 14-15). She then creates a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) that showcases the activities associated with peer status (trying things, experiencing things and growing up, lines 16-17). The previous plural pronoun “they” changes to “you” (line 14); Mindy interpellates the interviewer, creating a shared reality. Mindy proceeds to create another three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) regarding the pressures adolescents face (lines 18-20). Experimenting and growing up are mentioned again (lines 18-20), highlighting their validity as signifiers of adolescent symbolic capital concerning sexting, due to the association with being an adult. Mindy employs the word “competition”, which could signify the popularity economy in which sexting is a form of currency to acquire social status.

The category Mindy then employs is noteworthy. She suggests that wise people will judge the individual engaging in such acts if someone does the things she mentioned. There is



the implicit notion that adolescents engaging in such activities display behaviour considered unwise. Therefore, adolescents are positioned as inherently unwise. Here, sexting and other acts of teenage social capital appear to be framed as perhaps deviating common sense. Mindy proceeds to juxtapose the views of wise people with the idea that risk-taking behaviours are respect inducing. We are being introduced to the ways that adolescent societal capital economy works, whereas the respect of the peers for being risky provides societal status, albeit with behaviours that are deemed unreasonable. This construction of power is juxtaposed with the other side of the popularity/lack of power spectrum. Those who do not engage in such behaviours are thus positioned as lower in the hierarchy/ respect economy. Mindy then employs a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) to highlight the category associations of the “uncool” category (being frigid, immature, or childish, lines 29-30). It is noteworthy that this three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) consists of the opposites of the two three-part lists (Jefferson, 1990) mentioned in lines 15-16 and 18-20. Mindy summarises the ideological dilemma of sexting by repeating the point made in line 31, whereas there is no right choice as both abstaining and participating have consequences.

Similarly, the rumours and knowledge regarding sexting seem to be framed as further social capital in the overall power play of the adolescent peer group. In the following example, Olivia discusses why Mary spread a rumour that Tom and Nick were sexting. The previous reply emerged from Charles, who evaluated Mary as a bad person for spreading the rumour, and Olivia discusses Charles’ evaluation:

#### Focus group 4

1 **Olivia** I wouldn't say that Mary is a bad person(.)I just think  
 2 that kind of umm(.)sexting has kind of has been seen in a  
 3 negative uhh(.)light for a long time(.)and also like gay  
 4 relationships as well(.)and I think that is probably like  
 5 a culture in kind of school where you know(.)like(.)gossip  
 6 and that kind can be used to kind of you know(.)like gain  
 7 friends and popularity and a way like kind of teenagers  
 8 like connect with one another and just kind of culture and  
 9 I feel like Mary(.)just kind of done that because I don't

10 know(.)she's like(0.3)I don't know(.)like it doesn't make  
11 her actions(.)right(.)she's a teenager(.)but I feel like  
12 it's kind of down to like(.)the like(0.3)bad(.)like  
13 reputation that sexting(.)has and that is kind of like  
14 school culture(.)and she obviously should have  
15 like(.)acted(.)um you know more maturely

Olivia replies to Charles's account that Mary is a bad person and resists this evaluation, justifying Mary's behaviour and negating responsibility. There are multiple discursive constructions in this excerpt. However, I am interested in the notion of the school culture Olivia employs, which justifies and even normalises Mary's behaviour. Olivia forms a scenario where the culture in schools is responsible for the sexting rumours by highlighting the negative conceptions around sexting and gay relationships (lines 3-6). The chronological specification "for a long time" (line 3) functions as a way to imply persistence of such negative perceptions and a sense of continuity which further proves the initial point. Gossip is formed through the use of passive voice ("used", line 6) to highlight its functionality-it aims to be employed to achieve something, such as social status. The things one can achieve through gossip are painted emphatically through a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) (gain friends, popularity, to connect). Olivia "paints" and emphasises the multiple benefits of gossiping regarding sexting/other negative things. The repetition of the fact that a culture exists and the minimisation "just" (line 8) (Pomerantz, 1984) highlight the simplicity and factuality of the statement (Goodman & Burke, 2010).

In a Foucauldian sense, what Olivia suggests is the relationship between knowledge, power, and the cyber-body. The knowledge about sexting is enmeshed with notions of power (social capital and the adolescent popularity hierarchy) which is applied to the regulation of the cyber-body that is produced through the discourse (and as Olivia mentions, sexting and especially gay sexting are perceived as negative and what is "true" about the culture of the

school is that sexting is bad). The knowledge about sexting or around sexting facilitates one's status.

#### **4.5. Subject positions: females shamed, males praised**

In all the focus groups, adolescents tackled the gendered power dynamics of sexting. Participants oriented to the reputational damage that sexting causes for girls and benefits it holds for boys – they were socially located in a significantly different manner when it came to sexting and power in relation to gender. Moreover, in all the focus groups, participants did not just use the same rhetoric. Instead, they used the same discursive resources by employing the same words such as “slut” for females and “praised” for males. This could indicate the strong cultural history regarding the double standards concerning sex(ting) and gender. For example, consider the excerpt below, where Isabelle replies to my question regarding whether reputation is affected in relation to gender:

##### **Focus group 1**

1       **Isabelle** I think if(.)a woman is found to start sexting it might  
2                   become(.)be considered a slut or a prostitute(.)whereas  
3                   as a man(.)men(.)they get praised oh you have so many  
4                   people attracted to you

This excerpt initially appears straightforward; a direct statement highlighting a widely accepted cultural reality. However, there are multiple analytical points. Isabelle uses the words “is found” (line 1). This passive voice could be employed to highlight the scrutiny women face when sexting (a point I will discuss below in section 4.10.). Isabelle also highlights that a woman who “starts” (line 1) sexting can be considered a slut or a prostitute. Here, what is not said directly -but is implied- is that women initiating sexting instead of being a passive participant is perhaps considered worse due to the stigma of women being sexual (further elaborated in chapter 6). In a sense, Isabelle is constructing initiating sexting as gender trouble (Butler, 2003). The words “slut” and “prostitute” are ideologically charged

words and highlight the continuous societal punishment women face for being sexual.

Isabelle highlights the surveillance of female self-determination (another point I discuss in section 4.10 and Chapter 5). This position is juxtaposed with the position of males, for whom Isabelle uses the word “praised” (line 3). The word “praise (d)” was employed by almost all the participants. It suggests that not only men do not face negative consequences; men sexting constitutes an achievement and a form of social capital. In a sense, men are positioned as privileged, whilst girls are scrutinised and shamed.

It is noteworthy that Isabelle initially employs the word “man” (line 3) which she then repairs (Schegloff et al., 1977) to “men”. The repair and employment of plural tense aim to formulate a script, to highlight the prevalence of this positioning (Edwards, 1994; Wiggins, 2016). Additionally, Isabelle employs active voicing (Woffit, 1992) (line 3-4) to highlight the praise men often face and how sexting for them is a sign of popularity. Whilst the re-enactment does not perhaps sound like a realistic utterance, it serves another discursive purpose; to strengthen the position Isabelle describes. Indeed, as Frith & Kitzinger (2001) suggest, active voicing does not need to be a realistic representation; this hyperbole signifies the “sort” of things men say-or in this case are being told. Similar positions open in the following excerpt:

### Focus group 3

- 1       **Chloe** in terms of heterosexual relationships that girls are  
2       normally affected worse than the guy just because I think  
3       within those kinds of communities so like(.)a amongst  
4       those kind of friendship groups(.)they're not praised  
5       for that kind of thing(.)especially when they share those  
6       photos around because it's seen as I don't know(.)I think  
7       (.)you know(.)in history men have a kind of cultural kind  
8       of norm kind of pillage and do(.)they want to ransack  
9       places and like(.)you know(.)do these horrible things  
10       and then also just kind of expected from it(.)it's like  
11       (.)oh(.)yeah(.)well(.)he's a guy(.)what's that boys do  
12       boys(.)expression(.)type?  
13       **Anastasia** boys will be boys  
14       **Chloe** boys will be boys(.)exactly(.)that kind of mentality that  
15       boys can't really take responsibility for anything that

16                   they've done because it's just in their innate biological  
 17                   need to kind of do(.)these kind of things(.)I think  
 18                   that's where it reflects poorly on men(.)sorry(.)poorly  
 19                   on women like to feel bad

20           **Zena** yeah(.)I think it does it just like to the patriarchy  
 21                   and double standards(.)boys will be congratulated for a  
 22                   girl's(.)more(.)a lot(.)basically a reputation will  
 23                   usually get ruined(.)even though they're doing the exact  
 24                   same thing(.)the girls will go(.)like their reputation  
 25                   will be ruined and the boys if anything will get an ego  
 26                   boost

27           **Chloe** yeah

28           **Zena** it will work like that

29   **Anastasia** Tania(.)do you want to say anything? because your  
 30                   microphone is(.)open

31           **Tania** [yeah(.)I feel like the girl will get more shamed for  
 32                   it and the boy will be more praised but it shouldn't  
 33                   be that way cos they've done the exact same thing

In this excerpt, the participants position girls as those negatively affected by sexting and contrast/ compare them to boys. By employing the word “normally” (line 2), Chloe formulates a script, indicating that girls being affected more by sexting is prevalent and a widely accepted cultural reality. The script is further enhanced by the employment of the plurals “communities” and “friendship groups” (lines 3-4). The effects of sexting on women are juxtaposed to the impact of sexting on men and females are positioned as more affected by sexting rumours. The employment of the words “just because” functions as a way to highlight the existing socio-political reality. The utterance “those kinds of friendships” implies the gendered adolescent groups of males and females and the prevalence of the gendered norms.

Chloe draws on the history of masculinity, which shows the continuity of the positions she opens and some consensus and epistemic knowledge to the claims regarding masculinity. Chloe forms a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of some of the violent things men are expected to do; the passive voice and present tense highlight that it is an overall societal expectancy to this day (lines 8-11). Chloe also employs active voicing (Woffit, 1992) of some of the typical

phrases that constitute a battlefield of contemporary gender politics and excuse men, such as the phrase “boys will be boys” (line 14). The active voicing represents the kind of things men are told; men are thus positioned as benefiting from society, which justifies their behaviour. “Boys will be boys” is a phrase that carries ideological and historical notions, as it is one of the phrases that the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of feminism has challenged (Hust et al., 2008). Chloe further challenges the biological rhetoric that echoes notions of the nature of masculinity, often associated with violence, by employing the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) (“anything they’ve done”, lines 15-16).

Zena provides an evaluation of Chloe’s account by agreeing. She then attributes such phenomena to the patriarchy and double standards. Essentially, Zena is critical of such phenomena and thus is employing feminist terminology. She then proceeds to contrast boys and girls by employing a future tense (“will”, line 22) and the word “usually” (line 23) to highlight the certainty of the phenomenon and manages to paint a narrative of societal inequality. The formulation that boys are congratulated is juxtaposed with the antithetical reputation damage girls face. This contrast highlights the gendered double standards. Zena declares that they do the same thing, to showcase inequality further. She then repeats that girls face reputational damage and juxtaposes it to a contrasting element, this of boys getting an ego boost.

Chloe agrees, and Zena adds a second assessment (“it will work like that”, line 28), which indicates a shared social reality. Tania further agrees and contrasts girls to boys. Tania uses the word “praise” for boys, as used in all the focus groups. Tania again evaluates the societal discursive terrain by highlighting that these contrasts exist for the same actions. She then distances herself from it by highlighting that it “shouldn’t be this way”, thus constituting the evaluation of these positions as negative and problematic.

In a sense, girls tackle gender performativity. By carving the overall positions of females and males throughout history, they highlight that males are positioned as dominant in sexting and are often encouraged societally and excused when they are violent. Girls are positioned as vulnerable; if they step out of the strict boundaries of getting exploited by the male gaze, and become sexual, they are punished through reputation damage. Whilst the discursive construction here could be affected by the participants' gender, the sample was not substantial enough to permit such claims.

#### 4.6. Subject position: Male vulnerability

Whilst adolescents often employed the positions mentioned above, they located a new position for males. This position frames boys as vulnerable in relation to sexting coercion. That vulnerability was often justified as a result of the patriarchal ideas that males are always “up for it” and males are not vulnerable, and the perception of women as unable to cause harm. In the following excerpt, Jennifer discusses what would happen if the gender roles in vignette number 2 were reversed and thus Stella pressured John to sext:

##### Focus group 5

|    |                  |  |
|----|------------------|--|
| 1  | <b>Anastasia</b> | so if it was the other way around instead and Stella |
| 2  |                  | pressured John(.)how would you think this scenario   |
| 3  |                  | would kind of(0.2)unfold                             |
| 4  | <b>Jennifer</b>  | I feel like it would kind of be ignored that Stella  |
| 5  |                  | would be the one pressuring it would be like(.) like |
| 6  |                  | oh(.)you wanted it in the first place(.)you know you |
| 7  |                  | did because men are expected to like sext and(.)I    |
| 8  |                  | feel like(.)it would have like(.)such a negative     |
| 9  |                  | impact on John(.)I mean you see it in like TV shows  |
| 10 |                  | of men being sexually assaulted or(.)they're         |
| 11 |                  | explaining how they didn't want it(.)and everyone    |
| 12 |                  | around especially males(.)were like oh(.)you did     |
| 13 |                  | this(.)oh you had this woman be there wanting        |
| 14 |                  | you(.)like you didn't take(.)take it you didn't want |
| 15 |                  | it that is WRONG and it's(.)it's horrendous          |

In this excerpt, Jennifer positions males as vulnerable due to the idea that men do not get coerced. Jennifer uses active voicing (Woffit, 1992) (lines 6-7) to emphasise that men are

socially constructed as hyper-sexual, which signifies the kind of things men are being told. This is further enhanced by the passive voice she uses in line 7 (“men are expected”), which, along with the plural “men”, formulates a script, whereas men are societally positioned in a hypermasculine stereotype. She further evaluates the negative impact of this rhetoric and incident on John by emphatically evaluating such stereotypes as “wrong”.

Jennifer proceeds to invoke TV shows as a way to highlight the experiences of men who have been assaulted, creating a cultural consensus/history to strengthen the argument. Jennifer further highlights the shared cultural reality of this position by adding an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) (“everyone”, line 11) which is also followed by a specification (“especially males”, line 12) to highlight the pressures males face from their peers. Here, contrary to the previous position, the pressure is not formulated as emerging from the opposite sex but from the same sex. Jennifer then proceeds to employ a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of what men said, through active voicing (lines 13-15), to highlight her point further. This combination of discursive devices reflects the pressures men face to be sexual and the rhetoric that stigmatises them if they are not. This position is worked up carefully with delicate discursive work. It could be implied that the careful employment and construction of examples that Jennifer adds to her discursive terrain is due to the societal controversy that men can also be coerced. Jennifer further evaluates such scenarios as wrong and horrendous. The position that men occupy due to ideals regarding hyper-masculinity and hyper-sexuality is confessed as negative and problematic. Similar positions can be observed in the excerpt below:

### Focus group 3

1 **Chloe** I mean(.)Stella(.)if she's in John's position(.)she could  
2 have the exact same manipulative tactics and like(.)show  
3 the entire class when they call it out(.)because you  
4 know(.)these people(.)people can be the same and people  
5 could have similar manipulative tactics(.)so it's not  
6 just exclusive to one gender(.)but I think it would have  
7 been even harder for John to come out and talk to police



8           and(.)talk to members of staff or trust people or  
9           just(.)because of the way that society views male  
10          survivors of abuse(.)when of like(.)few men who have been  
11          abused or manipulated

12   **Zena** I agree with that 100% and it would be a lot harder to  
13          come out with it(.)rather than Stella because he is a  
14          man(.)and he'd probably be scared that it would ruin his  
15          reputation

16   **Chloe** true

17   **Theo** I think women are thought of as less competent and capable  
18          so I don't think anyone would believe that it's her  
19          who's doing the manipulating also harder to get a  
20          conviction

In the present excerpt, Chloe highlights that Stella could have the same manipulation tactics as John. The emphasis through which Chloe constructs the ability (“could” in line 1, “can” in line 4, “could” in line 5) implies that this capability would not have been expected socially if the roles were reversed. This subtle account could be a proem to Theo’s account, who explains the socio-cultural construction of women (in line 17) and a subtle resistance to the cultural belief that women are not capable of harm. Chloe’s statement in line 6 further highlights this; whilst no one previously mentioned that it could be exclusive to one gender, Chloe proceeds to declare it. It appears that there is a cultural precedent, and Chloe is resisting the cultural belief that coercion is gender-specific.

Chloe then evaluates the possibility of John talking about facing coercion as “even harder” (line 7) than Stella, which highlights the issues that these gender-related stereotypes might cause to men. The difficulty he would experience in reporting or trusting people is formed through a list of things John would face difficulty in doing (come out, talking to police, members of staff in lines 7-9). This showcases the wide range of activities John would not be able to do due to the societal stigma. Here the responsibility is placed on how society perceives male victims and the issues that stem from ideas regarding hegemonic masculinity (Connell, & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Zena agrees and contrasts John with Stella; Zena evaluates “coming out” as “a lot harder” for John (lines 12-13) due to his gender. More specifically, Zena formulates a script in which reporting an incident of coercion could cause reputational damage to John due to his gender. Theo further orients to this construction by formulating a script that puts women in the spotlight; it would not be believed that Stella would manipulate John due to the perceptions of women as less capable (lines 17-19). In this excerpt, the participants showcase the positions available for coerced men and women who coerce them while being critical of them; these positions are framed as problematic.

#### **4.7. Subject position: Non-cis/non-heteronormative sexting and vulnerability**

In all the focus groups, the participants formed non-heterosexual sexting with polarised framing. Adolescents located LGBTQ and non-binary individuals as vulnerable. Non heteronormative adolescents were often grouped together or mentioned interchangeably. Adolescents suggested that sexting was a good way of experimentation for LGBTQ youth, a way to explore what they like/do not like without any commitment or implications. However, the discursive construction of the impact of non-heteronormative sexting incidents being discussed by peers was framed negatively, with participants expressing concerns regarding homophobia and bullying. Consider the following excerpt:

##### **Focus group 1**

1 **Anastasia** so(.)the rumours that went around(.)how do you think it  
2 affects Nick and how do you think it(.)it affects Tom  
3 **Anna** I think it's especially scary for these two because it's  
4 (.)it's like a same sex thing and(.)at the moment there's  
5 still a lot of stigma around that so I think it'd be  
6 scary because it's kind of(.)like(.)they(.)being outed  
7 without having the chance to say they want to come

Anna evaluates the circulation of sexting rumours as “scary” (line 3)- an evaluation that is further emphasised through the word “particularly”. Anna characterises the stigmatised nature of same-sex sexting through chronological words such as “at the moment” (line 4) and

“still” (line 5). The employment of the aforementioned chronological words and the specification “for these two” could signify a cultural precedent; whilst LGBTQ rights have been more prominent the past few decades, homophobia is still prevalent and a contemporary problem. They could also constitute an indirect reply to the idea that homophobia is still prevalent despite living in progressive times.

The repetition of the word “scary” (line 6) emphasises the negativity of the experience concerning rumours and perhaps subtly tackles the implications of what this rumour could mean for Nick and Tom. Anna further tackles the idea of “being outed”. Outing is the act of an LGBTQ person being open about their identity. However, Anna uses the passive voice (“being outed”, line 6), to highlight the lack of choice and agency these individuals have regarding expressing their sexuality themselves, instead of it being revealed by others. This is further emphasised by employing the phrase “having the chance” (line 7), which further establishes the lack of power these individuals face when disclosing their sexuality. However, sexting was also constructed positively, as in the excerpt below:

#### Focus group 5

1     **Anastasia** so regarding sexting do you think sexuality comes into  
2             play would things escalate differently or similarly if  
3             there were female(.)male gender nonbinary trans and if  
4             so(.)how  
5     **Emmy**     I think it’s easier to explore your sexuality through  
6             sexting than it would be getting in real life(.)I think  
7             cos(.)I think I don’t wanna say like no strings but  
8             especially if it’s not(.)serious(.)I feel like there is  
9             more room for you to explore your sexuality like that

Here sexting is evaluated as better for those who want to explore their sexuality. Emmy employs the idea of ease, which is then juxtaposed with real life, to highlight the difference between the offline/online world. Emmy distances herself from the idea that this experimentation could lack the necessity of commitment, perhaps not to invalidate the importance of experimentation and sexuality. Sexting is described as giving an individual

“more room”; this metaphor could possibly signify the semiotics of liberty sexting gives when it comes to experimentation.

It should be highlighted that since I identify as a cis heteronormative woman, I do not have a lived experience of being non-heteronormative. As Bonilla et al. (2021) say, I also am, reproducing power-related rhetoric and structures, even if I try to resist them. For this reason, before analysing and writing this section, I had a brief discussion with one of my LGBTQ colleagues who has more expertise and insight in the area due to their identity. Therefore, they reviewed some of my initial points when I was developing the present section on non-heteronormative positions.

#### **4.8. IR: Consent and coercion**

In all the focus groups, participants constructed consent as characteristically affirmative. More specifically, participants formulated consent by emphasising the importance of sexting being reciprocated and the need for sexters to check on their partners. Consent was constructed as a dialogue, whereas clear, direct questions need to be asked. The tendency to have a conversation regarding what is okay outside of sexting was formed as imperative. Moreover, comfort and security were constructed as pre-requisites for sexting. The idea of affirmative consent was framed as a culturally well-known fact and widely accepted reality. This is evident in the following excerpt where I ask FG 5 how someone shows consent when sexting:

##### **Focus group 5**

1 **Anastasia** how does an individual show that they're consenting in  
2 engaging in sexting?  
3 **Jennifer** I mean(.)just having an overall conversation on what  
4 you're comfortable with(.)I feel it's something that  
5 should happen in every relationship(.)whether it's  
6 about um sexual stuff(.)or just about um how you  
7 approach your relationship because even so(.)some  
8 people aren't comfortable with hugging or hand holding  
9 (.)I really think it should just be a conversation to  
10 happen

In this excerpt, Jennifer frames consent as a conversation that constitutes a relationship requirement. Here, consent is constructed as a relationship contract in relation to boundaries and expectations. Jennifer introduces that requirement through the word “just” (Pomerantz, 1984) (line 3), a minimiser to highlight the simplicity and ease of the process. The pronoun “you” (line 4) is invoked to interpellate the co-speaker and form a sense of agency for the individual “negotiating” consent and boundaries. In line 5, Jennifer employs the modal verb “should”, emphasising accountability and obligation. This is followed by the word “every”. Here, conversations regarding consent are framed as an imperative prerequisite for relationships.

Jennifer declares that this conversation should not occur only when it comes to sexting (lines 5-6); it is formed as a general practice, including other aspects of relationship preferences. This is further highlighted by elaborating a more detailed narrative, featuring examples of different forms of intimacy people might not be comfortable with. Jennifer re-states that she believes that the conversation should take place by adding the word “really” (line 9) to emphasise the importance and imperativeness of discussing consent, whilst the word “just” (line 9) is repeated to highlight the simplicity and directness of the conversation. Emmy provides an emphatic agreement through the word “completely”. Consent here is not constructed as necessarily a part of the sexting encounter but as a pre-condition of it, a contract among the individuals that has more to do with the relationship rather than the exchange of sexts.

Similarly, lack of affirmative consent and enthusiastic reciprocation or avoidance was framed as lack of consent/coercion. This is further highlighted in the following excerpt:

#### Focus group 4

- 1 **Anastasia** okay(.)so what would you define as lack of consent and  
2 sexting and how does a person show that they do not  
3 consent in sexting?
- 4 **Charles** I'd say if one person starts to be sexual through  
5 texting(.)the person doesn't show interest let's say  
6 and so they don't continue(.)like(.)like(.)the sexual  
7 interest or just they literally(.)literally just say(.)  
8 I don't want to talk about this(.)but I would say  
9 there's no sure consent and both partners both partners
- 10 **Olivia** [yeah definitely I think(.)if one of the partners is  
11 like not like being engaged in it and showing like  
12 interested I think that should definitely be taken as  
13 they don't want to
- 14 **Charles** I'd say if one person shows that they are uncomfortable  
15 through texts or simply say no then that shows they  
16 don't give consent
- 17 **Georgia** I feel like texts sometimes(.)or if you know a person  
18 quite well(.)their text can definitely have tone and  
19 there can be like ways(.)in ways(.)in which you write a  
20 text to give it tone I think(.)like(.)like sure or  
21 just(.)you can be quite blunt through the text and that  
22 can definitely be recognized if you know the person  
23 through text
- 24 **Charles** yes(.)I think that's true I know it's quite hard to  
25 tell(.)a person's feelings through a text because all  
26 we can see is the words but not the actual person  
27 itself(.)so the logic I suppose(.)if you know the  
28 person well and how the text and the manner changes(.)  
29 the way the texting is sexual then it's quite easy to  
30 tell that something's wrong

In this excerpt, lack of consent is formed as lack of reciprocation/comfort, hesitation, and change in tone. All the replies by the participants are framed tentatively and through imagined scenarios and script formulations. The hypothetical scenarios employed here exemplify how sexting is scripted culturally. They allow the speaker to summarise their general societal knowledge of how events unfold in a single example (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). Charles introduces a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) to highlight how a co-sexter does not show consent (doesn't show interest, don't continue, I don't want to talk about it, lines 6-8). Lack of consent is constructed as lack of affirmative participation.

The more “direct” response, which is a verbal declaration that the person does not want to engage in sexting, is framed through the repetition and minimisation” “just” (line 7) (Goodman & Burke, 2010). Moreover, it is emphasised through the repetition of the word “literally” (line 7) and active voicing (line 8) to highlight the statement's simplicity, imperativeness, and authenticity. However, Charles then employs the conflicting statement regarding the lack of “no sure consent”. Charles formulates a de jure/de facto argument (Edley and Wetherell, 1999), whereas there are simple cues and communication standards someone can pick up. However, sexters can never be entirely sure. This argument could prelude the ideological dilemma that will follow in section 4.9.

Olivia evaluates Charles’s account through the word “definitely” and suggests that discomfort or simple denial of the potential co-sexter indicates lack of consent. Olivia’s account places more emphasis on the initiator/co-sexter to notice the lack of responsiveness, through the employment of “be taken”, the modal verb “should” whilst the importance of recognising lack of consent is framed as “definitely” (line 12) (Edwards, 2006).

Charles further accompanies Olivia’s account by talking about showing lack of comfort, which is formulated as central to the lack of consent (line 15). Georgia further constructs a conditional, imagined scenario in lines 17-19; if people are texting and they know each other, tone can be detected. In a sense, participants orient to framing cyber-consent as a transcendence of real-life behavioural cues in close relationships. Knowing the other individual often provides more insight into their behavioural patterns. It is noteworthy that this construction places the responsibility of detecting lack of consent or discomfort to the individual initiating sexting. Olivia employs the word “just” (line 21), to highlight that detecting consent is a straightforward process, especially if the co-sexter is blunt. The simplicity and ease through which the person who initiates sexting can recognise and detect consent are further highlighted by employing the word “definitely” (line 22).

Charles further agrees with Georgia and employs a de jure/de facto (Edley and Wetherell, 1999) construction: while he agrees with Georgia's account, he suggests he understands it can be challenging to detect feelings through texts. Charles then proceeds to return to the original point; he evaluates the possibility of detecting lack of consent emphatically as "quite easy" (line 29).

#### **4.9. Consent, responsibility and justification: an ideological dilemma**

As seen above, adolescents emphasised the importance of affirmative consent and conversations taking place in relation to what was acceptable in sexting and what was not. This could be attributed to the rhetoric around consent, which is more prevalent amongst the current adolescent generation (Newman, 2014). This rhetoric echoes the emergence of multiple social justice and sex education conversations online and offline (further discussed in the discussion section). Yet, the discursive terrain became significantly polarised when it came to Stella and John. Multiple participants suggested that the exchange was coercive, yet it was also mentioned that Stella should resist texting John or break up with him. Moreover, John was presented as coercing Stella because he assumed that was normal or due to a misunderstanding. Yet John was also constructed as manipulative and abusive. Often, these antithetical constructions were presented by the same people at various points of the interview. For example, in the following excerpt, I ask FG4 whether John implying that he will break up with Stella if she does not sext him is a typical behaviour:

##### **Focus group 4**

1 **Charles** I think it's about being in control about the situation I think  
2 he's taking it over the top(.)but I would say he's(.)I feel  
3 like he's only doing this because he feels like it's a normal  
4 situation it did say in the a story that he thinks it's normal  
5 to send explicit pictures between couples(.)so it's a it's kind  
6 of situational(.)he thinks it's normal(.)but then(.) the same  
7 time(.)he doesn't doesn't understand that what he is doing is  
8 actually very wrong(.)especially going as far as forcing  
9 someone to actually sent explicit pictures even when one person  
10 doesn't want to do it (.)so I'd say it's not a very happy  
11 relationship



12 **Olivia** I think it's just like(.)like(.)really like toxic of John to  
13 give her like(.)that like kind of threaten her with like  
14 breaking up(.)she does(.)like fulfil what he wants and I think  
15 he's too concerned with like the sexual aspects of their  
16 relationship(.)and I feel like whether you know he is kind of  
17 not that educated or not(.)I feel like whatever context you  
18 don't threaten to like to break with your partner because  
19 they're not to kind of what you want in that way

20 **Anastasia** how do you think that Stella should act when John requested  
21 photos and how do you think John should act when Stella was  
22 hesitant

23 **Charles** I think Stella should have said in the first place the fact  
24 she was uncomfortable(.)and then even if John did  
25 continue(.)whilst she said she was uncomfortable simply just  
26 say no(.)she doesn't want to do this(.)I feel like she should  
27 have just left her phone aside she just shouldn't reply to  
28 his messages(.)for a while (.) and then John said(.)I feel  
29 like he should have(.) taught himself that during this is one  
30 very risky (.) two requires consent(.)and three you have to  
31 ask permission for the person to send them also think  
32 beforehand(.)this is okay to do(.)especially(.)I'm guessing  
33 their age they are underage(.)to do it(.)so it's against the  
34 law

35 **Olivia** um I think that Stella umm should have told him like I  
36 understand it was like hard for her having a hard situation  
37 but I feel like she should have told him and being upfront  
38 with him and if he didn't have the maturity to understand  
39 where she was coming from then you know(.)she(.)she may be  
40 considered his character and relationship and John definitely  
41 should have been more(.)I suppose like(.)like he is like  
42 asking her kind of ensuring that like she did want to and he  
43 definitely shouldn't have threatened to like break up with  
44 her

In the present excerpt participants appear to attempt to understand the incident through lay theorising. Moreover, Stella (despite her consequent avoidance, explicit denial to engage in sexting and then finally her engagement in sexting after she was blackmailed) is constructed as being placed the onus to resist all the coercive attempts. Charles constructs John's threats to break up as a way to remain in control (line 1). He then follows with a disclaimer (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975), through which he declares/evaluates that what John did is wrong. However, the evaluation of John's behaviour as "wrong" is followed by the characterisation "over the top" (line 2). In a sense, Charles minimises the incident by forming it as overreacting, despite negatively evaluating it.

What follows after the disclaimer (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975) is another minimisation; through the employment of the word “only” (line 3). Charles describes the incident as a misunderstanding, and John is constructed as coercing Stella due to this misunderstanding. What is not directly said but is perhaps implied is that John is not directly responsible for the coercion due to this “misunderstanding”. Charles invokes the story/vignette as a way to create consensus (lines 5-6). Charles attributes John's pressures to convince Stella to sext with his sense of “false consciousness”. Whilst this false consciousness could be constructed as pervasive and a general misunderstanding of reading the consent signs, Charles constructs it as situational (and thus perhaps, a one-time incident) to emphasise its accidental nature. There is a repetition of Charles' suggestion that John thought it was normal (lines 4,5,7); this version contradicts the initial statement that formulates the incident as an issue of control.

Moreover, Charles positions John as unable to understand and thus evaluate his actions by employing the words “he doesn't understand” (lines 8-9). Charles evaluates the incident as very wrong. However, forcing someone is minimised as going “too far”. Charles's evaluation (that of an unhappy relationship) implies the overall dynamic yet manages to take the discursive focus away from John.

Olivia, however, employs a more negative construction in which she attributes more responsibility to John than Charles does; she evaluates John's behaviour as toxic. However, she also frames John's coercive behaviour as being “too concerned about the sexual aspects of a relationship”, framing it as preoccupation with a relationship issue rather than individual behaviour. It should be highlighted that Olivia adds the education aspects and then discusses that forcing someone should not be accepted regardless of them. Whilst no one mentioned education previously, it could be that Olivia's response reflects resistance to a more general belief regarding how one should behave that is not based on understanding or empathy but a more general theorisation/knowledge of relationships. Olivia concludes that one should not

threaten their partner by employing the word “whatever” to highlight that no contextual factors excuse John’s behaviour.

After my question regarding how they think John and Stella should have acted, more discursive work takes place in relation to the attribution of responsibility. Whilst previously (in section 4.8. above) consent was constructed as a lack of reciprocation, here Stella’s initial avoidance of sexting in the conversation is implied not to be the preferable response to the vignette scenario. Instead, her denial should have come first (“in the first place”, line 25). The responsibility is diverted on Stella. Instead of questioning why John did not consider her repeated cues or ended up blackmailing her, her attempts to resist are evaluated as defective. The discursive terrain appears to invoke ideas related to victim-blaming.

This responsibility attribution is further highlighted by Charles’ repeated use of the modal verbs “should” and “shouldn’t” (lines 25,29, 30) (Edwards, 2006). This responsibility attribution is further implied by the second evaluation of Stella’s actions, whereas Charles suggests that Stella should not have said she is uncomfortable but should have said no instead. This should have happened even if John continued pressuring her; in a sense, Stella is constructed as responsible for handling the sexting incident, and Charles negatively evaluates her initial response. The idea that Stella should have dealt with the incident differently obscures the fact that John did not consider her multiple suggestions she did not want to engage in sexting.

This is further highlighted by the conflicting statement employed in line 31; instead of saying no, her lack of replies should be the answer. It is noteworthy that in Charles’ response there is an evaluation of Stella’s actions, often in chronological order, of what Stella did and how she should have avoided the incident. The emphasis in the chronology is often manifested through words that indicate order “first”, “then”, “in the first place”, “for a while”

(e.g. lines 25, 26, 30-31). What is implied is that Stella did not react in the order that she should have. This is juxtaposed with a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of John's obligations (using the word "should") (lines 31-34). The contrast between Stella's and John's responsibility is interesting; the coercion here is not evaluated in terms of sexual coercion/morality/control but just as risky, with the reminder that consent is needed, which implies that the encounter was coercive. Moreover, John is framed as obligated to educate himself, not to not coerce others. Whilst Stella's responsibility is pedantically constructed as a chronological mishandling of the situation, John's responsibility is characterised as a lack of education.

Olivia employs a disclaimer (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975) (lines 39-40); she suggests that she understands it was hard for Stella. However, what follows is an evaluation of Stella's behaviour. Again, it is notable that Olivia, similarly to Charles, employs a chronological word to suggest that Stella should have told John earlier she did not want to sext ("upfront", line 41). The responsibility is placed upon Stella again, whilst John's denial to understand Stella's suggestion is framed as lacking "maturity" (line 42). This notion is a prevalent construction when it comes to boys; it implies that due to this immaturity, the attribution of responsibility should be lenient, as they do not possess the necessary maturity to understand their actions (Sela-Shayovitz, 2015). Therefore, Stella is constructed as responsible for handling the coercion she is experiencing in a more delicate and chronologically correct way, whilst John is framed as not having the maturity to act better.

What is constructed as immaturity, rather than coercion, is framed as something that should make Stella reconsider the relationship. Again, coercion is framed as a relationship issue; as if it is a problem of incompatibility rather than something John did. However, Olivia juxtaposes Stella to John, suggesting that he shouldn't have threatened her.

It is noteworthy that-both in Olivia's and Charles's accounts the evaluation of Stella's resistance is constructed through a chronological lens. This echoes ideas related to the theory of sexual scripts, which are often used when victim-blaming survivors of rape (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Sexual script theorists suggest that sexual encounters follow a number of predictable sequences. However, feminists have challenged such theories suggesting that often the conception of these scripts constitutes it challenging for women to deny to engage in sexual intercourse. Frith & Kitzinger (2001) suggest that often, when such scripts are employed, they are gendered and refusal is formulated as having gone too far.

Frith & Kitzinger (2001) also suggest that -as observed in Charles' account- male pressure on sexual intercourse is often justified with "male assumptions/expectations". Such incidents are constructed as expected scenarios and these constructions serve to highlight the predictability of such behaviours. The reference to what most people know by the employment of "many people think" "always" and "you", suggests that this is an expected way for men to behave (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001).

However, the idea that there was something else that Stella should have done to avoid her victimisation was also resisted by participants, constituting the discursive terrain dilemmatic. In these constructions, John was framed as toxic and manipulative. Consider the following excerpt:

#### Focus group 2

- 1     **Anastasia** do you think Stella should resist sending photos and if so  
2                    how?
- 3             **Jasmin** I do(.)I think that she should close the conversation  
4                    down and say look(.)I said that I didn't want to do it  
5                    (.)and then stop talking to him(.)or leave him or(.)  
6                    block him
- 7     **Anastasia** okay(0.3)so do you think this encounter was consensual and  
8                    if so(.)why? I think we kind of already mentioned
- 9             **Abby** [it's a weird one I think because(.)although she didn't  
10                    consent(.)by her(.)actually sending those photos(.)she's  
11                    consenting(.)because she's made that decision to like(.)

12                    send pictures of herself so that could act as a form of  
13                    consent

14        **Jasmin** I think that for John(.)that would be seen as consent but  
15                    I think a lot of teenagers aren't really taught to  
16                    realize that(.)that's(.)wrong what he's doing is  
17                    wrong(.)he may well do but a lot of the time(.)they just  
18                    think that's normal(.)and then he will go to his friends  
19                    and be like oh I do this and this is how I got nudes and  
20                    then they'll try it with girlfriends and then(.)it will  
21                    just keep sort of going on and on(.)and on(.)and I don't  
22                    think there's any consent there(.)she was harassed into  
23                    it(.)and it was very easy to victim blame her because she  
24                    sent the pictures but(.)it's not as plain and simple as  
25                    that(.)and it's just one of those very unfortunate  
26                    situations where neither side of the party knew what to  
27                    do(.)it's not like easy to stand up and be  
28                    like(.)NO(.)this is wrong(.)or you can't teach everybody  
29                    a lesson(.)and also(.)some people just can't stand up for  
30                    themselves(.)they might be young and not really know what  
31                    they're doing both of them(.)and I think there's a lesson  
32                    to be learned on both sides(.)but she was coerced into  
33                    doing something she clearly didn't show any interest in  
34                    doing

Jasmin employs the modal verb “should” (line 3) to infer responsibility (Edwards, 2006) to Stella and creates a long list of the actions she believes that Stella should have done (close the conversation down, stop talking to him, tell him that she doesn’t wanna do it, leave him, block him, lines 3-6). Similarly to above, John’s coercion is framed as Stella’s responsibility to handle and cope with. Jasmin additionally employs active voicing (Woffit, 1992) in line 4, to add authenticity to the account of what would be the appropriate response. It is implied that Stella’s attempts to resist the coercion she is experiencing are evaluated as poor. In this account, it is suggested that there is something more that Stella could have done to avoid her victimisation. Of course, the response could also be attributed to the nature of my question.

Abby evaluates the situation as “weird” (line 9), a disclaimer that functions as a prelude to what could be considered a controversial opinion. Abby constructs a de jure/de facto (Edley & Wetherell, 1999) argument regarding Stella’s consent; despite her not consenting, the decision to send them after John threatened her is considered consent. There is a lingering idea

of victim-blaming in the excerpt as Abby further justifies the statement (“because” line 11); Stella sending the pictures is constructed as her own active decision (“made that decision”, line 11) rather than a result of coercion. What is not mentioned here is the pressure and threats Stella received from her boyfriend. In a sense, John is invisible in this construction.

However, the accounts mentioned above are resisted by Jasmin. Despite previously evaluating Stella’s attempts to resist sexting as something that should have been handled differently, Jasmin builds a different construction here. She starts her reply with the words “I think” (line 15), signifying the topic's controversy and forming her opinion as a subjective perception. Initially, she declares that John would perceive Stella sending sexts as consent. She proceeds to formulate a script, through the employment of the plural “teenagers” which is further enhanced with the evaluation “a lot”. Here, the script is formulated as a sort of collective consensus/false consciousness and the justification of John’s actions is attributed to the normalcy of coercion in the adolescent world. Moreover, in this script, the coercive sexting incidents and their normalisation are again formulated as lack of education (“aren’t taught”, line 15).

This script is framed with further detail on how this phenomenon is perpetuated. Jasmin uses active voicing (Woffit, 1992) to emphasise her account (line 19) and highlight that this is the “kind of thing” that boys say/do. She suggests that John will tell his friends what he did, and they, in turn, will do this to their girlfriends. The pervasiveness and certainty of such phenomena are constructed with the triple repetition of the word “on” (line 21). Whilst this perhaps subtly reflects the discursive terrain existing in the peer group and how normalised it is, it must be highlighted that the script presented here is formulated as something that happens routinely. The future tense “he will go, they will try” (lines 18 and 20) further highlights such incidents' prevalence and normalcy. In a sense, Jasmin formulates the coercive incident as part of a bigger culture and problem in the adolescent circles.

Jasmin then resists the idea that this encounter was consensual, by employing the word “any” to highlight the lack of consent in the situation. She also employs the word “harassed” (line 22) to further emphasise working it up as non-consensual. She then uses the words “victim blaming” and characterising it as “easy” to perform (line 23); what is not directly said, yet is implied, is that the notion that this encounter was consensual because Stella sent the photos is problematic and attributes responsibility for the incident to her.

The idea that victim-blaming is easy is contrasted with the phrase “it's not easy to stand up” (line 27) and the evaluation of the previous opinion as “it's not plain and simple” in line 24), whereas Jasmin further highlights the complexities of resisting coercion. This phrase is further enhanced by the employment of active voicing (Woffit, 1992) (lines 29-30). However, the lack of resistance to coercion is framed as an inability to stand up for one's self (lines 29-30), and the incident is framed as an “unfortunate” (line 25) situation where neither party knows what to do. In both these constructions, John is not directly tackled, held accountable or interpellated as coercive. Both these constructions frame the incident as a inability to either resist the coercion or, again, a joint problem and “false consciousness” from both individuals. Additionally, Jasmin employs a show concession (Antaki and Wetherell, 1999) (that there are things to be learned for both of them). This concession attributes responsibility to the overall situation, rather than the individual, perhaps as a way to appear less biased. However, she concludes that Stella was coerced, and highlights the extent of the coercion by employing the words “clearly” and “any interest”.

Despite the participants initially stating that consent is affirmative, the data highlight an evaluation of Stella's consent as insufficient. Moreover, they indicate the expectation that Stella should navigate the coercion she experiences, or a sense of John not being held responsible for his coercion due to some misunderstanding. Furthermore, the employment of the formulation suggesting that this incident reflects a relationship problem is noticeable.



This perhaps highlights the dilemmatic nature of consent and responsibility attribution. There are a few points I want to draw from here. The first one is that the idea of sexual coercion as misunderstanding is a long withstanding rape myth that appears to have transcended the offline world (Xu & Tan, 2020). Moreover, the idea that Stella's claims that she did not want to engage in sexting should have been constructed in a different chronological order echoes notions of the sexual script theory. The sexual script for heteronormative couples constructs the male as sexually exploiting their partner as a result of the endorsement of being sexually exploitative by the peer group and being uncontrollable (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Females are constructed as being sexual to please and with an overall sense of passivity. This often employs the idea that women's refusals are tokenistic and need to be repeated. The sexual script that makes women eager to please implies their difficulty to say no. As Frith & Kitzinger (2001) indicate, the scripts around coercion are often formed in such a manner that women are held accountable for saying or finding it challenging to say no.

#### **4.10. Discussion, evaluation and conclusion**

In the present chapter, I analysed and explicated the IRs, subject positions and ideological dilemmas that I found in the datasets after conducting focus groups with adolescents. The findings indicate the often polarising nature of adolescent sexting. They highlight the ever-changing discursive terrain concerning gender and the challenging narratives around power in the online adolescent world. In this section, I will evaluate and discuss the findings.

The first finding highlighted the discursive terrain concerning the definition of the phenomenon known as sexting. The phrases "sexting" and "sending nudes", constitute a contested category. There is a generational resistance to the word sexting and the vocabulary around the word "sexting" constitutes a contested space. The employment of the words

“sending nudes” has been highlighted in recent literature (Ringrose et al., 2021; Thorburn, et al., 2021). Bonilla et al. (2021) suggest that participants are often in dialogue with the cultural status-quo, and whilst sometimes they challenge it, they also reproduce it. For example, the phrase “send nudes” has been used in memes (often in aggressive ways) and reflects the existence of an internet culture around sexting (Siapera, 2019). The findings of this study confirm that the youth terminology can differ from the academic terminology. Yet, the present study is enhancing our understanding by showcasing that the term sexting is a contested category; it highlights that the negotiation of the terminology is heavily based on sociocultural contexts. Thus, it provides insight into how such terminology is discursively located in relation to the generational gap amongst internet users and consequently, perhaps the existence of an online youth culture discursive divide.

Barrense-Dias et al. (2019) have commented on the consequences of the differences in the employment of the terminology of sexting and “sending nudes”. The terminological gap and thus contested category could have a plethora of implications. For example, it could affect reporting rates. This difference in the definition of sexting could also be an outcome of heteroglossia (previously mentioned in Chapter 3). However, researchers and psychologists could also design interventions and further research which aim to obtain an achievable level of “insider perspective”. This way, we can design sexting education and interventions *for* adolescents, as the currently existing ones appear to be more for adults, or rather addressing adult concerns (further discussed in Chapter 2).

However, section 4.3. indicated that sexting is also constructed in a dilemmatic manner. Again, there is an attempt to frame sexting as self-determination or exploration; referencing Bonilla et al. (2021), the participants are in dialogue with the culturally dominant rhetoric and resist the catastrophic discourse around sexting. Yet there are also discursive formulations acknowledging the negative consequences of sexting, especially after

adolescents being asked about them. The normalcy of sexting for adolescents has been suggested by past studies (Lippman and Campbell, 2014; York et al., 2021). This study further advances such findings by exploring the discursive terrain and highlighting that despite the normalcy constructions, adolescents do acknowledge and construct sexting as having negative consequences when asked so. This duality could perhaps mean that they are acknowledging its context-sensitive nature.

Sexting is heavily context-based, and thus the existence of this occasionally conflicting terrain is to be expected. What is important is how this duality will be navigated and what elements will be positioned in the centre of the discourse. It is worth considering that much of the discursive terrain was centred around non-consensual dissemination of the pictures. This perhaps reflects the current rhetoric around image-based abuse and could highlight that further public dialogue is needed in relation to sexting coercion (for example Georgia's suggestion regarding having to constantly sext in a relationship because it is expected in section 4.3.). It could also indicate a need to transition to interventions tackling power dynamics.

Indeed, power seems to be a crucial ideological dilemma for adolescents. In section 4.4. I showcased how sexting constitutes an ideological dilemma for adolescents. Engaging in it can provide them with social capital, and abstaining is stigmatising. Both engaging in sexting and not engaging in sexting can hold implications for one's reputation. Moreover, rumours/knowledge regarding peer sexting can elevate one's status. In a sense, knowledge regarding sexting was constructed as a type of currency in the economy that is "school culture".

It also needs to be highlighted that this notion of power, both the experiential knowledge of "adulthood" which provides the adolescent with elevated peer status and the

knowledge/rumour about others sexting, echoes of Foucauldian notions. More specifically, “power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 53). These constructions create or sustain hierarchies (Foucault, 1980); here, it is evident that an adolescent hierarchy is formed. Sexting is commodified as an adulting/deviance signifier to obtain peer status/power.

Past studies (Albury and Crawford, 2012; Ringrose et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2013) indicate that adolescents sext for popularity. However, there have been no findings tackling power, unless it is related to gender. Thus, I managed to shed light into how power and knowledge are explicitly centred in the popularity discursive terrain. I was able to showcase how notions of power do not only formulate sexting as social capital, but also the knowledge around it. As a result, I was able to discuss the discursive constructions through a Foucauldian scope. Moreover, due to my methodological approach, this study provides an advanced insight into adolescent hierarchies, social capital and the dilemmatic ideological constructions adolescents are called to navigate in their peer groups.

This ideological dilemma is challenging to navigate due to its complexity. However, these findings could also provide a fruitful approach to sexting education, especially in relation to consent. No sexting education interventions have focused on power despite academics calling for it (Jorgensen et al., 2019). Since adolescents themselves brought it up, it is necessary to tackle it. An education programme that focuses on the insights of the peer group instead of employing distanced rhetoric could be tailored to adolescent understanding of sexting.

The commodification and thus hierarchy of sexting and sexting knowledge appears gender-neutral at first. However, when adolescents open positions one can see the details of their framing, which showcases gender and sexuality-related power imbalance. More

specifically, in the adolescent domain of power, girls are positioned as shamed through the employment of ideologically polarised words such as slut. Boys appear to obtain social capital through sexting with girls. Boys are also positioned as vulnerable due to patriarchal popular discourses framing them as always “up for it”; thus, their experiences of coercion are not acknowledged. Finally, non-heteronormative sexting appears to be highly conflicting, and the positions that open for non-heteronormative individuals are contradicting; their sexting is an expression of exploration. However, if their peers learn they sext, non-heteronormative adolescents are othered and thus are positioned as vulnerable to bullying. These positions echo some of the third-wave feminism rhetoric and activism, especially concerning the reproduction of power structures (Mann & Huffman, 2005).

Many of these sexuality/gender findings have been tackled in previous literature. Regarding the subject position of females as shamed and males as praised, a number of studies have suggested that girls face damage reputation and boys benefit from sexting (Ringrose et al., 2012, 2021). However, this study strengthens the idea that sexting is underpinned by a gendered sub-context, through providing some of the first discursive findings regarding the discursive construction of the gendered double standards. Moreover, it provides some of the first findings on how adolescents are discursively positioned in relation to gender and how they resist such constructions and frame the gendered double standards as negative. Adolescents positioning males as vulnerable is a finding that provides novel insights to the topic of masculinity and sexting. The majority of the existing findings on sexting and gender highlight the (often negative) experiences of girls (Ringrose et al., 2021). To my knowledge, only Hunehall Berndtsson (2021) has explored sexting and consent from a male perspective, yet from a different scope; they explored the experiences of male adolescents through thematic analysis. Their findings highlight that ideas regarding masculinity leave boys experiencing sexual violations during sexting, yet being unable to

deal with them and causing feelings of loneliness and isolation. My research adds to the field of masculinity and sexting by offering a complex understanding of how adolescents of all genders position males in relation to issues regarding hegemonic masculinity and coercion. Moreover, my findings expand our understanding by showcasing how these constructions are worked up in relation to male vulnerability and sexting coercion; thus providing both a broad and narrow focus through the employment of CDP.

Finally, the findings regarding non heteronormative subject positions are the first extensive investigation providing insight into the duality of discursive constructions of adolescents. Studies until now have been quantitative approaches, exploring prevalence among sexual minority adolescents (Gómez-Guadix et al., 2017; Gómez-Guadix & Incera, 2021; Kim et al., 2020). Needham (2021) suggested that homosexual adolescents sext for validation and due to the limited potential partners in their peer group. However, my study was able to capture the positions that opened for non- heteronormative adolescents in relation to sexting and highlight the complexity of the adolescent constructions. Due to my approach, I managed to explicate how adolescents positioned their non heteronormative peers as sexting to explore, yet simultaneously vulnerable due to their otherness.

By employing such rhetoric adolescents can express the inequality they experience in their everyday life. However, the dichotomy of these positions makes it difficult for participants to occupy new ones. Females are only allowed to permit the victim/whore dichotomy (Scrine, 2017). Men can occupy either the “capital” accumulator position or that of the victim that is not believed. Non-heteronormative adolescents can occupy one positive position such as this of the exploring teen; however, this position is only “allowed” to them in private- and what self-determination exists to a position that is only allowed in secret? Once their sexting becomes acknowledged, they occupy the deviant or victim positions. This awareness about structural oppression is beneficial. However, we need to be able to imagine

and articulate new positions based on self-determination. By creating new discursive resources, we can resist and overturn the existing oppression by resisting the cultural hegemony of such symbolic productions and questioning their status as the prevailing cultural norm (Althusser, 2014).

Affirmative consent and lack thereof was another IR that was brought up in all the focus groups, during various points. Adolescents framed consent as imperative, simple, affirmative and a matter of feeling comfortable. It was often juxtaposed with coercion, which was framed as a lack of willingness to participate in sexting or a verbal rejection, e.g., a simple no. This repertoire echoes the current rhetoric around consent and coercion and sex education/consent activism. It is a positive framing around consent and coercion and due to the long withstanding rape myths, third wave feminism activist discourse reaching young people is remarkably progressive.

There have been a few attempts to explore sexting consent and coercion in the current literature. However, they often discuss the non-consensual dissemination as non-consensual sexting (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021; Pampati et al., 2020; Wachs et al., 2021). This study has been one of the first attempts to thoroughly examine how sexting consent and coercion are discursively constructed by adolescents. Thus, the findings presented here are significant as they demonstrate how consent is constructed in a characteristically affirmative way, while lack thereof is constructed and juxtaposed as coercion. However, during the focus groups, adolescents were caught in an ideological dilemma around consent/responsibility after the employment of vignettes. Indeed, we see adolescents attributing blame to Stella or excusing John. Other participants evaluated John as manipulative, coercive and toxic.

These findings further highlight the ideological dilemma of consent, responsibility and justification. Rape myth rhetoric seems to transcend the offline territory and has reached the cyber-space territory. These constructions and responsibility attribution echo a specific cultural history. Rape myths that present coercion as a “misunderstanding” take the blame off the perpetrator and put the spotlight/responsibility on the victim for saying no or not saying in an appropriate way (Frith & Kitzinger, 1997). It was often mentioned by the participants that boys are socialised to think coercing is normal and that Stella fails to say no in a way that is communicated effectively. This is further proof for the persistence of the since disproven miscommunication theory (Frith & Kitzinger, 1997). These ideas have been propagated from psychology and pop culture for many decades (Frith & Kitzinger, 1997), and as adolescents are in constant dialogue with culture, even when they resist it, they can still reproduce such rhetoric (Bonilla et al., 2021).

The second point I want to make relates to the theory of sexual scripts. Despite Stella saying no, a chronological approach to the evaluation of consent highlights the prevalence of sexual scripts (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Whilst consent education/activism is becoming prominent, victim-blaming still needs to be challenged (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001).

The finding regarding sexual scripts and the chronological evaluation of Stella’s resistance is significant. To my knowledge, there is only one quantitative study exploring sexting through the sexual script theory (Symons et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the findings presented here and the discussion challenge sexual script theory. My thesis showcases how the idea of sexual scripts has transcended in the cyberspace and how it is employed to discursively produce ideas of victim blaming in sexting coercion. Moreover, the findings provide the first comprehensive mapping of the complex discursive terrain around sexting, consent and blame through highlighting the ideological dilemmas of consent, responsibility attribution and sexual scripts.



When it comes to consent training and activism, the motto no means no and yes means yes that is often used in consent training echoes the idea that it is a woman's role to communicate rather than a man's to put the labour to understand whether their partner is consenting (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Here, I must declare that I do not believe that this is causal; I do not think the limitations of feminist/consent activism cause such rhetoric. However, I believe social justice is an ongoing process and thus, we can continuously improve our current understanding of such phenomena.

As Harris (2018) mentions, the idea that consent education is based on the concept of simple yes/no scenarios limits the discursive potential of consent. The concept of "no" focuses on self-determination and "yes" on enjoyment. Feminists still debate whether enjoyment or danger should be the centre of the discourse, as it overshadows agency. However, enjoyment exists in a domain of power. Yet adolescent subjectivities are often left to navigate consent or lack thereof and complex political realities and histories; they are also assigned arbitrary gendered stereotypes such as the eager to please females (Harris, 2018). For example, Harris (2018) also tackles what the participants mentioned; the dichotomy that females have to navigate, where the only options are being positioned as a frigid or a slut. Such dichotomies highlight how the idea of consent is as simple as yes and no further suggests that sext and sexting are acontextual. Moreover, such rhetoric ignores the continuity of the process and the idea that one can withdraw consent whenever they want.

Scholars have also challenged the idea of miscommunication as it perpetuates the notion that lack of clarity causes rape. Moreover, rapists often choose to ignore words such as no (Harris, 2018). Thus, the simplicity of consent appears a myth and tends to shift the conversation from the power and gender dynamics. Of course, that does not imply that consent activism is the issue per se; we produce discourse and we are also its discursive

outcomes (Edley and Wetherell, 1999), and thus, our rhetoric reflects the current patriarchal systems of oppression.

What is needed is context and culture-sensitive, more complex conversations regarding consent. It is evident from the findings of this chapter that adolescents are aware of power and hierarchies and gender. These findings highlight the need for new sexting education discussions and enhanced consent activism. Whilst there are no immediate non-performative solutions to a systemic issue such as sexism and sexual violence, new constructions and further online consent activism can be praxis. Since academics and practitioners hold positions of privilege, power and expertise, they can help formulate the new discourses of the cyberspace in a way that delegitimises harmful stereotypes and myths. This rhetorical change could be achieved through media, sexting education and further interventions.

## **Chapter 5: Parental constructions of adolescent sexting**

### **5.0. Introduction**

The current chapter presents the findings of my second study. In this chapter, I analyse data and explore how parents of adolescents discursively construct sexting, and how these constructions open positions related to notions of gender and sexuality. This chapter addresses the following research questions and sub-questions:

Research Question: How do parents/carers of adolescents make sense, construct and negotiate the sexting behaviours of their adolescent children?

Sub-questions:

-How do parents frame and construct sexting?

-How are incidents of sexting contextualised in relation to gender?

I initially present and elaborate on the interpretative repertoires in relation to adolescent sexting; these were formed based on the regularity with which they occurred in the interviews, and the similarity in the arguments or words used. I will discuss and evaluate the subject positions these repertoires open, and their wider cultural context and implications. Moreover, I will discuss the ideological dilemmas that are pertinent in the discursive terrain. The data I will analyse originate from 15 dyadic interviews with parents and/or carers of adolescents (N=30). Further information regarding the participants can be found in table 2, Chapter 3 and the interview schedule in Appendix section B.3.. The methods employed here have been discussed in Chapter 3. As discussed in Chapter 3, the benefit of these dyadic interviews is that they show the co-construction of a joint reality which additionally reflects the cultural understanding of gender and sexting.

## 5.1. IR: Adolescents as immature: sexuality and agency

The first repertoire that I discuss constructs the decision to either engage or abstain from sexting, as an indication of one's maturity, power and agency. The most prevalent construction, present in all the interviews, was that adolescents were immature. Varied versions of how this immaturity is constructed were evident in the dataset. More specifically, within this repertoire adolescents were positioned as "kids" who are too young to either understand their actions, are unaware of the negative consequences of sexting or do not care about them. Parents juxtaposed immature adolescents with an opposite positioning; the sensible adolescent, who is described as a minority and abstains from sexting as they understand the consequences. The following excerpts indicate this repertoire in use. Below, Katie and Steven discuss the illegality of sexting:

### Katie (female, parent)-Steven (male, parent)

1 **A** (...) sharing(.)sexually suggestive images or videos(.)not text  
2 (.)but images or videos(.)is illegal for people under the age of  
3 18 in the UK(.)um(.)what do you think young people feel about  
4 this kind of (.) law  
5 **S** it its illegal(.)yeah(.)um chance is(.)is(.)is(.)that is  
6 something that(.)doesn't limit them ummm or you know(.)one there  
7 could(.)be lack of awareness for one thing(.)or you know at a  
8 point they will(.)say(.)you know who cares just yeah(.)the  
9 other(.)person on the other side(.)will see it so(.)uum(.)  
10 chances are(.)even if they are aware you know they you know (.)  
11 they would ignore it(.)because they can't(.)they assume at that  
12 point of time that the d that the communication you know in  
13 whatever(.)form you know(.)its private so  
14 **K** [right  
15 **S** [ but in the moment it's not necessarily private  
16 **K** right  
17 **A** so do you think they are aware of the legal repercussions?  
18 **S** unlikely  
19 **K** yeah like a lot of other things that they do (.) that they are  
20 they have no clue its illegal(.)and they still do it(.)and then  
21 when it comes to the(.)the(.)consequences(.)they are(.)mindful  
22 of(.)because(.)they never thought that the consequences will be  
23 so harsh

Here the two conflicting positions are combined. The aware adolescent is constructed as being unconstrained from the limits of the law when either aware or unaware of it (lines 6-7). However, a new construction opens up in this excerpt: the naïve adolescent who assumes that sexting is a private conversation which will not reach others (lines 8-9). Even if they are aware of the legal landscape, adolescents are painted as unaware of the digital landscape. This construction was antithetical to the agency parents often mentioned regarding the digital nativity of adolescent (which will be tackled later in chapter 6). This presents an ideological dilemma. In the positions available even when the adolescent is positioned as agentic and aware, their naivety is encompassed in this agency. Perhaps parents manage to negotiate this troubled dilemma by employing constructions and conceptualisations of adolescents as agentic yet naïve, instead of beings which could potentially be sexual/are not innocent. A similar construction can be observed below, where Rachel and Jonathan discuss their perceptions as to why adolescents sext:

**Rachel (female, parent)-Jonathan (male, parent)**

1 **A** and why do you think some adolescents tend to sext and others don't?  
 2 (lines omitted)  
 3 **R** I think some kids are more(.)um(.)aware of the risks than others  
 4 (.)so I suspect that are some that don't(.)because they are aware I  
 5 mean they are aware of the fact that actually once you send  
 6 something you can't get it back(.)and so they're(.)gonna be less  
 7 inclined to do it because of that um(.)I think popularity is  
 8 interesting(.)interesting(.)point

In the above excerpt, the immaturity repertoire is built up with a discussion of awareness. Here, two constructions are drawn; the aware and the unaware adolescent (the latter while not directly mentioned is implied). My question sets the parents up to speak about adolescents generically as “pseudo scientists” (see Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Rachel starts her argument with the word “some” (line 3), either as a response to my question which included the word some, or perhaps to make it appear like a reasonable claim that takes into consideration all accounts (Wiggins, 2016). Rachel suggests that some adolescents (by using

the phrase “some” in line 4), are aware children, which adds authenticity to the account provided. However, agency here is presented as awareness of the dangers and an awareness of threat which is combined with reduced inclination, perhaps implying that the unaware adolescent is less aware about the risks and thus their agency is not fully informed,

When talking about adolescent sexting these are the constructions that parents orient to in relation to maturity. The affordances available seem to contrast adolescents who think they have agency when they practice sexting, not because they are not aware of the dangers but by their normalised perception of it, and adolescents who are sensible and practice their agency by abstaining due to their awareness regarding the sexting dangers. However, as it will be seen below, these constructions of maturity and agency were characterised by gendered stereotypes.

## **5.2. IR: Maturity, power and agency; gendered constructions**

The repertoire above painted adolescents as naïve and unknowing, albeit with different positioning regarding immaturity, agency and power. However, across the dataset, gendered constructions of immaturity/maturity were very prevalent. Sexuality was gendered and aligned to long-standing double standards (e.g., males “were always up for it” while females were not). Sexual agency is both present yet also problematised except in relation to adolescents who identify as LGBTQ. Secondly, in terms of sexting, constructions of maturity (irrespective of gender) became more relevant yet were also dichotomised.

The issue of whether the researcher should trespass the boundaries of the text and its wider interpretation has been widely discussed in the discursive approaches in psychology. For further information on the matter, the reader is urged to read the methodology section or visit Wetherell (1998) and Edley (2001). A few of the discursive scholars emphasise that the ideological/political should not be brought into the conversation. Whilst that does not concern

critical discursive psychology, I think it is a point worth mentioning as an indication of the cultural strength of ideology.

The data analysed here illustrates how embedded gender performance and stereotypes are in sexting discourses and our cultural reality. The interview schedule was structured in a way that questions pertaining to gender were tackled during the final part of the procedure. However, the participants made gender relevant (Stokoe & Smithson, 2001) long before they were asked anything about it, either by tackling it directly or by assigning different sexting roles with different pronouns (e.g., on many occasions they assumed not only heterosexuality, but also assigned a female pronoun to the sender of the sext or the coerced “sexter”, and a male to the received/perpetrator of coercion). Gender haunted the conversation and was omnipresent. Furthermore, sexuality was strongly tied to long withstanding standards, such as boys naturally being the sexting initiators, and the problematisation of girls as sexual creatures (Brown, 2011; Holloway, 1984). This can reflect the conflicts of the current political climate in the western world, as the interviews emerged in an era where these stereotypes are slowly subverted. This subversion stems from the rise in ideological tensions in the public conversations concerning identity politics (Brunila & Rossi, 2018), which was often reflected in participants carefully managing certain discourses, despite making them relevant.

The implications of this repertoire are the differences in how males, females and gender non-binary adolescents/LGBTQ adolescents are evaluated. Throughout this repertoire, different positions open for adolescents-especially in relation to culturally pre-conceived ideas regarding sexuality and gender. Whilst these positions are not permanent, they were pervasive in the dataset and were often employed interchangeably; perhaps suggesting they can be hegemonic representations of how sexting, power and agency are culturally constructed in relation to gender.

### **5.2.1. Position: Girls and maturity; popularity and the insta-girl**

In approximately half of the interviews, parents discussed the pressures girls face from external influences to become sexualised. In multiple instances, sexting and revenge porn cases that belonged to the pop culture sphere were mentioned (e.g., sex tapes or revenge porn incidents involving celebrities). Parents oriented to the glamorisation of online sex work and the influence of social media as part of the external pressures regarding online sexualisation. This opened a new position for girls; the insta-girls, who sexted as a way to become popular. Yet, the position opening for girls presented them as being more eager to please and self-objectify as a form of social capital, often to be popular among boys. In this position, while girls appeared to be constructed as agentic in terms of deciding what happens with their body, their self-determination and power seems to be a pseudo-concept, influenced by external pressures. In the following excerpt, Nate and Georgina bring up the issue of pop culture when they are asked about the gendered identities of adolescents and their role in sexting:

#### **Nate (male, parent) and Georgina (female, parent)**

- 1 **G** I think like social media and magazines and all that sort of thing  
2 have a massive impact on young um(.)girls young(.)young teen(.)  
3 teenagers  
4 **N** it's also being popular  
5 **G** yeah body shape and things like that so when they're showing off  
6 their body shape in a skimpy top or whatever um(.)they think that  
7 that's the image they want to try um and um  
8 **N** [portray  
9 **G** portray because they wanna emulate all the so(.)called glamour  
10 models or what have you(.)in(.)in the limelight or whoever's on  
11 love island or what have you um(.)and I think that can be quite  
12 dangerous(.)as well um(.)sorry I've gone off topic  
13 **N** but some of them yeah  
14 **G** I've lost my train of thought(h)  
15 **N** but some of them it's that thing of popularity as well how many  
16 likes can I get how many positive comments(.)can I get(.)yeah

This position intertwines the public (social media, likes, celebrity culture) with the private sphere. Gabriella employs a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) to work up a pervasive picture of the impact that “social media and magazines and all that sort of thing” (lines 1-2)



have. The list aims to produce a vivid, strong image. Gabriela initially implicates this construction as being linked to young girls then adds/repairs this to “young young teen (. . . teenagers” in lines 2-3, perhaps as a way to make her construction less tied to girls and generalised to the wider category of teenagers (Schegloff, 1979).

Following this, Nate inserts/adds a construction of sexting being about popularity, to which Gabriella agrees. Gabriella proceeds to paint a further picture. Yet her choice of words has a slightly negative undertone rather than a concerned one. More specifically, Gabriella suggests that “they” “show off” their body shape, a word which has more negative connotations of displaying bodies/ trying to impress (lines 5-6). What is perhaps implied to the reader within the cultural context, is that a body-shape worth showing is often perceived as an achievement. Gender is not specified in her construction, yet the construction of “skimpy top” typically connotes feminine attire. The employment of the word “think” in line 6, can signify a flaw in judgement. Whilst the image is curated by the adolescents/girls, Gabriella problematises the sense of agency here. One could argue that Gabriella is constructing this curation as a false perception. Nate co-constructs this version by employing the word portray with Gabriella (line 8).

In lines 9-13 Gabriella orients to a production which formulates the argument that adolescents’ agency is not entirely agentic. Whilst the statement in lines 9-13 initially seems like a gender-neutral statement, it can be read as implying girls, due to the term “glamour models” which typically applies to female models. While Gabriella has tried to widen the category of who is impacted by social media, she reverts to referencing girls -albeit not explicitly. She then proceeds to provide a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990), a list of current role models for girls in pop culture (lines 9-11). She paints this list negatively, framing it as a potential danger (line 12). Whilst Gabriella appears to repair by apologising and suggesting she has gone off topic, Nate attempts to co-construct a further version of this repertoire. He

states that its some of them (perhaps employing the word “some” to appear more objective) and he repeats that it is an issue of wanting to be popular.

Thus, sexting appears to merge with social media instances whereas positive comments and likes are the predominant desire of “some” girls (lines 15-16). The word “some” is perhaps used to create what appears to be a valid statement. Again, girls are not painted as sexual creatures; they are constructed negatively for self-objectifying and thus positioning themselves in a potentially victimising position. This repertoire can imply that girls are constituted responsible for their victimisation instead of emphasising the factors that pressure or influence them. Whilst later on boys are constructed as burdened by the standards of hegemonic masculinity, the same lenience is not allowed to girls here. The concerns regarding sexualisation do not paint them in a sympathetic light and are confessed as problematic. Whilst this might seem like a legitimate critique to the pressures of traditional femininity, it fails to contextualise them. Subsequently it does not acknowledge the societal consequences of rejecting traditional, pop culture notions of femininity that girls often experience-it just paints them negatively when they succumb to them (Kearney, 2013).

### ***5.2.2. Position: Mean girls***

As mentioned above, female sexting was constructed as a means to gain social capital e.g., attracting boys or popularity. However, parents also constructed girls’ sexting as power play and positioned them as bullies to both other girls and boys. There appears to be a tension here between a false “girl power” agency in terms of sexuality yet a more troubled construction of girls as confident/fierce, which goes against the sexual norm. This section maps the positions that girls are available to occupy as sexters. The conceptualisation of girls engaging in sexting moved away from the culturally prescribed female passivity (Kearney, 2013) and thus in these positions they were performing gender trouble (Butler, 2003). The following extracts display the mean girl position and the detail discursive work that is needed

to employ it. The excerpt below is part of the reply to my question about who might feel more pressure to comply with requests for sexually explicit pictures in relation to gendered identities:

**Nicole (Female, parent)-Marta (Female, parent and co-carer friend)**

1 **N** (...)but when it comes to images(.)the girls are probably as likely  
2 to say(h)look at him(h)(.)as as they boys would(.)don't(.)I(.)when  
3 it comes to an image(.)unless they're in a(.)deep relationship  
4 where they do actually value and respect each other and(.)and they  
5 feel(.)that they have you know genuine feelings and a and a strong  
6 relationship(.)maybe I'm just being naive but I but I I think think  
7 that teenage girls can be such↓ bitches↓ that the:y(.)the:y(.)um  
8 are as likely to(.)to(.)you know(.)get a photograph of a boy and it  
9 is a big joke(.)isn't it they can(.)they could be(.)↑ pretty nasty  
10 ↑  
11 **M** yeah  
12 **N** and the boys(0.4)hhh yeah and I mean we just I just I suppose(.)I  
13 guess my first thought was like you Martha that(.)that uh(.)the  
14 girls were more(.)vulnerable= was that the question or more(.)boys  
15 will be more likely to share(.)than girls but(.)mmm probably  
16 not(.)NO(.)no  
17 **M** yeah ↓ I don't think so ↓  
18 **N** probably more li(.)but see again(.)I don't know why I just feel  
19 like girls have been more(.)likely to send(.)take a picture and  
20 send it(.)but that's (0.3)I got nothing to base that on(.) it's  
21 just a feeling(.)maybe it's because I'm a female(.)I don't  
22 know(.)I just feel that(.)yes that girls would(.)take the picture  
23 first(.)I think  
24 **M** do you think  
25 **N** I do(.)I think that  
26 **M** yeah  
27 **N** I think I think girls have more of more of a(0.3)that of a feeling  
28 of being wanted and needed and(.)it's ridiculous I don't because I  
29 don't know why I say that

Here we see the tension between the pseudo empowerment that sexting offers and the bad girl position materialise together, offering two positions for the girls to occupy; the mean girl and the popularity seeking girl. Initially, in lines 1-2, girls are mentioned as similar to the male other and “as likely” to use their sexting image to mock them. This construction is contrasted with sexting in a healthy relationship (“unless” in line 3) and is presented as conditional: making fun of someone is likely, unless someone accomplishes the pre-condition which is being in a deep relationship (lines 3-4). The recognition of the healthy instances of sexting (albeit being presented as conditional and rare) could be a show concession. During

the concession the speaker showcases that they are aware of all of the cases of an argument before reaching their final point, to appear less biased (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999). The present concession has the three-part structure of the proposition; initially the speaker introduces the argument, that girls are as likely to make fun of someone. Then, the speaker mentions the possibility of not acting like that, which is a concession, and then the girls being constructed as mean is the reassertion (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999).

In line 6 Nicole proceeds to position herself as naïve, managing stake (Potter, 1996). According to Potter (1996), anything an individual says can be considered as a product of managing one's stake, or more specifically interest. Nicole managed stake - before stating the category characteristic attributed to girls- by using the word "bitches". It is possible that Nicole positions herself as naïve due to the negatively charged word she uses, which is also emphasised by her change in intonation. She then re-states that it can be a big joke for girls (line 9) and makes another category/evaluation "nasty" available, using the phrase "isn't it" as gloss. The switch/repair from "can" to "could" (in line 9) functions as a second assessment, possibly to adopt a more reasonable and hypothetical position and appear more objective.

Girls are further described as nasty and as using sexting to obtain power and to mock, unless they are in a committed relationship, for which Nicole produces a list of conditions to strengthen the nature of the relationship she wants to portray in lines 3-5. Nicole asking "isn't it" (line 9) can be a way to draw consensus from Marta and the interviewer or to soften a claim (Holmes, 2001) to indicate that this is a familiar cultural way of presenting girls. Her change of intonation, which becomes louder, can suggest affect display to emphasise her point. Marta agrees and then Nicole proceeds in a second assessment of her position, posing a *de jure/de facto* distinction (Edley & Wetherell, 1999). Whilst she initially considered that girls might be more vulnerable, this is not the case. Nicole then proceeds to paint another

position available for girls; they send pictures first (lines 18-23)-however, due to the need to be liked. She then suggests that she does not know and it's something she feels. The statement "I don't know" is used to distance oneself where the statement is perhaps controversial (Potter, 1996). Nicole then manages stake, as she evokes her group membership by using the word "female", perhaps to appear less biased as a member of the group yet not in the same age/perhaps not sharing similar qualities in relation to maturity. She then positions girls who send photos as a means to social capital; their engagement in sexting is making them feel "needed" and prescribes them their desired value.

The following excerpt is similar to the previous one. I asked parents who felt more pressured to comply with requests for sexually explicit pictures when it came to gender. Peter initially suggests that everyone expects it to be girls, but he is not sure:

**Linda (female, parent) -Peter (male, parent)**

- 1 **L** no I mean I can see(hhh)I don't know of it(.)but I can see I can
- 2 see that(.)happening(.)in characters that I've seen they are
- 3 quite(.)there's some quite prominent female characters out there
- 4 and I'm sure they would(0.3)I can see it in a few people(.)that
- 5 they might try to(.)um(.)encourage sexting(.)from
- 6 **P** boys
- 7 **L** someone just
- 8 **P** [boys to girls or girls to boys or girls together and stuff as
- 9 well
- 10 **L** [m(.)but I think it's(.)some(.)from a(.)sort of a sexual
- 11 satisfaction i:n the(.)perhaps even the relationship kind of way
- 12 but some of these purely to(.)I think girls are more likely to be a
- 13 bit more(.)bitchy(.)if I can say that
- 14 **P** yeah more likely to share it with their(.)friends
- 15 **L** yeah(.)more likely to try and con(.)either another female men(.)
- 16 male gender non binary to(.) to post I think that'd be better at
- 17 lying to get someone to send those photos to then use them against
- 18 them(.)I think they:re(.)probably a bit more sneaky and conniving
- 19 certain(.)certain girls are(.)than um(.)than others think
- 20 **P** yeah
- 21 **L** that would be my biggest concern I think(.)there to
- 22 **P** bit of(.)power reasons
- 23 **L** yeah

24 P rather than sexual reasons  
25 L yeah(.)yeah(.)I think that they are more likely to be a bit sneaky  
26 and conniving

Linda initiates her reply with an affect display (line 1). She exhales while constructing an imagined scenario: that there are some “quite prominent” females. The word prominent, despite seemingly neutral, foreshadows a negative elaboration, in the context that it is used. Of analytical importance are the words “some” (line 3) and “can” (line 1). Whilst they do not paint a definite picture of females, the experience or potential for the existence of some makes the rationality of what is said more robust. Initially, girls are presented as more likely to encourage sexting. However, the picture is then painted in further detail. Girls *can* sext in a relationship, yet this is presented with hedging. The use of hedging adaptor words such as “sort of” and “even” function as a way to soften the statement (Gribanova & Gaidukova, 2019). One can say this, too, is a show concession (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999) where the individual considers other positions to appear more rational. In this excerpt, similarly to the previous one, being in a relationship is presented as the “even”, conditional scenario, a rarity rather than a common phenomenon.

Linda then proceeds to open another position for girls; when they do not sext in a relationship, they sext because they are bitchy. It is noteworthy that before the word “bitchy” a minimisation takes place which downplays the significance of the statement. As Edwards (2000, p. 354) suggests “a nonextreme generalisation is logically and semantically weaker than an extreme case formulation, it can be rhetorically and interactionally stronger”. This is followed by the qualifier “if I can say that”, perhaps due to the controversy of the statement or due to my presence as an interviewer, and the possibilities of how I could receive this construction. Peter then co-constructs this narrative by suggesting that girls are more likely to distribute the image. Linda offers a second assessment by agreeing and offers a three-part list

(Jefferson, 1990) of what girls will do (con, lie to get photos, use them against others). The picture painted here is a rather negative one; girls are likely to sext to abuse their power. Girls are either committed and passive, or sexually active and mean.

It is worth highlighting that girls are often positioned as implicitly or explicitly constructed as sexting for power- a point I will further elaborate on in the conclusion. Here, girls do not simply request sexts: they will lie and deceive to do so. Linda constructs girls as “sneaky and conniving”, drawing on the traditional discourses of the mean girl (Brown, 2011). The repletion of sneaky and conniving at the end emerges without the word certain. To quote Edwards (2000) it “can be factually and rhetorically more robust in the sense of less easy to knock over by citing one or two counterexamples” (Edwards, 2000, p. 352).

The detailed discursive work testifies to the controversy and the cultural history of what is being said, as with the current political climate calling females “bitches” is starting to be challenged (Felmlee et al., 2020). I want to emphasise a few commonalities these two excerpts share: the affect displays and the use of variations of the word “bitch”. Many scholars have produced elaborate work about the semantics and history of the word bitch (e.g. Sobieraj, 2018) but it is imperative to say it has been tied into oppressive cultural practices for centuries and only recently in human history there have been some attempts to re-appropriate it (Felmlee et al., 2020). The script presented with girls being mean is formulated in a tentative manner, as seen in Linda’s construction, line 1 “can”, line 5 “might”; lines 1-2 “can see that”; line 3 “some quite...”, line 18 “a bit more sneaky” etc. and often employment of the word “ I think” which personalises rather than generalises.

It is noteworthy that in both of these excerpts, despite the detail in which the incidents of female sexting are portrayed, the participants clarify they have never heard of such incidents or that “they don’t know why they said that”. Despite such statements, they

construct the potential of a mean girl repertoire. This could be an indicator of the presence of cultural history through which individuals draw for their positions: girlhood is constantly collectively reproduced (Brown, 2011). The bad girl stereotype, which often includes the sexually liberated girl, has been present in pop culture, psychology, legislation and the media for many decades, portraying the female adolescent as scheming, nasty and thus not showcasing the aggression girls often experience (Brown, 2011). During the early 00s the representation of the indirect violence girls supposedly perpetrate was contextualised in the cyberspace where girls were presented as online bullies (Ringrose, 2006). Pop culture highlighted a new message; girls trying to enter an androcentric society means they have to lie and manipulate (Ringrose, 2006). However, these discourses were quite different than the ones constructed for males. The ideological dilemmas in the gendered discourses will be covered later in section 5.4.

### ***5.2.3. Position: Boys as initiators/perpetrators***

When it came to male sexting, boys were often positioned as the initiator or the perpetrator of sexting. This construction was often painted negatively or framed as a straightforward fact without any elaboration, perhaps indicating that it is a universally accepted cultural idea about males. These positions were often confessed as controversial. Here Tiffany discusses the gendered differences in sexting, after stating the vulnerability of girls and non-binary adolescents:

#### **Tiffany (female, parent) and Robert (male, parent)**

```
1 T um(.)and (.)and for for the majority of kids I think it's
2 probably(.)going to be boys who are going to be harassing girls(.)
3 sorry to say(.)I think(.)that's(.)that's(.)that'll be the main
4 direction of travel there I think
```

Above, Tiffany is suggesting that boys will initiate sexting with girls. Yet, sexting is not portrayed as just something boys simply initiate, but also as harassment. The way this



presupposition is formed seems complicated, as it is initially declared that it refers to a majority (line 1). However, prior to the statement that boys will be harassing girls, the words “I think” are employed (line 1). Again, this employment frames the statement as an opinion, and it is followed by the word probably, which aims to further neutralise the statement. The use of the words “sorry to say” in line 3 is noteworthy, as it could be an apology. However, it perhaps also testifies to the cultural controversy of the statement. It functions as a way to suggest an emotion category (Edwards, 1999), but also encompasses stake. Tiffany suggests that while she does not like saying this as it is the reality which makes her feel sorry, yet it is what happens. After this, a metaphor is employed (line 2), which is accompanied by the words “I think” both in the beginning and the end. Metaphors function as a way to manage the account and blame (Wiggins, 2016). The ideological position one is called to occupy is described as “travel” (line 4). The usage and the repetition of the words “I think”, indicate that what was just said was a potentially distressing statement.

Here, Sasha and Nate discuss the gendered consequences of sexting after being asked if they believe they exist:

**Sasha (female, parent)- Nicolas (male, carer)**

1 N because(.)I(.)I(.)and this is me guessing(.)but I would guess(.)  
 2 that its much more common for boys(.)to talk girls into sending or  
 3 to want girls to send than the other way around but I might be  
 4 pointing in a stereotype(.)I get that(.)but I still reckon its  
 5 pro(.)it's about every female friend I have who has been on a dating  
 6 website has seen many many many more penises than she ever wanted to  
 7 (.)without asking for them and you know(.)um that means that men  
 8 tend to more to be the perpetrator in this kind of thing(.)not  
 9 always(.)but you know I would say boys are more likely to be the  
 10 ones that are doing that um(.)so I I think there's very(.)there's  
 11 more I think(.)there's more for girls to lose in a weird kind of way  
 12 because of this horrible patriarchal society we live in(.)where like  
 13 it's still(.)actually(.)the world of boys will be boys(.)kind of  
 14 thing and oh it's just a boy acting like a boy(.)and things get  
 15 dismissed

This excerpt employs a number of feminist themes; what is noteworthy is the way these are articulated. Nicolas starts his statement with the disclaimer that he is guessing (line 1), and then repeats the word “guess” (line 1) before he suggests that boys are the ones that talk girls into sending texts. The usage of the word “guess” indicates and emphasises that it is an opinion and an imagined scenario and thus might not correspond to the adolescent reality. The choice of words such as “talking into” (lines 2-3) indicates that it is not a consensual exchange per se, and it involves an amount of labour by the boys to convince or even coerce. Nicolas then adds that he is pointing in a stereotype as a way to appear less biased; the way this is constructed suggests that the idea that boys can perpetrate coercive sexting is a controversial statement. He then proceeds to invoke an anecdotal experience (line 4-6): every one of his female friends has received unsolicited sexual photos. It is noteworthy how this disclaimer is again followed by “not always”, framing the statement to make it appear more neutral and the individual more credible. Boys are then characterised as more likely to be “bad”, not due to their own virtue but due to the societal permissance to what boys are allowed to do and the lack of consequences they face.

The sexual agency positions available to adolescents evidently exist; yet are problematised in terms of the heterosexual binary. However, the opposite happened with LGBTQ and non-binary adolescents: the positions opening for them were significantly more positive.

#### ***5.2.4. Position: Non heteronormative constructions of agency***

Most parents, when asked about LGBTQ and non-binary individuals often grouped them together. For example, when they were asked about non-binary individuals, they replied in relation to LGBTQ adolescents. Non-heteronormative adolescents were often othered (almost all the participants offered disclaimers stating that they are heterosexual and thus cannot speak from a non-heteronormative point of view). Thus, LGBTQ adolescents were

discussed as the Other to the heteronormative norm. Unlike the heteronormative binary, parents often positioned them as sexually open and more curious, and their sexting as an activity aiming to explore their emerging sexuality. In a sense, this position was one of the few constructions of positive sexting parents employed. In the following excerpt Chloe and Dan discuss their perception of the influence sexuality might have on sexting engagement:

**Dan (male, parent)-Chloe (female, parent)**

1 D I don't I don't have many ummm people I know who are(.)um(.)LG..  
2 C [gay(.)]just say that(h)  
3 D yes gay I had more(.)when I was working(.)I had access to a(.)um  
4 (.)greater number of people(.)then yes(.)I have colleagues who(.)  
5 fit that category(.)and they(.)I say they(.)they were much more um  
6 (.)open in their sexuality(.)so I guess that when it comes to  
7 expressing that or or communicating that eh and sexting sorts of  
8 message they may be more willing to do it = but um(.)I can only  
9 speak from a heterosexual point of view(.)um within my circle (.)  
10 but I would I I I I can't I can't answer that(.)I don't know(.)I  
11 don't know

The excerpt above seems to be centred around the discursive accomplishments of trying to relate to an LGBTQ point of understanding when it comes to sexting. Dan starts with a statement (line 1) suggesting that he does not personally know LGBTQ individuals. Dan visibly struggles with the acronym, which perhaps shows an unfamiliarity with identity politics. Chloe attempts to relieve that difficulty by using the minimising “just” to encourage him to talk about gay people. The lack of familiarity can also be indicated by the use of the word “gay”, which in the LGBTQ spectrum of sexualities only represents the L(esbian) and G(ay). Chloe then laughs as an affect display (Wiggins, 2016) perhaps to indicate her reconstruction of his understanding and to signify trouble (line 2). Whilst Dan agrees with Chloe’s repair/addition (line 3), he then proceeds to talk about having been acquainted with non-heteronormative individuals through his work. The employment of the word “access” is perhaps signifying that they are a group he does not belong to. In a way, Dan is positioning LGBTQ individuals as the Other to the heteronormative lived experience. Dan paints LGBTQ people as open in their sexuality and then suggests a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990)

to emphasise his point; to express that (their openness) and communicate it and sexting, they are more willing to do it. Sexting is constructed as an extension of one's manifestation of sexuality and thus being sexual and sexuality seem interrelated. It can be assumed that sexting is thus constructed as a sort of a sexual liberation /curiosity that is not problematic and is a manifestation of the desire to express one's preferences. In a way, acknowledgement and acceptance of sexual identity is a similar form of sexual liberation as sexting. However, he then proceeds to manage stake by suggesting that this is a heterosexual point of view, employing his identity and potentially suggesting that his opinion might be wrong. The excerpt finishes with the repletion of the words "I don't know", which are perhaps used to distance him from a that statement can be controversial (Potter, 1996) so he can avoid criticism in case his views are not representative of the reality that LGBTQ people experience.

The cyberspace was also discussed as a space of sexual emancipation for LGBTQ adolescents. Sexting was constructed as an act of sexual exploration and LGBTQ adolescents as sexually curious young people. Below Jonathan and Rachel discuss the differences sexting presents in terms of sexuality:

**Rachel (female, parent)-Jonathan (male, parent)**

1 **A** how do you think actually(.)do you think there are differences  
2 similarities in relation to sexuality and how heterosexual and  
3 LGBTQ individuals sext  
4 **J** yeah yeah absolutely that lead on to it I think yeah I think  
5 **R** I think it probably goes back to safe spaces doesn't it if its seen  
6 as a safe(.)environment to explore sexuality then I I would  
7 imagine(.)I have no no I have no evidence or knowledge at all but I  
8 would imagine it would be more attractive to LGBTQ kids to be able  
9 to kind of experiment as what is seen as a safer way  
10 **J** mmm

There are two things of analytical interest here. Whilst heterosexuality is not directly mentioned, it is implied, present and the defining contrast to non-heteronormativity. Rachel suggests that the internet is a perceived safe space (line 5) to explore one's sexuality. What is

perhaps implied is that what is unsafe is the non-virtual heterosexual world, which encompasses less safety when one explores their sexuality. Exploration can be safer in the cyberspace as it provides more opportunities. The question “doesn’t it” in line 5 indicates that it is a shared cultural understanding that the online domain offers less threatening, more exploratory liberty. It is noteworthy that the cyberspace is now presented as a safe space and sexting as a liberal activity in order to explore one’s identity. Sexting is framed as a way to explore sexuality which is a positive construction; when heterosexual sexting was discussed (as mentioned above), parents resisted positive constructions. Rachel then proceeds to create a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) (lines 6-8); she can only imagine, she does not know and has no experience and then repeats the words “I would imagine”. This way she manages stake (Edwards and Potter, 1992) and positions herself as a heterosexual who does not have the insider LGBTQ perspective, perhaps to avoid criticism in case she is mistaken. Sexting is constructed and framed as attractive to non-heteronormative adolescents (line 8).

The construction of LGBT adolescents is one of the rare instances where sexting is painted in a positive manner and parents construct it as something that can be an exploratory practice. Here, sexting is not only framed as experimentation but also as a safer one, possibly- even though not directly mentioned- compared to the physical adolescent world. LGBTQ kids open a new position in relation to sexting; that of the sexuality -curious adolescent who is agentic and has to assess what is safe and what is not in order to experiment.

### **5.3. IR: Sexting creates victims**

In almost all the interviews sexting was constructed as extremely negative. The descriptions varied yet had common themes. Sexting was immediately associated with revenge porn, sextortion, stranger danger, and the possibility of dissemination of the pictures. Here Charles discusses how he feels about adolescents getting involved in sexting, after I asked him so:

**Charles (male, parent and step-parent)-Beatrice (female, parent and step-parent)**

1 C personally(.)I think it's a horrific idea which I just you don't  
2 know(.) what's gonna happen to where it's gonna(.)go(.)or where  
3 it's going to end up(.)um(.)um(.)personally(.)whether I've got a  
4 son or a daughter(.)I just think it's a horrific concept for them  
5 to be involved in(.)I don't know whether it goes on or not  
6 B yeah  
7 C but I I would just think it's a terrific thing(.)as a parent(.)to  
8 find out that your kid might be involved in it on the receiving  
9 or(.)or(.)or(.)the sending end it's(.)it's not a great idea when  
10 you're talking about(.)pictures of things(.)whether it's also  
11 covering text messages(.)I don't know recording is it photographs  
12 you are talking about or its it texts or is it both

Charles frames his opinion as personal, perhaps to avoid criticism. This management of stake (Edwards and Potter, 1992) is possibly a prelude to the overly negative and invested description of sexting which is described as a “horrific idea”. Charles’ construction of sexting is worked up and glossed as imagined scenarios, e.g. “I don’t know whether it goes on or not” yet couched as “but I would think it’s a terrific thing”. Thus, Charles places his meaning of this aspect of the negative consequences of sexting as his personal and parental imagined responses to an unknown, yet potentially “out there”, consequence of sexting.

The (imagined) sexting photo is personified through active voice. The photo can “go” and “end up”. This construction of the photo almost builds the picture up as an agentic entity which could signify the authority/power it can have over an adolescent. Notions of revenge porn are employed indirectly via the implied power of the photo and its distribution. Charles then clarifies that this is the case no matter whether he has “a son or a daughter”. This could signify the heavily gendered discourses on the topic, an analysis of which will follow below. He then suggests that it is something one should not endorse universally. He further manages stake by invoking a parental identity and then switches; from his personal identity and the use of “I”, he interpellates (Althusser, 2014) the co-speaker through the word “you”. Through the interpellation and invocation of the parental element, Charles creates a co-constructed reality.

### 5.3.1 Positions: females as victims of sexting

The interpretative repertoire of sexting creating victims mapped out very distinct gendered positions about sexting victimhood. Females were constructed as occupying the victim position, largely due to patriarchal pressures. In the following excerpt, Nancy and Phil discuss who they believe feels more obliged to sext:

#### Nancy (female, step parent)-Phil (male, parent)

- 1 **A** so of boys or girls or gender non binary who do you think might  
2 feel more pressure to comply with a request for sexually explicit  
3 pictures  
4 **P** well immediately(.)as we always say as girls don't we your  
5 immediate thought is it's girls that are pressured into providing  
6 pictures  
7 **N** and probably that(.)that(.)they're the most frequent cases I've had  
8 to deal with our(.)females  
9 **P** and I suspect  
10 **N** images  
11 **P** I suspect as well  
12 **N** but I don't know if that's it's because males feel like they can't  
13 come forward or they feel like it's the  
14 **P** yeah there will be an element of that of course it will(.)but but  
15 also(.)um  
16 **N** it must be embarrassing for a boy to come to their female(.)I don't  
17 know(.)female(.)year head and say(.)this has happened or rather you  
18 know  
19 **P** I think also(.)a picture of a girl is more damaging to that girl  
20 (.)than a picture of a boy is to that boy  
21 **N** well it goes back to that kind of macho sort of(.)stereotype isn't  
22 it of kind of look at me and my giant penis(.)and then(.)women you  
23 know I've got loads of situations with girls when they're happy is  
24 it dysmorphia when they see themselves in a different way to what  
25 they actually look like(.)and self-image and all that sort of stuff  
26 (.)I think is more rife with girls than it is boys  
27 **P** yeah(.)I thought that too

In response to my question, Phil prefaces his response with a discourse marker, “well”, before presenting a generic understanding couched as “we immediately”. Moreover, he employs the word “we always” (line 4) before constructing girls as being more vulnerable, alluding to a widely accepted and shared societal reality. Here females engaging in sexting is constructed as a by-product of coercion and as a common incident. It is noteworthy that it is not mentioned by whom girls are pressured. Moreover, the use of passive voice perhaps is implying/referring to the broader societal pressures girls experience. Nancy then invokes her

category bound knowledge (Sacks, 1992; Wiggins, 2016) as a teacher to back up this generic construction with the cases she has encountered (line 7).

Moreover, during the interviews, when what could be construed as a feminist argument was employed, it was often balanced with insertions about male vulnerability. This insertion could perhaps function as a way to present a fair assessment. For example, Phil proposes that boys might “feel like they can’t come forward” which could link to hegemonic masculine ideals of strength in reporting instances of sexting against them (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), specifically here to a female head of year. This insertion leads to a return to female vulnerability via a construction of pictures of girls being “more damaging” (line 19). Thus, by juxtaposing the gendered stereotypes, participants construct the pressures of femininity as more deleterious and punishing, especially in relation to the perception of the female body.

These insertions of cases where the victimisation of boys was raised post discussing girls’ vulnerability are not replicated when the reverse scenario is discussed, a point that I will return to later. Girls were routinely assigned as vulnerable due to societal pressures to be sexual. This can be demonstrated in the following excerpt, where Dan and Chloe answer my question regarding gender and the pressure to comply to requests for sexually explicit material:

**Chloe (female, parent)-Dan (male, parent)**

1 **A** so how boys or girls or gender non binary adolescents(.)what do you  
2 think(.)might feel pressure to comply with the request for(.)  
3 sexually explicit pictures or(.)videos or messages?  
4 **C** fgirls  
5 **D** yeah girls  
6 **C** we(.)well I know boys too are taught to be beautiful now but the  
7 stock the value of a woman is still(.)her(.)her looks are a  
8 commodity and her image is a commodity and her sexuality is a  
9 commodity to be(.)traded(.)still=and I think women know that in  
10 their core(.)perhaps that’s just my own view versus my own  
11 experience(.)but(.)I don’t think we’re through that yet(.)I don’t  
12 think we’re on a level playing field yet and(.)uh I’ve again  
13 forgotten the question



14 **C,D,A** (h)  
15 **A** who feels more pressure(.)to comply with requests for sexts(.)  
16 basically  
17 **C** girls they(.)no(.)not just girls(.)I mean(.)I'm sure boys worry  
18 about the length and the size and the stamina and the duration and  
19 all those aspects of sexuality(.)I(.)I don't think it's a(.)a stress  
20 free zone free there(.)but yeah(.)pressure to comply(.)I suspect  
21 girls feel more pressured to comply(.)I mean(.)again(.)it's really  
22 generalized(.)but(.)you know(.)I'm certain the one that I was gonna  
23 say(.)I've certainly been in office days where people get their  
24 dicks(.)but having said that(.)actually(.)girls do that too(.)so(.)  
25 pressure to comply(.)yeah(.)I'm gonna stay with the girls(.)I think  
26 there's more pressure

This excerpt follows the format of the previous one. The immediate response that Chloe constructs is that girls face more pressure, which then is also co-constructed and supported by Dan. However, after this statement, Chloe proceeds to suggest that boys also face issues. She then resumes to the original point, which is that girls face a lot of external pressure to look good. Chloe refers to that initially as “stock value” (line 7), perhaps to highlight that it is equivalent to societal capital. She then proceeds to employ a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) to emphasise the extent of the commodification of women (lines 7-9). The employment of the word “women”, whereas before girls were mentioned, could imply the general gendered nature of sexting that reflects broader societal pressures which then translate into adolescence. The same format is employed when Chloe re-answers my initial question due to forgetting it. Whilst initially she states girls face pressures, she then proceeds to mention boys and states a list of the appearance-based issues they face. She declares that they do face stress too, perhaps to avoid criticism as if the first statement is controversial. In both answers, Chloe evokes personal experiences as an opinion statement, perhaps to indicate that it is subject to one’s judgment. In many ways, this position was confessed as a controversial opinion.

### ***5.3.2. Position: Male victimhood***

In the previous section, participants positioned girls as victims of sexting. However, other parents positioned boys as facing several challenges, induced by the stereotypes

associated with masculinity. This position was justified as a result of the widely shared stereotype that boys are perpetrators of coercion; this results in a lack of awareness regarding the issues they face when they are harassed. Below Rachel constructs the idea that boys are vulnerable due to being perceived as bad:

**Rachel(female, parent)-Jonathan(male, parent)**

1 **A** what do you think about(.)the consequences though(.)do you think  
2 that they are different do you think they are the same for  
3 genders(.)or gender non-binary adolescents  
4 **R** I think there is a risk(.)that(.)boys will be viewed as(.)  
5 aggressive(.)and predatory and bad(.)and the girls(.)can be viewed  
6 as victims(.)I think that there's a real risk(.)of that when that's  
7 not(.)perhaps the case(.)I have absolutely no idea whether there's  
8 any sort of different perceptions(.)or or impacts on gender(.)non  
9 binary kids(.)I I don't know

In this excerpt, Rachel suggests there is a risk that boys will be perceived negatively. She initiates the sentence with the phrase “I think” (line 4), perhaps to indicate that it is her own opinion and thus can be subjective. However, she also uses the word “risk” to highlight the potentiality and unwantedness of such incidents. The potentiality can be also inferred by the usage of the word “will” in line 4. Rachel then emphasises the possibility by repeating the disclaimer that there is risk by adding the evaluative word “real” (line 6) and proceeds to declare that this is not the case. It is noteworthy that the sexting risk is constructed as boys being aggressive or predatory, but also on the perception of females as the victim. In a sense, boys are juxtaposed to girls. Whilst there is a risk that boys will be viewed as aggressive, girls can be viewed as victims. The use of “can” seems less definite from the word “will”, perhaps implying that boys are more likely to be perceived as predatory than girls to be perceived as victims. The potentiality is again highlighted by the repetition of the word “risk” which is evaluated by the addition of the word real. Rachel proceeds to produce a de jure/de facto statement (Edley & Wetherell, 1999); whilst this can be a common perception, it is not always the case. Rachel appears to be about parity over assumed generalisations. To

strengthen her argument, she employs a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of the negative characteristics attributed to boys (lines 4-5).

Similarly, Anna and Mary talk about the lack of visibility boys face due to the societal emphasis on female victimisation. Prior to this there had been a discussion of the media perpetrating discriminatory stereotypes both for heterosexual and homosexual individuals:

**Anna (female, carer/relative)-Mary (female, parent)**

1 **A** we've missed out that there will be a whole lot of boys um(.)  
2 questioning again their sexuality their feelings(.)their genitalia  
3 how they understand their bodies um(.)and their own personal  
4 development who were(.)if exposed to a picture again of anything  
5 of a sexual nature(.)would question(.)you know what(.)what is this  
6 what(.)what I mean(.)but we seem to skim over that area because  
7 it's always emphasised particularly even in schools in my opinion  
8 on girls being the victims  
9 (lines omitted)  
10 **M** however if um(.)you've got(.)as Anna said(.)if you've got a girl  
11 sending a picture of her genitalia or her body she's automatically  
12 into it she's a slut she's dirty whereas if a guy sends his bits to  
13 a girl he is a bit of a player you know a bit of a boy such a laugh  
14 OR he's a complete rapist and a and a paedophile that's on what the  
15 media is so it's very very difficult to get true indication of of  
16 what you're exposed to

Here, Anna suggests that due to the emphasis on girls as a society, we “missed” the male issues. The use of future tense (“will be” in line 1) might attest to the factuality of the statement, and the evaluative “whole lot” (line 1) can indicate the prevalence of this issue. Anna provides a list of concerns, perhaps to strengthen her argument and indicate the multitude of issues boys can experience. An extreme case formulation (Jefferson, 1990) is employed, which attests to the vulnerability of boys; anything can make them confused. This is accompanied by another extreme case formulation (Jefferson, 1990) that girls are “always emphasised” as the victims in schools (lines 7-8), which is interrupted by a softener (“in my opinion”). It should be highlighted that the vulnerability is not constructed as a result of boys’ confusion per se. Instead, their vulnerability seems to be a by-product of them being unequipped, especially by schools. It is implied that it is not sexting or hegemonic masculinity that leaves them vulnerable; it is the societal concerns and sexting education

focus on girls. Mary appears to build on Anna's version and co-construct a shared reality. She introduces the position available for boys; they can either be praised for sexting or be labelled as deviant. These positions are confessed as problematic.

It is noteworthy that when parents discussed the pressures males faced, no interruptions emerged about how girls might experience similar issues, like when the violence girls experience was discussed. Moreover, when girls were mentioned as perpetrators of coercion, males and non-binary adolescents were positioned as victims. Yet, when females were positioned as victims, while boys were sometimes mentioned, there was a construction of such incidents emerging due to the societal pressures they face.

### **5.3.3. Position: On heteronormative vulnerability**

When it came to LGBTQ and non-binary adolescents, they were often grouped together, perhaps due to the novel and often politically correct terrain of such subjects. When parents were asked questions related to non-binary individuals, they replied in relation to LGBTQ adolescents and vice versa. This grouping can be attributed to their Otherness; parents were sympathetic to such groups yet acknowledged that these adolescents can be othered. Parents suggested that this Otherness might make them subject to either coercion/harassment or might constitute them vulnerable in terms of how they feel about their freedom of expression regarding gender and sexuality. Here Tiffany elaborates on the differences between heterosexual and LGBTQ sexting:

#### **Tiffany (female, parent)-Robert (male, parent)**

- 1 **T** but my concern is much(.)that certainly adolescents who are(.)  
2 LGBTQ(.)that they're much more at risk of being abused by other  
3 people(.)receiving abusive messages
- 4 **R** mhm
- 5 **T** so that will be my greatest concern then(.)yeah so(.)this is not  
6 so much about about being able to resist requests for stuff this  
7 is why I think they just kind of get(.)they get nasty messages  
8 basically they get bullied and again

9 **A** so thinking about gender(.)do you feel that sexting is different  
10 for boys or girls(.)or gender nonbinary adolescents

11 **T** yeah I'm sure it's(.)I mean(.)my(.)my understanding is that(.)uh  
12 (.)well(.)that anyone who's not straight gets harassed(.)so any  
13 kind of of gay(.)lesbian trans bi person(.)or anything(.)those  
14 kids will have a hard time(.)I guess they will possibly probably  
15 sext each other as well at times(.)I don't know and(.)but my main  
16 concern would be that they would be the recipient of nasty  
17 abusive stuff um

In the excerpt above, Tiffany frames LGBTQ sexting as something that concerns her, using the word “certainly” to emphasise the possibility of risk. In this context, sexting is now constructed as including abusive messages, and non-heteronormative individuals are more at risk of being abused. The passivity of the account “being abused” (line 2) indicates the general vulnerability and power imbalance LGBTQ people might experience. Tiffany employs an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) which involves investment (“my biggest concern” in line 1); a display of her preoccupation with the said subject and perhaps an indicator of the legitimacy of the risk LGBTQ adolescents face. She then adds a statement suggesting that it is not their own inability to decline such requests, potentially distancing herself from the general vulnerability position (as seen above). She emphasises that they get nasty messages. Thus, the vulnerability is formulated not just as a matter of whether they exercise their own agency, but a matter of external power imbalances. Passive voice is used again (“get harassed” in line 12), perhaps to emphasise that this is not a matter of exercising one’s agency but a matter of being discriminated against.

Tiffany’s next reply signifies the nature of the vulnerability LGBTQ adolescents experience. Her sentence starts with the statement “I am sure” in line 11, which perhaps adds to the factuality of her position. Tiffany paints the othering LGBTQ adolescents experience. She proceeds to create an extensive list of sexualities (line 13) which ends with the phrase “or anything”. Multiple categories of not only sexuality but also gender are included before the

word anything, potentially highlighting that it does not matter what kind of sexuality or gender adolescents identify with. What is implied to define them and thus other them, is the juxtaposition to their heteronormative peers.

Tiffany proceeds to declare that these kids can be sexual and sext, potentially wanting to adopt a position that shows she considers all possible scenarios. However, she then repeats that they will receive nasty and abusive stuff, painting the sexting exchange not only negatively but with them being receptors who lack agency and are harassed. The discursive construction here is clear; the other does not receive sexting as flirtation but as punitive harassment for their Otherness, a concept that she paints as concerning and worrisome. This construction appears rather antithetical with the positive aspects of sexting mentioned earlier; perhaps creating an ideological dilemma

#### **5.4. Ideological dilemmas; gendered battleground**

Across the interpretative repertoires already explored, a pattern of ideological dilemmas is evident. The positions that open for adolescents in relation to sexting are conflicting, polarised and antithetical; suggesting that the shared cultural understanding of sexting is complicated and depends on gender.

This is partially a consequence of the historical context regarding identity politics. This study is conducted in an era of subversion of older gender norms and consequent resistance to that subversion. Moreover, it perhaps emerges from the interview questions and the attempt of both myself and the participants to be politically correct. In the positions that open for adolescents and subsequently the overall discursive terrain, one can observe the switching dialogue on gender equality and the old replacing the new. At times, it felt that sexting is not about adolescents anymore; adolescents are the soldiers of the gendered battleground in which contemporary discourse unravels. Adolescent desire in the cyberspace

is the field where the old versus new understandings of gender, sexuality and desire materialise.

The repertoires parents employed and thus the positions they open present numerous ideological dilemmas. In the first IR, girls are positioned as either insta- girls (suppressed by the patriarchal prototypes of society yet unwillingly synergic to their own victimisation) or as mean girls and thus responsible for victimising others. Yet another conflict emerges as boys are presented as the initiators of sexting and coercion. Therefore, in both binaries, sexual agency is there and is also problematised. Only LGBTQ and non-binary adolescents do not appear to occupy conflicting positions, as they are painted as curious.

The second repertoire about maturity, agency and power carries more ideological complexities and dilemmas, since all genders are presented as victims of sexting. However, the nature of victimhood is very distinct. Girls are framed as victims of boys/the patriarchy. Boys are framed as victims of the discourses which are occupied by conversation about female oppression and non-heteronormative adolescents are victims of their Otherness. The positions that open for girls are vulnerable, agentic and powerful as a bully and agentic but not really powerful as a willing sexter due to self-commodification. The positions that open for boys are even more antithetical. They are either initiators of sexting, perpetrators of harassment or victims of female emancipation and thus power. The management of this duality can have implications to the affordances regarding adolescent sexting. Finally, non-heteronormative adolescents' notions of victimhood emerge due to their Otherness, which constitutes them as vulnerable to bullying.

As mentioned earlier, girls are constructed as sexting for power, which did not occur with boys. This is a particularly novel finding, rarely covered in the literature and often not directly mentioned. It is noteworthy that when parents were discussing male sexting, boys

were constructed as perpetrators, whose behaviour was sanctioned and encouraged by the demands of hegemonic masculinity/patriarchy. However, girls were often explicitly constructed as sexting to be mean and thus to obtain power. The position of girls as power-thirsty bullies breaches the traditional, passive constructions of femininity (Ringrose & Renold, 2010) and breeds gender trouble and troubled positions (Butler, 2003).

As Ringrose and Renold (2010) suggest, much of the meaning of traditional femininity revolves around “niceness”, sexual innocence and passivity. It is expected that girls will perform this niceness at all costs, as these traits constitute the idealised notion of femininity. Contrary to this expected passivity, heteronormative masculinity is associated with more aggressive sexuality and such expressions are often expected from males. With the emergence of 3rd wave feminism and social media these traditional gender norms seem to be getting disrupted, and the idea of girls being sexual does not respond to the available existing discourses.

It could be assumed that if boys do not occupy their societally assigned position, they are perceived as victims of female emancipation and quest for power. In other words, the emergence of female sexuality and self-determination is one that does not correspond to traditional notions of femininity who demand innocent and niceness at all costs. Girls not being passive is being perceived as the troubled identity of being power thirsty- as often only extreme binaries are available to girls (Ringrose & Renolds, 2010). The idea of the sexual female appears deviant and threatens to subvert the traditional role of the dominant sexually aggressive male. As De Beauvoir (1989, in Chiwengo, 2003) suggested, female identity is often defined by juxtaposing and othering it to the male part of the heteronormative binary (Chiwengo, 2003). Thus, hegemonic masculinity is constructed on the basis that females cannot occupy agentic positions, and if they do, it classifies them as deviant, and masculinity is threatened. This reflects an androcentric understanding of sexual agency, based on the



cultural history of masculinity which is often conceptualised as violent and assertive (Connell, 2002).

Many of these dilemmas are not resolved. What could potentially resolve them would be more agentic positions that emphasise normal understandings of desire and experimentation. What could additionally be an accepted solution to this dilemma for parents would be a position of purity, as it would resolve the ideological tensions and the controversies of the subjects. It is noteworthy that it can be challenging to orient to such dilemmas. Often, parents employed multiple conflicting repertoires. A takeaway message here is that society cannot have androcentric discourses in female sexual relations in the cyberspace and vice versa because it minimises and de-contextualises the problems adolescents face in relation to the gender they identify.

### **5.5. Discussion, evaluations and conclusion**

In the first section of this chapter, I discussed the parental repertoires in relation to sexting, gender, monitoring and consent. The repertoires discovered were complex and often conflicting. This antithetical and often polarised notion of sexting that parents/caregivers employed is consistent with the notion of lived and intellectual ideology, as introduced by Billig et al. (1988) (further elaboration can be found in Chapter 3). In this section, I will attempt to discuss the positions these repertoires open in relation to sexting and evaluate them from a feminist perspective.

The positions that parents/caregivers opened regarding adolescents and sexting were heavily contextualised in relation to gender and sexuality. The positions available for girls appear to be the reincarnation of the hegemonical cultural discourses around girlhood in cyberspace. Overall, adolescent female sexting is highly problematised. Regarding the repertoires of sexting and maturity, two positions open; the first one is the mean girls. The

mean girls are agentic and powerful, yet they employ their agency and power to bully others via sexting. This was not constructed as an acceptable position. Participants confessed it as problematic, whilst girls were positioned negatively (e.g., as bitches). This position reflects academic, educational and pop culture discourses regarding femininity; girls are constructed as mean in a de-contextualised manner. This has been supported by Ringrose (2006), who suggests that “This discourse of the new universal mean girl is distinctly postfeminist and works to re-establish the bounds of femininity disrupted by feminism.” (Ringrose, 2006, p. 419).

The second position that parents/caregivers opened was girls sexting for popularity, attention and because of pop culture. This position is more complex and requires further examination. While acknowledging the cultural pressures girls face to be sexualised is a good step towards female emancipation, the discursive terrain is conflicting. More specifically, despite parents often stating the societal pressures girls face, the male gaze is not brought into the repertoire. The external pressures girls face are not always constructed in a sympathetic light. Girls are judged for the desire to fit in a society that bombards them with the messages that parents seem to criticise. This is supported by Mascheroni et al. (2015), who state that when it comes to posting online in more public cyber-spaces, whilst there is the acknowledgement that girls face pressures in relation to their appearance, they get judged by their peers for conforming in such stereotypes. In a sense, that position constitutes girls responsible for their victimisation without taking into consideration the potential consequences of rejecting the pressures of performative femininity. There is a paradox here: if one hypothesises that girls succumb to these societal pressures, then why do such repertoires construct them so negatively? In other words, is it the girls’ fault or society’s? If one dares to contrast it to the position of the vulnerability of boys, which is heavily

constructed on the basis of the visibility of female victimisation, they can observe that girls face more scrutiny for succumbing in what parents perceive as societal pressure.

It is noteworthy that no positions are open whereas girls are agentic or sexual without being problematic. In the mean girl position, girls have agency and power and use it to bully their peers through sexting. In the insta-girl position, girls have agency, but it is false as they have no power. This can have implications; as Renold & Ringrose (2011) suggest, the current academic and popular discourses fix girls as either passive objectified victims or savvy navigators of a culture of rampant sexualisation.

It should be highlighted that the position of girls being victims is acceptable and discussed openly. However, it is noteworthy that it is often interrupted by the suggestion that this can happen to boys too; as if suggesting that girls are vulnerable somehow erases the vulnerability of boys, and that position is a controversial one. I believe that the “not always” instances are the rhetorical results of the #notallmen hashtag/movement. They constitute a rhetorical device which derails the conversation from the violence women experience as a defensive argument. Whilst parents did not necessarily adopt a defensive stance, it is possible that expressing these opinions in a postfeminist era is very ideologically charged. This could be evidenced by the confession of this position as controversial. It can be assumed that a culturally valued position that girls occupy is that of purity.

Regarding the positions of girls as victims of sexting, there have been a lot of feminist debates regarding the victimisation of females and reclaiming the term victim. However, I believe that victimhood is only problematic when it is conceptualised with an androcentric notion. For example, as Cunniff-Gilson (2016) suggests:

Not identifying as a victim when one has been victimised is also worrisome since it prevents those who have been victimised from receiving support and from forming “a

sense of unity among women” because it leads to underreporting and skewed statistics and because it precludes the pursuit of whatever modicum of justice is available (Cunniff-Gilson, 2016, p. 80).

The negative connotations or pathologisation behind the term victim decontextualise it from the societal conditions that perpetuate it and take away the spotlight from its perpetrators.

The position of men being perceived as perhaps facing their own challenges regarding sexting is a progressive one. Moreover, it is a position that due to long withstanding notions of hegemonic (and, from my feminist perspective, often toxic) masculinity has not been particularly available to men and is now materialising. This position often encompasses resistance to boys being perceived as inherently aggressive. However, my personal evaluation of the positions available to them is ideologically ambivalent; in many excerpts it is eluded that the current visibility/emphasis on female violence or female aggression is what constitutes boys as sexting victims. This poses further questions; are males threatened by the surge of movements such as “me too”-a sexual violence awareness online movement which is not limited to women but is predominately associated with them (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Furthermore, do such movements overpower and threaten the visibility of their vulnerability, or are males threatened by the restrictions of hegemonic masculinity (Parent et al., 2019).

Here, it is worth considering: the only ideological positions available to males construct them as vulnerable, yet not due to hegemonic and toxic masculinity pressures. Instead, they are constructed as vulnerable due to the spreading awareness of the sexual violence women experience and the movements that aim to raise awareness. It is worth considering “why”. As Nicholas & Agius (2017) suggest, some of the new discursive constructions of masculinism are based on the premise that males are victims of the

politically correct culture, which tends to focus on women as a result of feminism. It should also be highlighted that it was expected from males to initiate sexting whilst they were additionally described as inherently sexual in many cases. This was not the case for girls. Masculinity is so hegemonic that when girls were perceived to act like boys, they were criticised.

The position that males are the perpetrators of coercive sexting or revenge porn could be an extension of the social justice movement emerging during the past decade. However, it is a position that encompasses heavy ideological notions, depending on how it is employed. It is important that this position remains challenged and critiqued. There are dangers with this position becoming available in a state of normalisation, and that is the passive acceptance of the patriarchal state of things as something that will always exist (Edley & Wetherell, 1996); a state of patriarchal ideological hegemony.

What is striking is that there are no positions of the healthy, respectful male adolescent who sexts consensually. Males can either be the perpetrators/initiators of sexting or its victims (further analysed in section 5.4.). We need to open a position where males can be sexual without being “macho” or coercive, and their vulnerability can be acknowledged and nurtured on its own and not as a by-product of the emancipation of girls. There need to be parental constructions of male agency that do not involve the pressure of masculinity, so boys can learn that they do not need to be either the victim of female emancipation or the perpetrator of coercion, but they can occupy the position of a curious adolescent.

As mentioned earlier, when parents/caregivers discussed the issues males faced, no interruptions emerged about how such problems occur with girls. However, when the violence or the societal pressure girls experience was discussed, many interruptions emerged stating that this can happen to boys. When girls were mentioned as perpetrators of coercion,

males and non-binary adolescents were positioned as victims. However, when females were positioned as victims of coercion, despite boys being sometimes mentioned, the vast majority of the participants generalised rather than personalised the pressures. In a sense, there was a construction of such incidents emerging due to the societal pressures they face, whilst the victims of the “mean girl” were gendered and personified. It could be assumed that stating that girls experience pressures could be a controversial position due to backlash that the third wave of feminism is receiving (Nicholas & Agius, 2017).

A noteworthy finding was that initially, no positions were available for LGBTQ and non-binary adolescents-that was until I asked questions involving them. The interview design was designed in a way that any questions regarding gender and sexuality were left for the last section of the interview. As mentioned earlier, gender was omnipresent. However, when gender was interpellated in the discourse, the cases or examples mentioned were only heterosexual or cisgender. Even after non-binary adolescents were mentioned, parents often returned to talking about binary constructions. This lack of positions prior to my questions- which can perhaps be attributed to genuine lack of information/awareness regarding non-heteronormative relationships- can constitute LGBTQ and non-binary adolescents less visible.

The LGBTQ and non-binary positions are also conflicting ideologically, though not very polarised. It is noteworthy that the non-binary and LGBTQ adolescents were often answered together or mentioned interchangeably when any of these two categories was mentioned in a question. Whilst sexuality and gender are very different issues, this and the fact that parents often declared they are straight cis etc. or do not know non-heteronormative people indicates a lack of awareness regarding LGBTQ issues. Their “novelty”, despite othering them, liberates them from the chains of the binary (such as the pre-set ideas about

gender and agency). Yet it simultaneously opens a peculiar collective position for them: the non-heteronormative Other.

However, this paradoxically allows parents to open two conflicting but widely accepted positions of non-heteronormative adolescents: the vulnerable other and the curious other. Perhaps the lack of the gender battlefields which often characterise the binary- especially since the surge of 3rd wave feminism- allows them to afford a positive construction; they do not sext as a matter of deviancy but as a way to connect and explore. The positions available to them do not seem problematic or confessed as an issue. Interestingly, their Otherness is also what constructs them as vulnerable. Half of the parents suggested that their Otherness will make non-heteronormative adolescents subject to bullying or harassment. Thus, another position opens: that of the vulnerable other, who is subjected to coercion and bullying.

The research on parents' construction of sexting is limited. Thus, the findings presented here can ameliorate the current understanding regarding parental constructions of sexting, especially concerning gender. My thesis' findings contrast Charteris et al. (2018), who conducted discursive analysis on parents of adolescents. They highlight two dominant discourses regarding adolescent sexting; children are portrayed either as innocent, shocked by sexting or as the knowing child, innocent and knowledgeable of their sexuality. The findings I highlighted in this chapter tend to differ. In this study, adolescents are constructed as either victims of sexting or immature and unaware. However, my findings also expand the current literature, as they suggest that these constructions are gender and context-sensitive.

Charteris et al. (2018) indicate that parents worry about gendered double standards and slut shaming. My findings suggest that parents construct girls as victims of the patriarchy and worry about gendered double standards. However, my findings expand the current

literature as they also highlight the available positions for girls when they are not constructed as victims. The above results showcase that when girls are agentic, they are either constructed as insta-girls or mean girls. Moreover, they differ from Charteris et al. (2018): in the position of girls as victims, parents are concerned regarding the sexualisation of girls. In the position of insta-girls, parents tend to frame girls negatively when succumbing to such pressures. Moreover, my findings suggest that it is not only girls that parents worry about. The positions that open for male and non-heteronormative adolescents also highlight their potential for victimisation. Such differences could exist due to the sample of the study mentioned above, which was relatively small, as it consisted of two female parents and no carers. Moreover, Charteris et al. (2018) employ a different analytic approach, whilst their study focuses on ephemeral media such as Snapchat.

Another qualitative study on parents/carers and sexting was conducted by Fix et al. (2021). Their results indicate that parents were concerned regarding the permanency of the sexting material. Many of them constructed it as normal behaviour, while others constructed it with concern about its frequency. These findings differ from my findings, whereas parents constructed sexting negatively through the repertoire, which emphasised that it creates victims. In the other existing repertoire, adolescents were portrayed as immature for not considering the negative consequences of sexting (section 5.1.).

Moreover, in Fix et al. (2021), caregivers expressed concerns regarding peer influence and the over-sexualised images portrayed in the media. These findings support my research. However, my thesis expands our current understanding of parental constructions of sexting as it also explores it in relation to gender. This thesis sheds light in the nature of concerns and the positions available for girls and boys. It further enhances our understanding of the topic at hand by discussing the lack of cultural precedent that exists for non-heteronormative adolescents and how it impacts the positions they open for them.



Finally, a similar finding of this thesis with Fix et al. (2021) was that girls were also constructed as sexually more aggressive than boys. This finding is also supported here in the “mean girls” position that parents opened. Moreover, girls are also constructed as sexually aggressive as a power quest, in the only agentic position they are allowed to occupy. However, this thesis provides another finding by suggesting that boys are also constructed as sexually aggressive, and it is one of the few positions they occupy. The results of my thesis simultaneously provide findings that contradict, expand and affirm the findings in relation to girls' sexual aggression. However, such findings could be due to the differences in methodology, e.g., I employ CDP, which showcases the co-existing contradictory positions, while Fix et al. (2021) employ grounded theory. The different findings regarding the nuances in gender could also be justified through the research aims of the studies, as the present thesis involves gender-specific sub-questions whilst Fix et al. (2021) did not necessarily focus on gender.

As the literature on the topic is quite limited, despite the similarities and differences in the findings, all the existing studies provide new insight regarding the topic at hand. However, as it is perhaps evident here, the present thesis employs a critical discursive approach and thus can provide nuanced insight into the gendered nature of the discursive terrain. Finally, unlike past studies, it can provide insight into the competing ideologies that co-exist, the conflicting positions that open concerning sexting and gender and finally the positions that need to open in relation to gender.

To conclude, adolescents need positions that do not necessarily vilify them; the discursive affordances do not allow them to occupy positions that paint them as sexually curious young people. Moreover, they are caught in a very challenging ideological dilemma, whereas they are interpellated into either very passive notions of agency or when they are active, they are placed in problematic, vilified positions. Whilst not directly mentioned, it

appears that the only acceptable position they are allowed to occupy, is one of purity and innocence. The gendered nature of discourse can have multiple implications in relation to the positions adolescents are allowed to occupy. It could be assumed that the gendered discourses parents employed do not just reflect the current discursive climate around sexting but the general polarised gendered battlefields of identity politics. Consequently, new affordances and positions need to be opened, which will not other them and will reflect the needs of adolescents in relation to such issues.

## **Chapter 6: Parenting, sexting, consent and monitoring**

### **6.0 Introduction**

The current chapter further elaborates on the findings of my second study. I will continue to analyse data and explore how parents of adolescents discursively construct sexting. Therefore, this chapter addresses the same research question as Chapter 5 yet tackles different sub-questions. The questions the present study addresses are the following:

Research Question: How do parents/carers of adolescents make sense, construct and negotiate the sexting behaviours of adolescents?

Sub-questions:

- How do parents construct their engagement with adolescent sexting and safety regarding protection from sexting?

-How do parents construct sexting consent and coercion?

Chapter 5 focused on gendered constructions regarding sexting. However, this chapter rather emphasises parenting and sexting consent. Thus, I will focus on the ideological dilemmas that the parental constructions of consent present. I will additionally discuss the repertoires regarding parental monitoring and their wider implications. The dataset I will analyse in this chapter is the same as in the previous chapter.

### **6.1. Discursive constructions of sexting consent; an ideological dilemma.**

When asked regarding consent in sexting, most participants framed it as an oxymoron. The choice to send a picture was juxtaposed to the lack of control of said picture regarding distribution. Multiple parents presented a *de jure/de facto* distinction (Edley & Wetherell, 1999). Initially, the picture might have been sent consensually (and was assumed to have been sent consensually). However, the sender did not consent to the picture being distributed outside of who they sent it to. Moreover, the sender did not have any control of what happens

to the picture after they sent it. Participants framed informed consent as impossible to give in relation to sexting, as there is never full awareness of what can happen to the picture and its potential dissemination. Parents resist the idea of consent in sexting and consider it equal to non-consensual distribution (which was further discussed in Chapters 2 and 5). Consider the following excerpt:

**Charles (male, step-parent and parent), Beatrice (female, step-parent and parent)**

- 1 **A** so moving along when we talk about sex we refer to consent(.)how do  
2 you think this notion applies to sexting?  
3 **C** (...)so usually(.)yeah(.)you could say by sending that to somebody(.)  
4 you're consenting on them(.)seeing it but you are not consenting on  
5 them forwarding it to anybody else  
6 **B** mmm  
7 **C** so(.)it would only go as far as that one person you send it to (.)so  
8 if they send it to anybody else you're not consenting to  
9 that(.)that's how I would perceive it(.)I'm not giving you know(.)  
10 the other person(.)permission to send it on  
11 **B** yeah  
12 **C** giving that person permission to say(.)that one  
13 **B** yeah  
14 **C** so(.)  
15 (lines omitted)  
16 **B** yeah(.)yeah(.)umm it's a difficult one consent isn't it(.)because  
17 there's nothing explicit um(0.3)you know(.)there isn't any kind of  
18 explicit exchange of(.)you know(.)I'll I'll send you this image and  
19 this is all you're allowed to do with this image we don't do that(.)we  
20 don't do that with any type of image or text um who wants the image  
21 I don't know(.)I don't think anybody knows really uhhh once it once  
22 you send it out(.)of your phone it's gone

Sending a photo is deemed consent per se; implied consent is constructed as the interpersonal exchange itself (lines 3-5), which is then contrasted with the dissemination of such photos. The dissemination is framed as the non-consensual aspect because the individual was intending for one person to see it. It is noteworthy how sharing images or what might be non-consensual distribution is equated with sexting, rather than the pressures and the power imbalance that can emerge before someone sends a sext. This is perhaps showcasing that the available sexting affordances in the discursive terrain for parents are limited. Furthermore, they are mainly related to what is often widely discussed in relation to sexting, which is dissemination of materials (further discussed in Chapter 2 and 5). Beatrice provides an

assessment of consent as difficult and then an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) (“nothing explicit”, in line 17) to build up the implicit nature of adolescent sexting. Beatrice proceeds to construct what she perceives as consent. There is an expectation of the discussion of the terms in which the picture is sent. It could be hypothesised that here consent is framed as a negotiation based on the sender’s and/or the receiver’s individual responsibility. Moreover, consent is implied and constructed as not usually getting verbalised, which is further evident in Beatrice’s made-up quote “I’ll send you this image...” (line 18).

Consent is painted as complex/something one usually does not explicitly obtain during sexting, followed by the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) “with any type of image and text” (line 20). Whilst Beatrice suggests that a detailed agreement of the terms of use would be necessary for an exchange to be deemed as consent, she suggests that this rarely happens in any exchange, providing a *de jure/de facto* assessment. This distinction is discussed by Wetherell et al. (1987) who suggest that while the participants set the ideal case, they then proceed to argue and showcase why it is not realistic. As mentioned before, this distinction, besides the antithetical elements it entails, highlights the nature of the consent constructions available to parents. One cannot sext without the possibility of photos being shared non-consensually or distributed to a wider audience than the intended recipient. The picture is presented in a passive voice, perhaps emphasising the lack of control which results from the picture leaving from the sender and the life the picture obtains afterwards, that is its own. A similar construction of consent was painted by Tiffany and Robert when they were asked about the notion of consent in sexting:

**Tiffany (female, parent)-Robert (male, parent)**

- 1 **A** so(.)when we talk about sex(.)with sex(.)you know(.)↑the physical  
2 action of sex ↑(.)not sexting(.)when we talk about sex(.)we refer to  
3 consent  
4 **T** yeah  
5 **A** how do you think this notion applies to sexting  
6 **T** yeah(.)sort of similar but(.)um(.)you know(.)so(.)people should have  
7 control over(.)what(.)they receive(.)and(.)and what happens(.)to the

8 material they send(.)and that is very difficult to actually control  
9 (.)so(.)um(.)in some ways consent is more(.)more difficult to(.)umm  
10 yeah kind of enforce(.)I guess(.)with this because once they are  
11 sent out there it's out there then you c: an't control what other  
12 people do with it(.)and(.)but yeah the basic principle is that  
13 (.)you know(.)servers(.)involved(.)images are taken(.)or receives(.)  
14 any kind of sexting messages whatever they are(.)if(.)if they don't  
15 want it(.)then you know that's what the consent is(.)that they need  
16 to actively agree(.)that this is okay with them  
17 **A** uh huh  
18 **T** and they should be able(.)to at some point in the future say(.)this  
19 is no longer ok(.)you know(.)I do not do not want that photo of  
20 me(.)um(.)you know(.)I want that photo to be(.)destroyed(.)I want it  
21 to be deleted  
22 **A** uh uh  
23 **T** and that's a (.)would also be(.)part of consent(.)and that's(.)  
24 that's the bit where I think it falls apart(.)because that's not  
25 going to be possible to police

Tiffany's reply employs the modal verb ("should"). As with the previous excerpt, this one contains a *de jure/de facto* distinction. Whilst people should have control, this belief is contrasted with the reality through an assessment; obtaining control is characterised as difficult (line 8). Again, consent is constructed as unachievable, as it requires control of the material post sending it and the avoidance of dissemination. This definition of consent seems to draw from the previous constructions where sexting is assumed to equate to non-consensual distribution.

As seen in the previous excerpt, parents emphasise the need to construct a verbal agreement regarding the terms and the use of the images post the interpersonal exchange. The informed consent needs to be a negotiated one, which includes controlling the image after a few years. The active voicing (Wiggins, 2016) in lines 19-21 adds to the factuality of what is said. It additionally functions as a discursive device, showing that adolescents are the subjects of the consequences of sexting and should be agentic in relation to what happens to the sexting content. Again, a *de jure/de facto* distinction is constructed (Edley & Wetherell, 1999). In the end Tiffany suggests that consent as they conceptualise it falls apart, as policing a photo permanently is not possible. This *de jure/de facto* distinction is perhaps reflecting the

affordances of the discursive terrain regarding non-consensual distribution and the negative connotations around sexting from a parental /media standpoint.

Sexting consent appears to constitute a powerful ideological dilemma for parents. Parents recognise that sexting can be consensual. However, the construction of sexting coercion to them does not occupy the negotiations/process prior to sending pictures/sexts. For them, the coercive element is the possibility of distribution and revenge porn. Thus, they actively resisted the idea of consensual sexting due the criteria they employed for what qualifies as consent, which they then delicately de-constructed or resisted. For parents, a truly informed consent constitutes of an agreement, an informal contract of the terms of use. However, parents frame policing what really happens to the agreement as impossible, and thus it is impossible to ever really consent.

Here, consent is constructed as controlling what happens to one's sexting material- yet in the cyberspace the sense of control is virtually impossible. Therefore, consent is an oxymoron framed by competing ideals; consent needs to exist, but its traditional notion (often employed in sex) which should be informed and happens in the now and present cannot. This notion of consent in sexting does not happen in the present but is a situation which perpetually continues in the future.

These notions of consent heavily draw on the discursive affordances available to parents, which could potentially reflect the moral panics associated with sexting. In their attempt to break down the dilemma, parents frame sexting as an activity to be entirely avoided.

## **6.2. Monitoring: polarised repertoires**

In this section, I showcase the repertoires present across the parental interviews regarding parental monitoring of sexting. When asked about what conversations should take

place with adolescents regarding safety or whether monitoring adolescents' devices is preferred, two conflicting repertoires emerged. In the first repertoire, parents (N=14) vocally criticised the idea of monitoring their adolescents' sexting/devices. In the second repertoire, parents (N=16) painted monitoring devices and sexting as an activity closely related to parental duty. In the first repertoire, which I will call the "liberal parent", the participants constructed monitoring as an intrusive procedure which robs the adolescent of their agency. This disruption of agency and consequent power struggle might push adolescents further to the unwanted result. The idea that was lingering in this excerpt was the idea of adolescents as digital natives who would disobey monitoring attempts by finding other digital means to exercise their agency. I further elaborate in the following sections and excerpts.

### ***6.2.1 Liberal parenting: monitoring as an invasion of privacy***

As mentioned above, approximately half of the parents actively resisted the idea of monitoring, by framing it as an intrusive practice. This construction of monitoring is so negatively worked up that it positions adolescents as reactive and thus more prone to sexting engagement if they are being monitored. Parents instead emphasised the need for trust and dialogue. An example of this would be Sasha's and Nate's answer to whether conversations between parents and adolescents are needed in relation to sexting:

#### **Sasha (female,parent)-Nate (male,carer/step-parent)**

- 1 **A** (..)do you think conversations should take place with adolescents  
 2 regarding sexting(.)and if so what(.)should they entail  
 3 **S** yes as a parent I think trust is very important(.)because if you  
 4 don't have that(.)that(.)trust your(.)kid wouldn't say anything  
 5 to you about this  
 6 **A** yes  
 7 **S** because if they keep to themselves(.)how do we know(.)because now  
 8 technology like phone(.)using fingerprints(.)they are smart  
 9 (h)(.)how will will check out(.)I(.) don't (.)I(.)personally I  
 10 don't want to check my(.)my(.)daughter's phone(.)because I don't  
 11 really like her(.)looking at my messages(h)(.)I don't really like  
 12 her looking at my messages there's nothing important but it's (.)  
 13 it's my privacy(.)so(.)I kind of(.)respect her privacy as well  
 14 **A** mhm  
 15 **S** so that's why I think its it's important to have this trust  
 16 first(.)because if(.)no matter what we say that↑ooh about love ↑



17       (.)if you don't have that trust(.)again(0.3)they could do things  
 18       behind you(.)so  
 19 **N**     yeah and I think again(.)it goes back to technology thing a  
 20       little bit as well again they're like (.) if you are the sort of  
 21       parent who does look at their kids phone then all you're (.)gonna  
 22       do is drive your kids to find new ways to hide that  
 23 **S,A**   mhm  
 24 **N**     you know I dont(.)think(.)don't think that's very(.)that they  
 25       cannot do it(.)or make them more open about it(.)I think(.)it  
 26       would drive them to hide it more(.)umm

Sasha starts by invoking her parental identity (line 3), which entails a level of investment, to provide an assessment of the importance of trust/being able to converse with “kids”. The conversation is contrasted with lacking trust, possibly implying a narrative where having these conversations is an indication of good parent-child relationships. This contrast is followed by an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986), “without that trust your kid wouldn’t say anything” (lines 4-5). According to Edwards (2000), extreme case formulations are not literal, they function as a way to enhance one’s argument and make it more justifiable. The pronoun change in line 7 (“we”) is notable, as it could imply that it is a phenomenon concerning all parents. Here trying to control technology or children is presented as a power imbalance; the parent cannot access technology which is evolving and thus, monitoring is impossible. There is a strong sense of the parent as a digital immigrant. Phones are personified and presented as one would present people who have their own will (lines 7-8).

Sasha then changes the pronoun again, using a first-person account (line 9) to work up a construction of not wanting to check her own daughters’ phone. Sasha is evoking the category bound activities (Sacks, 1972) that might be associated with liberal parents; resisting the idea of checking her daughters phone. She then proceeds to manage stake by saying she would not want her daughter to check her own phone, painting a sense of equality in which the adult and the adolescent are similar in terms of agency/power. Not checking her daughters’ phone is constructed as respecting privacy, perhaps implying that checking it would be a violation of it.

A quid pro quo relationship is painted by the change of pronouns (“I wouldn’t want ...so she wouldn’t want”).

Trust is worked up and constructed as respecting someone’s cyber privacy. Adolescents are constructed as rebellious (as they would still engage in sexting yet hide it) and agentic. It is noteworthy that Nate adds to Sasha’s liberal parenting construction by contrasting the liberal parent with parents who look at their child’s phone. The discursive work he employs implies the position of the strict parent who, through monitoring, is driving their kids to become rebellious. What is perhaps implied is that the other parent, the personification of the strict parent, fails to create an open relationship. In this way, the strict parent achieves the opposite result, having less agency than what they intended. Monitoring is not just constructed as an activity to be avoided, but as one that delegitimises the adolescent’s liberties. One can almost see the categories of the strict and the liberal parent and their category bound activities (Sacks, 1972) unfolding. The respectful, non-intrusive parent builds trust with their children without monitoring, whilst the strict parent pushes them to a battle to reclaim their autonomy by lack of trust and monitoring. A similar construction was evoked by Nancy and Phil when discussing the issue of monitoring:

**Nancy (female, step-parent)-Phil(male, parent)**

- 1 **A** do you think monitoring should take place(.)or do you think they  
2 should be(.)you know(.)do you think there should be restrictions  
3 and monitoring(.)or do you think(.)parents should be less  
4 involved in that sense  
5 **P** I’ll let you go first  
6 **N** is it (.) restrictions on computers(.)and watching(.)looking at  
7 what they are looking at  
8 **P** yeah  
9 **N** we(.) we’ve got a friend who’s very(.)up on it(.)isn’t he  
10 **P** well he is  
11 **N** he monitors every single thing this child has(.)to an inch of  
12 their life  
13 **P** [(inaudible)  
14 **N** (.)and this child is(.)naughty(.)and a nightmare  
15 **P** yeah  
16 **N** I th(.)I think you should educate(.)educate(.)an adolescent on  
17 what’s good and what’s not um(.)and trust that they made the  
18 right decisions  
19 **P** yes

20 **N** I think(.)monitoring them too much(.)is not a healthy thing  
 21 **P** I think it's not um  
 22 **N** it's an invasion of their privacy(.)with respect  
 23 **P** yeah(.)not only is it an invasion of privacy and a lack of  
 24 respect for the child(.)but also the parents can  
 25 probably(.)sometimes find out things they really don't want to  
 26 know and shouldn't (.)because there are some things that children  
 27 need to do(.)that the parents don't have to find out about  
 28 **N** I think its(.)communicating that with with the kids though(.)and  
 29 saying look(.)I'm choosing not to delve into your life(.)  
 30 because(.)I'm respecting your privacy(.) I'm doing it because  
 31 this and this this

Here, the discursive work done by the parents is clear. Nancy answers my question.

However, instead of offering a direct evaluation of monitoring, she builds upon his argument by invoking the case of a family friend who is interpellated (Althusser, 1971) in the discursive terrain (line 9). In line 9, Nancy asks “isn't he” to co-construct a joint account with Phil about the nature of their friends' practices. The function of this anecdotal story is for the friend to personify the monitoring parent as an anti-example and as personal knowledge and evidence to their resistance of monitoring. An extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) is then provided (line 11), to emphasise the extreme monitoring level of their friend, along with an affect display by emphasising the words “every single thing”.

The assessment that follows focuses on the child and it is quite negative. The child is described initially as naughty and then with an upgrade as a nightmare (line 14), perhaps implying the child's resistance to monitoring and the obvious failure of such practices. This type of parenting is then contrasted with what they construct as right; educating and trusting the adolescent, perceiving them as an equal who is agentic and capable of taking their own decisions. Similar to the previous excerpt, monitoring is painted as an invasion of the adolescent's privacy. Consequently, cyberspace is constructed as a personal space for the adolescent and such disciplinary measures as an intrusion. One can see the affordances of the anti-monitoring discourses; trust, respect and privacy words were used in both excerpts.

The liberal parent repertoire was prevalent in the data. Parents often resisted and vocally disowned the idea of monitoring by constructing it as intrusive, an invasion of privacy and trust. It was often mentioned that it would bring the opposite result, or that adolescents would resort to hiding their sexting. Monitoring was contrasted with conversing and being honest and open with the adolescent. However, the rest of the parents (N=16) framed monitoring as necessary. Despite the conflicting ideas present in the discourse, it should be highlighted that both groups of parents emphasised the idea of a dialogue with children about safety. Whilst the participants' parenting repertoires were different (one could assume that they could be divided in the liberal parent and the strict parent, which will be showcased in the subheadings below), both parenting groups constructed their role as supportive. Moreover, they discursively constructed the core of the parental relationship as providing children with a positive figure which can be approached for support, whereas the adolescent is not just subject to parental authority but able to approach them actively and not as a passive subject.

### ***6.2.2. Strict parenting: monitoring as a parental duty***

Half of the parents were pro-monitoring and discursively constructed it as a parental duty, or a responsibility one should have due to the dangers associated not only with sexting, but the exposure to sexually explicit material online. A similar opinion was stated by Georgina and Nate when asked about monitoring:

#### **Georgina (female, parent)-Nate(male, parent)**

- 1 **A** (...)do you think(.)there should be restrictions on monitoring (.)or  
 2 do you think they should they be less involved(.) what do you  
 3 think?  
 4 **N** restrictions or monitoring from who?  
 5 **A** from parents  
 6 **N** yes(0.2)like I said(.)we used to do it with them(.) we'd look at  
 7 the phones(.)we still look at the phones  
 8 **G** yeah  
 9 **N** nowadays we pay the bill(.)you know  
 10 **G** yeah I think you definitely need to  
 11 **N** [yeah  
 12 **G** have that relationship with your child(.)with your teenagers(.)if  
 13 you can  
 14 **N** [ also be trustworthy

15 G [and open and honest with each other about stuff  
16 N [yeah that you're approachable as well(.)that they can come to you

Nate and Georgina construct monitoring as something they consider a practice attached to their parenting. Whilst the hands-on parenting is constructed as something they endorse, they also endorse the idea that a good relationship is imperative. The importance of monitoring manifests in the repair where they change the tense from “we used to do it”... “still do it” (lines 6-7) to emphasise the perseverance to being an attentive parent. The use of the pronoun “we” (line 6) is perhaps employed to manage stake as parents. Moreover, it is perhaps a way to invoke their parental identity/category despite the question being theoretical. It could be assumed that monitoring is constructed as an evidence of good parenting. Georgina confers by agreeing (line 8), constructing a shared view of what the normal parental monitoring is and then Nate suggests that they are paying the bill. The payment of the bill is perhaps as a legitimisation of parental surveillance and a construction which clearly differentiates the adult -who has monetary responsibilities and thus signifies that is an adult/ has more rights- from the child. This statement is accompanied by the words “you know” (line 9) which interpellate the other (in this case the interviewer) to share this as a commonly acceptable justification and a socially shared perception.

Moreover, the way Georgina juxtaposes the supportive parenting narrative is worth mentioning. Whilst monitoring is a normative parental reaction, Georgina paints a further picture. Monitoring and having an honest relationship is a necessity (use of the word “need” in line 10) and not a choice. She then proceeds to paint the picture of the child as an agentic adolescent (evident from the repair from “child” to “teenager”). Then Nate and Georgina co-construct what could be considered a three-part list to further suggest the supportive parent characteristics; they need to be trustworthy, honest and approachable. A similar argument is

evoked when I ask Anna and Mary whether restrictions or monitoring should take place or should parents /carers be less involved:

**Anna (female, parent)-Mary(female, parent/relative)**

1 **A** I feel that you'd have to restrict maybe their access to the  
2 internet(.)their access to stuff and just take some responsibility  
3 because it is(.)it isn't it(.)isn't a joke(.) isn't funny(.)and  
4 you're not only protecting yourself(.) you're also protecting that  
5 child from being exposed to certain things(.)you know(.)clicking  
6 links may(.)open up things that(.)that they don't need to see and  
7 you know(.)once you've seen those things you can't unsee them um  
8 (.)you know got(.)you know(.)I don't know how the internet works  
9 instead(.)but I do know how easy it is to navigate and reset links  
10 to click onto something that is completely inappropriate and  
11 completely(.)not acceptable(.)and(.)you know(.)as a parent(.)you do  
12 need to maybe put these things into crisis and sometimes just(.)  
13 say this is what happened

Whilst this excerpt is clear regarding the pro-monitoring position the participant takes, the discursive work is much more delicate and complex. Anna starts her answer to my question regarding whether sexting monitoring should take place, by stating that monitoring is a parental obligation, through the use of the words “you’d have to” (line 1). The minimisations “just” and “some” indicate how monitoring is a low effort practice. Monitoring is stated as an act through which the parent takes some responsibility, perhaps implying that parents who do not follow this practice could be neglecting their parental duties.

Whilst no one mentioned sexting as a joke, Anna formulates the script by indicating it “isn’t” (line 3). This is perhaps an act of resisting what can be implied as more light-hearted perception of sexting, or as a way of building up the seriousness of the issue. Monitoring is constructed as a normative protection of both the parent and the child, possibly as an indication of the effectiveness and necessity of practicing it. The words “you know” (line 5) are used to indicate that the co-speakers all share the same reality of the internet. A fact/general rule is stated to further legitimise the argument, by suggesting that once someone has seen something, they cannot unsee it. This statement, besides highlighting a shared and commonly accepted fact, additionally presents seeing something online as a fatal irreversible

incident that should be avoided. The position Anna opened for herself is a digital non-native, yet this further legitimises the idea of monitoring; despite not being proficient, even she (as a digital immigrant) knows the dangers. In line 8 Anna's argument is followed by the category entitlement of the parent, further legitimising that monitoring is a parental duty. The phrase "you need to" (line 8) presents them as a necessity rather than an option, an unbreakable category related activity to being a parent.

The careful construction of monitoring as a need, and the delicate discursive work to legitimise its necessity as part of the parenting practice, constructs an interesting repertoire. One could say that the necessity of monitoring is painted discursively in order to soften the automatic positioning of the parent as the "strict" authority. Similar interpretative repertoires have been noticed when it comes to monitoring of the technological devices in general. According to Mascheroni (2014) the discourses available can predominately be summarised in the liberal and the strict parent repertoires. It could be implied that parental monitoring, whilst culturally dominant, has negative connotations and thus its defence needs to be constructed carefully.

In summary, monitoring repertoires appear to be quite conflicting. Half of the parents construct it as a necessity, and half of them as a violation of trust. Moreover, both pro and anti-monitoring parents framed their position as beneficial to the relationship with adolescents. This could constitute a dilemmatic construction for parents, as some of them employed both constructions. What might be different, or even challenging for parents when it comes to adolescent sexting and monitoring is the lack of clear instructions on how one should handle technology or adolescent sexting. One could assume this is evident in their claims that adolescents can find ways to virtually overpower them, a rhetoric that is invoked in/by both the liberal and the strict parent. As mentioned earlier, all parents suggested that regardless of the monitoring practices, they need to offer support and have honest

conversations with their children. It can be assumed that this is how parents deal with the dilemmatic nature of monitoring or lack thereof.

### **6.3. Interpretative repertoire: Performing parenting**

The involvement, as well as the monitoring practices of sexting, were often constructed as an indication of one's parenting. Monitoring practices and parenting approaches to sexting were framed as a performance/signifier of either good or bad parenting. The "bad" parents were often Othered and were represented/personified by acquaintances or imagined scenarios/versions of what participants framed as bad parenting. Participants constructed other parents, whose families or parenting skills are subpar/have mental health issues themselves, as not discussing sexting. They worked them up as considered neglectful or less concerned about sexting. An adolescent engaging in sexting is socially located as an indication that their parents are failing in parenting. The accounts parents provided often constructed educating and equipping children to resist sexting as a dutiful responsibility.

Moreover, parents often constructed their kids as overly innocent (e.g., fighting over sandwiches and indifferent to anything sexual). Most parents declared that their own children did not sext, were not sexually active etc. A child's engagement in sexting was constructed and socially located as a reflection/indication of their family environment or practices. Children who sexted were often constructed as vulnerable, or a by-product of unstable family environments. The conversation concerning whether an adolescent is engaged in sexting marked the semiotics of good and bad parenting. Barbara elaborated on this when asked about who adolescents can ask for help in cases of coercive sexting:

#### **Barbara (female, parent/ carer)-Fay ( female, parent/carer)**

1 B and I think it comes back to the stability of your home life(.)you  
2 know(.)and that's not saying that you've got to have two parents  
3 and you've got to be(.)it's about parents(.)whether it's one  
4 (.)two(.)whatever taking that time to be there(.)and for me it was  
5 always(.)we had dinners together  
6 (lines omitted)



7 and I think by creating that stability at home they always knew  
8 they had somewhere they could come to(.)and somewhere that was  
9 safe(.)so they didn't feel they needed to do anything particularly  
10 naughty or bad or wrong or(.)you know  
11 (lines omitted)  
12 and so(.)I mean(.)I think kids are lucky these days to have good  
13 parents(.)I mean that's you know there were some kids with(.)you  
14 know(.)parents aren't around or the parents are working full time  
15 because they have to(.)or some parents they choose to do things you  
16 know they're not around or they're just not present for them to  
17 speak to so they're having to grow up on their own in a lot of  
18 ways(.)and I think(.)I think you'll find this is this is in general  
19 who is(.)who are doing things where they have no guidance(.)maybe  
20 (.)I don't know  
21 (lines omitted)  
22 yeah I think that's what it is a lot with this(.)you know(.)this  
23 particular topic(.)yes(.)attention(.)yeah(.)it is(.)and you get it  
24 (.)don't you(.)you get it further

In this excerpt Barbara tackles sexting as an issue of home life. She suggests that it can be a by-product of family stability (line 1). Barbara starts the next sentence with a disclaimer (line 1-2) suggesting that the number of parents does not matter, perhaps to emphasise that she is not particularly interested in traditional notions of family but the quality of the relationship. This is also evidenced by her employment of the symbolic nature of the dinner as a metaphor. More specifically, after suggesting that it is a matter of “being there”, she employs the semiology of a very intimate family picture around the table. This metaphor is further narrated by her bringing up stability and safety as causal to not doing anything naughty. This could be perhaps implied by the causality in the statement “they could come to...so they didn't feel they needed” (lines 8-9). It is also noteworthy that doing something naughty perhaps implies sexting and thus it is presented as a need (line 9) due to a lack of safety. In lines 14-17, a three-part list is evident (Jefferson, 1990) which signifies and emphasises one of the categories parents construct; the absent parent. One of the categories assigned to the absent parent is raising a child that is acting up due to growing up on their own. The researcher is interpellated into the discourse in line 18, whereas the pronoun changes from “I” to “you” will find, perhaps to create a universally shared reality; kids

without attention and guidance consist a category. Thus, they are characterised by a category bound activity (Wiggins, 2016), which is perhaps doing things for attention.

#### **6.4. Adolescent and parental positions and evaluations**

In this section I evaluate the positions the above findings open in relation to sexting. I additionally discuss their implications. In terms of parents and monitoring, two positions opened. The first position was the liberal parent, for whom monitoring is a violation of one's privacy. The other position that emerged was the "strict" parent, who monitors devices and considers such practices a necessity and part of their parental duties. Both "groups" of parents seem to attend to these antithetical positions by initially employing different rules and yet concluding on the same principles, which are that communication and honesty should be prioritised. These repertoires could emerge from the wider parental interpretative repertoires about parenting online. According to a study by Mascheroni (2014), parents draw on two repertoires regarding general internet parental mediation: the "parenting out of control" style—which entails liberal parents—and the authoritarian, strict parent.

The strict parent repertoire was confessed as a necessity in the face of online adversity, whilst the liberal parent was constructed as a defence towards the potential failings of the strict parent. The positions that parents can occupy are dilemmatic, and the way they manage to cope with the uncomfortable discursive climate is by opening a third construction: the position of the compassionate parent. The position of the compassionate parent seems to manage the tensions between such dilemmas. Despite one's parenting style, in the compassionate parent position, the importance of open conversations and trust with the child were brought up by all the participants.

Moreover, the generational and/or the digital divide among the two groups (of parents and adolescents) appear to be a power struggle. Parents are typically constructed as lacking

knowledge of the cyberspace and thus power. The typical notions of family power seem to subvert in the cyberspace, in which parents are positioned as less knowledgeable/ digital immigrants and adolescents are positioned as digital natives. Similar results were again reported by Mascheroni (2014), whose research on the discourse of internet mediation indicated that mothers often perceive themselves as digital immigrants and construct children as having an advanced understanding of the cyberspace due to their generational gap. These findings call for the opening of positions where parents are comfortable in the cyberspace and can help adolescents; an affordance that can perhaps be created via informative workshops which will ameliorate parents' understanding of the cyberspace and the adolescent online underlife.

#### **6.5. Conclusion, implications, and future directions**

In this chapter, I further analysed and presented parental interviews in relation to sexting, consent and monitoring. The repertoires, subject positions and ideological dilemmas found are indicative of the polarising cultural history concerning sexting. In this section, I will discuss the findings, challenges and future opportunities they present.

When it comes to consent, parents were caught in an ideological dilemma. Consent was constructed through a *de jure/de facto* distinction; the sexting messages were assumed to be consensual *per se*, yet what was constructed as coercive was the distribution of the picture without the sender's consent. The consequence of this polarising construction of consent is that parents frame it as an oxymoron and practically impossible to give and obtain. This ideological polarisation reflects the existing cultural representations in relation to sexting. Sexting is a relatively novel phenomenon, and parents are not always familiar with the cyberspace.

Past research exploring parental/carer constructions of sexting consent is nearly non-existent. Thus, the present findings regarding consent provide further advances to sexting research. For example, Barens-Dias et al. (2017) suggested that adults in their study do not define coercion/ blackmail as sexting but as harassment. However, their study explored definitional issues concerning sexting and compared the definitions employed amongst parents, teachers and young people. Moreover, their parent samples were significantly smaller than the present study. Another finding related to consent was presented by Tracy et al. (2021), who suggested that mothers are more likely to discuss traditional gender norms in relation to sexting and consent with their adolescent children. Thus, the present findings cannot be juxtaposed to past research as they are novel in at least two major respects. Firstly, this is the first qualitative study focusing on parental constructions of consent in relation to sexting. Moreover, the findings highlight the dilemmatic nature of consent and provide us insight into its conflicting discursive terrain. It should be noted that participants constructing and framing consent as an ideological dilemma is a novel finding. This is the first study showcasing how the discursive construction of consent is intertwined with non-consensual distribution, which sheds light on the discursive affordances of the topic.

This finding highlights that what parents frame as coercion, takes place post the sexting exchange. More specifically, for parents/carers, coercion is the non-consensual image distribution; a characteristic of image-based abuse. What perhaps goes unnoticed/is not discussed are the coercive elements prior to the exchange which can be highly dependent on power imbalances (further discussed in Chapters 2 and 5). This could be attributed to an overall lack of awareness regarding the nature of coercion in sexting. The lack of awareness regarding the coercion which can emerge prior to the sext being sent, and the assumption that sending a sext is consensual per se can present a multitude of challenges. For example, parents/carers might not be able to discuss issues regarding coercion with adolescents and

they might emphasise on the distribution instead. This could derail the focus from the emotional distress adolescents face when they are being coerced. Furthermore, the focus on the distribution derails the conversation from coercion and thus the power dynamics prior to the exchange remain unquestioned.

Moreover, such findings can indicate that we do not have the discursive affordances to tackle such issues yet. Perhaps this is a reflection and an outcome of the broader cultural context concerning sexting, as the emphasis until now in academic, school and media discourses was heavily placed on the distribution of images or/and revenge porn (Doring, 2014; McGovern & Lee, 2018). Coercive sexting (further discussed in Chapter 2) has been a topic that has recently emerged in the academic literature (Kernsmith et al., 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2021), whilst most of the media and sexting education programmes tackle the moral panics about sexting and the lasting effects of the dissemination of the images.

Thus, the intertwined meanings of sexting, consent and non-consensual distribution could be attributed to the novelty of the terminology (Crofts et al., 2015; McGovern et al., 2016). However, as the findings presented in Chapter 4 indicate, adolescents' construction of consent is not contextualised in relation to dissemination to the extent its construction by parents does. It could be hypothesised that parents/carers have employed what Charteris et al. (2018) refer to as the discourse of innocence, which formulates adolescents as naïve and innocent. Thus, it is perhaps easier for parents to construct sexting as non-consensual distribution which has more deviant and criminal connotations.

When it comes to sexting and monitoring, parents/carers placed themselves or others in antithetical positions, whereas the pro-monitoring parents/carers were positioned as strict, and the anti-monitoring parents/carers were positioned as liberal. The strict parent position was confessed as controversial. Liberal parents constructed the pro-monitoring stance as

bringing opposite results and pushing adolescents to rebellion. Parents/carers who were pro monitoring confessed their position as a need and a necessity. In order to solve such tensions and navigate this new, polarising discursive terrain, all parents emphasised the need for communication with their children. Moreover, parents opened positions in relation to the cyberspace; parents were described as digital immigrants, and adolescents as digital natives. Due to their knowledge, adolescents were positioned as much more capable to resist any monitoring their parents imposed. It should be highlighted that it is perhaps one of the first generations that parents have to navigate online sexual activity with children who have access and agency in the cyberspace from a significantly young age (Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2020).

These findings are novel; only a few survey studies have attempted to map out the relationship between parental monitoring and adolescent sexting (Ahern et al. 2016; Douglas et al., 2021). Such studies usually explore the prevalence of sexting discussions amongst adolescent and parents (Widman et al., 2021), the impact of parental supervision on risky online activities (Sasson & Mesch, 2014) and the correlation between high occurrence of restrictive parental monitoring/mediation and willingness to sext (Atwood et al., 2017). Thus, the findings of this study expand our current understanding of parental constructions of sexting. The present thesis entails the first qualitative study to explore parental constructions of monitoring in relation to parental discursive affordances. My findings illustrate the dilemmatic nature of the existing interpretative repertoires regarding monitoring, such as the liberal and the strict parent. Moreover, they highlight how parents navigate the conflicting discursive affordances by moving to the compassionate parent position, whereas sexting needs to be discussed and a good parent-adolescent perspective is imperative.

Finally, the interpretative repertoire “performing parenting” framed sexting as a reflection of one’s parenting. It was often implied that adolescents who sexted reflected a

perhaps more chaotic upbringing, which parents vocally distanced themselves from. As mentioned in Chapter 2, there have been a few attempts to shed light on parenting and its relationship with adolescent sexting. However, most of the studies are surveys exploring whether sexting engagement or lack thereof is affected by the frequency of parent-adolescent communication (Wolfe et al., 2016), parental involvement (Smith-Darden et al., 2017) and adolescent-parent relationships (Atwood et al., 2017; Baumgartner et al., 2012). Yet, the findings regarding the “performing parenting” IR reflect the only existing qualitative findings on the topic. According to Fix et al. (2021), caregivers suggested that sexting could result from parental neglect. However, the present findings advance our understanding of parenting and monitoring by providing an insight into the formulation of the “bad” and the “good” parent with regards to adolescent sexting. Finally, such findings ameliorate our understanding of the current discursive affordances concerning parenting and adolescent sexting.

However, such a discursive terrain can present implications: framing the child’s decision to engage in sexting as an indication of whether a parent is good or bad can be challenging. Such discursive constructions take away the focus from the adolescent and stigmatise parents who perhaps do not have enough awareness when it comes to online relationships. These constructions characterise parents not by their actions but by what they cannot often control or actions they are not aware of. What would perhaps be more useful is opening dialogues with parents about what would and would not be beneficial to do in terms of supporting adolescents.

What is evident from the aforementioned findings is the lack of cultural precedent which can be attributed to the idiosyncratic nature of sexting. Due to its novelty, society does not have the available repertoires that tackle coercive sexting. Whilst this presents academic psychologists with a set of challenges, it has significant benefits; there is scope for new, improved discussions in relation to sexting. Furthermore, the current political climate, with

the emergence of sexual violence awareness and third wave feminism, can inform these conversations. This could be achieved through workshops, awareness training and sexting education. Finally, academics can ameliorate the current rhetoric and contribute to a new ideological hegemony around sexting and consent, through engaging in the public dialogue in a way that interpellates parents.



## **Chapter 7: Educators: discursive constructions of sexting, consent and sexting education**

### **7.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings of my third study, the exploration of how teachers/educators of adolescents discursively construct sexting and sexting education. I examine how these constructions open positions and dilemmas concerning gender and consent. In this chapter, I will present the IRs in relation to adolescent sexting. Moreover, I will discuss the ideological dilemmas present in the discursive terrain and their implications, both in practice and research. The aims and objectives of the studies are best captured by the following research question:

-How do educators of adolescents make sense, construct, manage and negotiate the sexting behaviours of their students?

As well as the following sub-questions:

- How do educators/teachers frame and construct sexting and consent?
- How do educators/teachers construct their role in relation to adolescent sexting?
- How do educators/teachers construct the education and monitoring practices related to sexting and the protection of their students?
- How are incidents of sexting and consent contextualized in relation to gender?

The data I analyse originate from 30 individual, semi-structured interviews with teachers/educators of adolescents (N=30). Further information regarding the sample will be found in table 3, Chapter 3. Moreover, details regarding the methods I employed in this study have been discussed in Chapter 3 and the interview schedule can be found in Appendix section C.3. As discussed earlier, interviews provide us with a stream of rich data, which facilitate the exploration of cultural, collective production of the discursive terrain. When

approaching data analysis from a discursive point of view, interviews can present the cultural discursive resources available to participants about a topic; what can be said, and what is hegemonic in the specific context/culture (Nikander, 2012).

## 7.2. Interpretative repertoire: Sexting as a threat

The first IR I discuss constructs sexting as a threat to adolescents and a problematic phenomenon. The most prevalent construction across interviews (N=27) was that sexting was negative and inherently dangerous for adolescents. Various persistently negative constructions of this “threat” were evident in the dataset, such as the association of sexting with non-consensual dissemination and its impact on adolescents’ mental health. Such constructions can be observed when Karen discusses her perception of sexting:

### Int 24-Karen, F, Sociology and English teacher

- 1 **A** how do you feel about teenagers getting involved in sexting(.)do  
2 you think it's good(.)do you think it's(.)bad(.)and why
- 3 **K** um(.)uh(.)I think it's a little bit more nuanced than just bad or  
4 good(.)I mean(.)I I think(.)I mean(.)I I I think the culture is  
5 (.)is toxic(.)as I said(.)I think(.)um you know(.)a lot of kids get  
6 into a lots of(.)um(.)slightly dodgy situations(.)I'm not(.)I mean  
7 I don't know anyone who would say(.)yes to that question  
8 (.)okay(.)so(.)so(.)yeah(.)as a teacher(.)and as someone who's got  
9 (.)you know(.)I have(.)I have children myself(.)um I(.)I would not  
10 imagine that it's a particularly it's not a healthy thing in our  
11 society at all(.)for(.)for that you know(.)it is uh(.)it is uh (.)  
12 something that distracts students from their learning for a start  
13 (.)if they're doing it in a school(.)it creates bullying(.)I mean I  
14 said all these anyway(.)yeah(.)so(.)I've already kind of answered  
15 that I think(.)which is(.)it's very prevalent and it's very toxic  
16 and it can lead to really really poor(.)poor kind of attainment in  
17 schools(.)um(.)because children are completely distracted by  
18 something like that(.)which is why most many schools really  
19 don't(.)don't want mobile phones
- 20 (lines omitted)
- 21 **A** that's my next question(.)basically(.)what do you think are the  
22 positive or the negative outcomes of sexting for adolescents
- 23 **K** I think I've answered that(.)you know(.)I think I'm wholly negative  
24 about it it's(.)it's really quite toxic(.)yeah(.)so I don't think  
25 it has any great place in school

Karen starts her answer with an evaluation of sexting. She initially suggests that it is more nuanced than just bad or good. However, later on, she constructs a highly negative evaluation of it. After this construction, the participant states that the culture is toxic (line 5). This statement is constructed through hedging (Wiggins, 2016) and with hesitation, through the repetition of the words “I”, “I think”, “I mean”. Hedging functions as a softener. Perhaps the opinion is formed tentatively as a way to foreshadow the negative constructions that will follow (Holmes, 1984). By commenting on the general climate/culture, Karen might avoid immediately characterising sexting per se. Karen then creates consensus by highlighting that she does not know anyone that would say yes to that question (line 7). According to Dickerson (1997), the invocation of others can be an issue of stake management. The argument cannot be dismissed as a motivated account if others that are less motivated also support it. Indeed, what follows is an invocation of two categories which qualify her as invested and an “expert” due to lived experiences: her parent category and her teacher category (lines 8-10).

Karen proceeds to categorise sexting as socially unhealthy (lines 10-11). This categorisation is followed by a few category-bound activities (Sacks, 1992): distracting students from education and being the cause of bullying. Sexting is not constructed as a personal mistake but as an overall negative societal phenomenon. This construction is further painted with a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) (prevalent, toxic, poor attainment in schools) to emphasise the issues it creates. Then Karen employs corroboration, whereas the school is invoked as an independent, personified actor and appears to ban phones. Corroboration functions as a way to reflect on the culturally shared understanding that sexting can be problematic (Wiggins, 2016). The excerpt finishes with Karen answering emphatically that sexting is “wholly” negative and “really quite” toxic. Karen's detailed discursive work could

testify to the topic's controversy. Teachers' accounts were carefully designed around justifications for their overly negative evaluations of sexting.

### ***7.2.1. Sexting as an ideological dilemma: the good, the bad, and the "normal"***

The majority of the constructions concerning sexting were negative. However, teachers also constructed sexting in a more normalised way. Often teachers framed sexting as something that would happen due to adolescent sexual curiosity or could even have benefits as it constitutes sexual intercourse without the danger of STIs and pregnancies. It was highly prevalent for both negative and positive constructions to co-exist. Positives were often resisted by being contrasted with or overshadowed by the negatives. Sexting formed a powerful ideological dilemma for teachers. The contradictory, context-sensitive constructions of sexting are played out in the following excerpt:

#### **Int 25-Harry, M, Music teacher**

1 **A** how do you feel about young people getting involved in sexting(.)do  
2 you think it's good(.)do you think it's bad(.)what do you think?

3 **H** I don't think(.)I don't think the process itself(.)is BAD (.)  
4 necessarily bad(.)but the question is what exactly is the context  
5 (.) okay? because for example(.)one could say something(.)I don't  
6 know(.)say 17 or 18(.)they can say something like(.)okay I want to  
7 sleep with you like something(.)something which is(.)which is  
8 (.)which sounds at least quite minor(.)I mean we're talking between  
9 youngs and youngs

10 **A** yes yes yes

11 **H** between youngs and olds it's something criminal(.)I think(.)depends  
12 on the context(.)it depends on the context(.)actually depends on  
13 what is(.)what(.)what we're trying to achieve(.)I mean do they try  
14 to(.)is it a relationship that they see seriously(.)is it something  
15 they do for fun(.)it's something that they just want to show that to  
16 their friends and they want to upload it in(.)you never know that  
17 what it's behind(.)so I think the process itself is not necessarily  
18 bad(.)what(.)what's(.)what is behind that(.)and what(.)what enforces  
19 them(.)enforces them(.)what makes them want to do that(.)and the  
20 other thing is that I'm not sure how teenagers can(.)can control the  
21 situation(0.3)I mean if(.)they have a mindset because what will  
22 happen once they understand what is the difference between  
23 (.)uhh(.)that kind of sending pictures to the a girl they don't know  
24 then(.)seeing something that has been developed through the  
25 relationship with another girl(.)but there are others that(.)you  
26 know(.)they still see it as something fun

Harry states that sexting as a process is not necessarily bad. What is perhaps not directly said, yet implied, is a subtle resistance to the widespread negative constructions of sexting (as seen in the previous section and Chapters 2, 4 and 5). This could be further evidenced by the repair (Schegloff et al., 1977) he employs afterwards: Harry adds the word “necessarily” (line 4), maybe due to the culturally acknowledged controversy of the topic. Sexting is constructed as an act that depends on its contextual elements (lines 4-5). Harry employs a hypothetical scenario and reported speech (lines 7-8, “I want to sleep with you”). As Frith and Kitzinger (2001) suggest, one of the functions of active voicing is constructing sexual negotiations as scripted. What males often say in terms of sexual interactions can be easily mimicked and recognised examples of the overall “sorts of things men say” (Frith and Kitzinger, 2001, p. 223). Changes in pronouns indicate agency (Wiggins, 2016). As Harry describes older adolescents expressing their desire to have intercourse, it could be that the construction he is building is one whereas adolescents are autonomous individuals. The scenario evoked presents sexting as a normative expression of the desire to engage in sexual acts.

The invocation of older adolescents in the imagined scenario, functions as framing adolescents as almost adults instead of kids. Harry evaluates the scenario as a minor incident (line 8), by employing the words “at least” and “quite” to emphasise its insignificance. This scenario could constitute an attempt to demystify/de-villainise sexting. This is enhanced by the declaration that he is referring to sexting between adolescents. This construction is then juxtaposed with sexting between adults and adolescents, which Harry declares criminal. This statement could be stake management and setting distinctions due to the prevalent discourses around sexting that equate it with other forms of cyber-delinquency, such as online grooming.

Harry emphasises the importance of motivation by repeating that sexting between young (adolescents) and old (adults) individuals is criminal and emphasises the context-

sensitivity of the subject. He continues building up his case by employing a rhetorical question expressed through a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of motives to engage in sexting (lines 14-16). He employs an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) (lines 16-17, “never know what is behind”) to show sexting itself is not an issue but its potential weaponisation is. This formulation is followed by the repetition of the statement that sexting as a process isn’t bad, as a way to resist past negative constructions emphatically. Here, the negatives of sexting are briefly acknowledged and then discussed as a lack of ability to control things, and cyber-flashing, which is contrasted with sexting in a relationship. Harry concludes that some adolescents see this as fun, after acknowledging the negative consequences of sexting and returning to the normative construction.

Here, we see an attempt to consider and even create a discursive terrain for the positives of sexting or its formulation as a normative sexual procedure. Perhaps, due to the controversy of the topic and the emotive/ negative attitudes it might provoke, its normalisation or even defence needs to be constructed carefully. The alternative constructions of sexting could be problematic for adults and teachers, and thus, they need to be constructed delicately.

### ***7.2.2. Gendered positions: Males as dominant, females as victims of sexting***

The negative sexting repertoires opened gendered positions in relation to power. Girls were positioned as the victims of the pressures to sext and the backlash of sexting. The constructions teachers employed were heteronormative. Teachers worked up power dynamics with many traditional feminist discursive signifiers such as “lad culture”, and “boys will be boys”. Teachers mapped the positions that society opens for girls, such as “slut”, “frigid” “easy”. They constructed sexting as a byproduct of the pressure female adolescents face, either from their male peers or the cultural norms that promote their sexualisation. However, boys were positioned as benefiting from sexting, either by collecting sexts as a form of social

capital, or by sexting without not facing the scrutiny girls do. Moreover, boys were often positioned as coercive and pressuring girls to obtain sexting messages.

Regarding females, sexual desire or agency was absent throughout the data corpus, with few exceptions. Female sexting mainly was constructed as a byproduct of power imbalances. In the following excerpt, Hubert replies to my question regarding who feels more pressure to comply with a request for sexually explicit pictures in relation to gender:

**Int 16-Hubert,M, History teacher in a secondary school**

1 H okay(.)girls(.)girls(.)absolutely(.)and again(.)I don't know(.)but I  
2 just think(.)I don't think there's any reason why this would be  
3 different than any other kind of thing to do with gender(.)sexual  
4 violence(.)or(.)or anything related(.)rather(.)as I said a minute  
5 ago it's 99% of the time(.)something bad(.)a male does to a female  
6 (.)and I would think that(.)I would think probably the word  
7 transpires(.)most of the time(.)in a bad way(.)is more of a boy  
8 saying to a girl come on(.)send me what do they call them a dick pic  
9 (.)or whatever(.)like(.)what are you frigid or something(.)I  
10 wouldn't(.)I didn't know (.)the language goes on(.)and then(.)and  
11 then the result is probably negative 99% of the time(.)and it's  
12 probably mostly negative for the girl involved(.)and it's probably a  
13 bit of a laugh for the boy or something(.)and probably affects the  
14 girl(.)or emotionally(.)afterwards(.)if there is any fallout for  
15 that boy he probably doesn't really care that much(.)you know I sent  
16 her a picture of my bits(.)so(.)who cares(.)I don't really care (.)  
17 who cares(.)whatever(.)that's just what I think I think it mostly  
18 it's(.)it's(.)that kind of transaction and negative thing which  
19 happens(.)initiated by a male to a female who feels pressure to do  
20 that might or might not comply(.)and you know maybe 1%(.)1% of the  
21 time(.)it might be empowering or fun or something but probably bad  
22 (.)most of the time(.)done by males to females(.)as like anything  
23 else

Here, the traditional gender norms often found in sexual violence (Hiavka, 2014) appear to extend to the cyberspace, and a script is formulated. Hubert repeats the word “girls” (line 1) to emphasise his point. This is followed by the word “absolutely”, which works up a pervasive picture of the impact sexting has on female adolescents and highlights that it is a widely accepted reality. The phrase “I don't know” (line 2) functions as a way to distance one's self when the statement is perhaps controversial (Potter, 1996). This is followed by the minimisation (Pomerantz, 1984) “just” in line 2. The minimisation is framing the following

sentence as an opinion due to the overall novelty/controversy of the subject. The words “ I just think” are then repaired to “I don’t think there is any reason”, implying the lack of counter-argument: thus, showcasing the difficulty to challenge it and the factuality of the position. The extent to which sexting reflects the overall cultural history of gender norms regarding sexual violence is emphasised through a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) in line 4 (sexual violence, gender, anything related). Here we see a category unfolding: males are positioned as sexually aggressive. Moreover, their category related activity appears to be the perpetration of sexual violence.

This is evident by the repetition of the evaluation “bad” in lines 5-7 and the employment of the extreme case formulation (99%) (Pomerantz, 1986) in line 5, which emphasises the prevalence of such social injustices. The construction “male does to female” (line 6) further paints the script of agency/power imbalance between male and female adolescents and holds males accountable. The pressure boys exercise on girls is expressed via active voicing (line 9), which produces a vivid narrative of the power imbalances, and further adds to accountability. One can see the categories and the category bound activities emerge: boys are the ones that pressure, girls are being pressured. The hypothetical boy appears to actively perpetrate coercion and exert power by using the word “frigid”, which is ideologically charged due to its cultural representations. The participant distances themselves from that vocabulary, confessing it as problematic.

The factuality and emphasis on the negative experience of sexting is expressed through a repetition of the aforementioned extreme case formulation (99%) (Pomerantz, 1986). The difference in the gendered experiences of sexting is expressed through a strong contrast. Hubert juxtaposes the binary and their experiences: what is mostly negative for a girl it’s just a bit of a laugh for a boy. Further contrast is then drawn between the category bound activities. Whilst the girl is emotionally affected, the boy will not care. Sexting is



described as a transaction, perhaps due to the societal currency it arguably has for men. The answer ends with an-extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986): whereas sexting could be positive, only 1% of cases would be such. The negative reality girls face when it comes to sexuality is confessed as a problematic yet widely normalised script. Consider the excerpt below:

**Int 13-Nicolas, M, PT Neuroscience teacher**

1 **A** and what do you think are the positive or negative outcomes of  
2 sexting for adolescents

3 **N** I suspect that there is a kind of reputation that comes alongside it  
4 (.)that can be positive or negative(.)I think(.)unfortunately(.)  
5 there's probably um when it comes teenage cliques and stuff in their  
6 groups and social dynamics(.)I suspect that there is a a(.) an  
7 element of guys being like(.)oh I got all these texts from this  
8 person(.)and girls getting a reputation about it(.)unfortunately(.)  
9 I do think it is quite gendered um and not balanced (.) um and  
10 (.)unfortunately I think that there's there's probably quite likely  
11 that guys are encouraged to(.)try and get these kinds of images from  
12 people or these texts from people(.)and then use it as kind of  
13 social currency(.)they have these(.)things(.)whereas girls and  
14 probably(.)subjected to(.)m(.)being kind of frowned upon but like  
15 almost bullied if they are someone who can refer to as like a frigid  
16 back(h)was in school(.)I was reluctant to engage in that kind of  
17 thing(.)but also I have this issue in is probably negative comments  
18 connotations with being referred to as like a slut or something(.)I  
19 personally don't think that these terms are okay to use(.)but I  
20 suspect that that is(.)what is used

Nicolas makes gender relevant without the interview question tackling it as a topic.

Similarly to the excerpt above, this could showcase the culturally prescribed gendered categories of sexting. Nicolas's response is created tentatively, through hedging, by the use of the word "I suspect" and the minimiser (Pomerantz, 1984) "kind of" (line 3). Perhaps the statement that sexting can lead to a reputation is controversial due to the gendered distinction Nicolas proceeds to make in terms of reputation. Indeed, this utterance is followed by the words "I think", "unfortunately", and "probably" (lines 4-5), which downplay the significance of the statement, further attesting to its controversial nature. The word "unfortunately" ideologically distances Nicolas from the statement whilst simultaneously

attesting to its factuality; albeit unpleasant, it is true. Similarly to the previous excerpt, the gendered sexual script is confessed as problematic yet accepted as normative.

Again, boys here are juxtaposed to girls. Boys are liberated as they openly talk/brag about their sexting, whilst girls are constructed as inferior when it comes to power dynamics due to getting a reputation. Boys are positioned as being encouraged (though the originator is unclear due to the passive voice employed) to obtain these pictures. Requesting sexting pictures is constructed as involving effort, and pictures are categorised as social currency. This implies the power held by males in heteronormative society and the objectification of the female adolescent cyber-body.

The category frigid appears to invoke bullying and being frowned upon, perhaps constructing the pressures of living in a patriarchal society. This construction is contrasted with being referred to as a slut. This co-existence of two antithetical constructions showcases the dilemmatic pressures females face. There is a strong binary here, which paints the positions that are available to adolescents. Girls are damned if they sext and damned if they do not, yet boys are encouraged to do it to get societal capital. The excerpt finishes with a *de jure/de facto* statement: whilst the gendered oppression is not okay, and Nicolas distances himself from it, he formulates the script as this being the current dominant societal reality.

### ***7.2.3: Position: Girls as the attention-seeking other.***

Teachers opened another position for girls: that of the attention-seeking other. This position carries ideological tension. Girls sexted to either get self-esteem through the approval of their male peers or gain their interest. Whilst the previous position constructs girls as victims and boys as the oppressors, in this position girls want to appeal to the male gaze.

Interestingly, this female sexting position was constructed through a heavily androcentric gloss. The centre of the discourse is still the male; the female is constructed as competing to fit a male frame and appealing/defining the self through the male gaze. Teachers attend to this androcentric rhetoric by opening positions for females that are hetero-defined through their male peers. Moreover, girls commodify the self for their male peers' attention, which in turn connotes power imbalances. These constructions of imbalance, when compared to the previous positions, connote different conceptualisations of agency. The positions that are open, only open in the male domain of discursive power. This position often opened along with the position of girls as victims of boys/the patriarchy, creating further ideological tensions. It is noteworthy that female sexual desire is not tackled at all. Instead, female desire is constructed as trying to mould into male desire; the female body is weaponised to gain male attention. This construction is evident in the following excerpt:

**Int 27 -Diane, F, Secondary school science**

1 A so(.)again(.)thinking about the gender identities of teenagers(...)who  
 2 (.)do you perceive as being more involved in engaging in sexting(.)  
 3 do you think it's boys(.)do you think it's girls(.)gender non  
 4 binary(.)trans

5 D I would imagine(.)boys are more likely to initiate it(.)overall(.)I  
 6 would expect girls to initiate it(.)if potentially(.)she thought  
 7 maybe he was drifting off(.)or they might be going through a rough  
 8 patch(.)she's trying to bring him back in(.)that might be a case  
 9 where the female may initiate

Diane positions boys as the initiators of sexting, which implies they are dominant power-wise (line 5). She employs an imagined scenario and stake inoculation (Edwards & Potter, 2005); Diane declares she imagines boys as the initiators. She then employs the word “overall” (line 5) to indicate that this is mainly the case. It is noteworthy that the word “imagine” (line 5), previously used for boys' engagement in sexting, changes to “expect” (line 6) for girls. This testifies to the cultural strength of what is being told. While the statement concerning boys is formed more tentatively, the statement regarding girls is formed

as more factual. It is noteworthy that the plural boys and girls become “she” and “he” (lines 6-7). Diane formulates a lively script of a hypothetical example of a heterosexual relationship, albeit one that is implied and not directly constructed. The words “rough patch” and “bringing back” typically denote scenarios of romantic relationships going awry. Adolescents become a representation of the gendered cultural battlefields. Diane proceeds to emphatically formulate a script (Edwards, 1994) through a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990). She states the cases in which a girl could sext; to bring “him” back if they are drifting off and they are going through a rough patch (lines 7-8). The girl is positioned and constructed as the active agent through the use of passive verbs, and the boy is the passive subject. Yet, meaning wise, “he” dominates the discursive construction as the centre and the motivation behind the active agents’ (girls) actions. A similar construction unfolded in the excerpt below:

**Int 22-Simone,F, SEND safeguarding lead**

1 **A** (...)why do you think that some of the lessons so engaged in sex and  
 2 others don't?  
 3 **S** I don't know I think we(.)from again(.)from experience(.)it seems to  
 4 be(.)we have more girls that send them I don't know if that's  
 5 because they're slightly more easily persuaded(.)or I think there's  
 6 lots of reasons I think some might be to get validation(.)and to  
 7 have the compliment(.)and to have the attention or they think well  
 8 if I send it this boy is definitely gonna like me(.)but then  
 9 there's(.) they're not very nice(.)it's where they've been groomed  
 10 into it (.) open it into it or pressured into it(.)or they think(.)  
 11 if everyone's doing their that friend said that they did is also  
 12 I'll do it(.)and just do it because that's(.)what that's(.)that's  
 13 kind of what they do

In the present excerpt, gender is brought into the discursive terrain without the researcher asking, testifying how discursive constructions of sexting are constructed on traditional gender norms. Simone’s reply starts with the repletion of the words “I don’t know”, to distance her from a statement that can be controversial (Potter, 1996), as she proceeds to form the next sequence as an opinion (using the words “I think”). The script that

is being formulated (Edwards, 1994) is again painted tentatively, through hedging, which testifies further to the controversy of what is being said. This is evidenced by the employment of the words “seems to be” and her invoking her personal/teaching expertise and experience (line 3) to testify a lived narrative.

The teacher’s experience/expertise provides the speaker with category entitlement, and the inference that is drawn is that girls are easily persuaded (lines 6-9) and want validation from their male counterparts. The pronoun “I” think changes to “we” (lines 3-4), to create a sense of corroboration/consensus (Wiggins, 2016): that many individuals in a school location have experienced that. It is also an invocation of the teacher identity, whilst the possibility of girls being easily persuaded is constructed with a minimisation by employing the word “slightly”. A script is formulated (Edwards, 1994)-albeit in a tentative gloss- by the employment of the words “I think”, “some” and “might” (line 6). These words testify to the statement's controversy. Moreover, a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) follows (to get validation, have the compliment and attention in lines 6-7) to paint an emphatic case regarding why girls engage in sexting. What follows this three-part list is a construction of the girl sexting for a boy to get attracted to them, which is framed with the word definitely, indicating how culturally commonplace this construction is. This three-part list is juxtaposed with another list of coercive actions due to which female adolescents engage in sexting. It is noteworthy that the perpetrator of coercion is not mentioned directly. The more active construction of sexting for validation is juxtaposed with coercive elements, such as girls being easily persuaded, which again is painted in a passive voice, or groomed and pressured; perhaps as a way to highlight the differences in the lack of agency and thus severity.

### **7.3. Position: Adolescents as naïve/unaware**

Another distinct position was that of adolescents as naïve, immature, or unable to understand the consequences of sexting. Whilst they are described as autonomous and

agentic, it is not a real sense of autonomy or agency, as they cannot conceptualise the full extent of their actions. This lack of awareness was often juxtaposed with adults, who were positioned as fully developed and thus knowledgeable. This is conflicting with the juxtaposition of children as technologically overpowering their parents. This sense of lack of awareness is evident in the following excerpt:

**Int 18-Felicia, F, Safeguarding officer, Secondary humanities, PSHE/Sex ed**

1 **A** sharing sexually suggestive images or videos is kind of(.)illegal  
2 for people under the age of 18 in the UK(.)what do you think young  
3 people feel about this(.)do you think they're aware of the(.)kind  
4 of(.)legal consequences

5 **F** um I don't think it doesn't matter how many times we tell them  
6 someone will still do it(.)I'll still deal with issues of this  
7 nature(.)and it doesn't matter(.)the only time it hits home is when  
8 its turns nasty or with humiliation(.)up until that point(.) they  
9 feel they're kind of immune to it(.)even I mean(.)if sharing it  
10 it's not actually their picture(.)it's not their videos(.)but they  
11 are still happy to share it(.)assuming it's okay and that they  
12 haven't done anything wrong(.)and it's only when again when it kind  
13 of goes(.)desperately wrong that they have to if the police get  
14 involved and stuff like that(.)that's when they suddenly go oh I  
15 didn't you know I didn't they send it to me they don't actually  
16 think they did anything wrong

The present excerpt employs detailed discursive work, to highlight the extent of the naivety of adolescents. Felicia suggests that adolescents will engage in sexting “no matter how many times” teachers inform them. It is perhaps implied that adolescents will still exercise their own will despite the repetition. This evaluation creates a narrative of adolescents as stubborn. The pronoun used in line 1 is “we”, evoking the collective identity of educators and implying a collective consensus. The membership categories (Sacks, 1992) of educators and students, constructed as “us” and “them”, could imply differences in agency/knowledge and power between adolescents and teachers. A discursive power struggle is formed, whereas the dominant power figure in the classroom (teachers) exercises their own regime of truth, which adolescents then resist. This resistance is heavily implied by the words “will still do it” (line 6). Felicia formulates a script that presents sexting as inevitable and employs the word “someone”, which attests to the factuality of the statement. She then

changes the pronoun from “we “to “I” in line 6. Perhaps, she is invoking investment or stake (Edwards & Potter, 2005), due to being the one responsible for dealing with such incidents. The words “doesn’t matter” are repeated. They are followed by an extreme case formulation (“the only time”) which emphasises the script of adolescent recklessness, that can lead/stops only when the situation severely escalates.

Felicia further constructs the script of adolescents’ naivety through the word “feel”. What is not said but is implied is that this narrative doesn’t reflect reality and is more of a feeling. The extent of adolescents’ naivety is painted with a script formulation, which trespasses the boundaries of sexting and reaches non-consensual sharing of others’ images. Felicia evokes the emotion category of “happy to share them”, perhaps as a portrayal which manages to paint them as wholly unaware of the consequences of their actions. Even in extreme cases, adolescents are positioned as utterly oblivious to potential harm. She employs the word assume, perhaps to highlight their flawed perception and an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1984) (“haven’t done anything wrong” in line 12). She then re-employs the same script (Edwards, 1994), that adolescents will not understand anything until the police is involved (a script that could be assumed is the worst-case scenario) and repeats the extreme case formulation.

#### **7.4. Positions: parents and schools as co-responsible**

In almost all the interviews, teachers positioned parents and educators as co-responsible for having conversations or monitoring adolescent sexting and intervening interchangeably whenever one of those groups could not effectively guide or help adolescents. The positions were constructed as socially expected. Such positions could be related to the discursive construction of adolescents as naïve. Yet these positions can be very antithetical to the idea of adolescents as digitally more knowledgeable (further discussed in section 7.6.). Consider the excerpt below:

### Int 30-Hailey, F, Citizenship teacher

1 **A** so(.)whose responsibility do you think it is to have conversations  
2 with adolescents regarding sexting(.)do you think it should be  
3 parents do you think it should be the school(.)anyone else

4 **H** I think it should be both(.)I know that in the schools now there's a  
5 big push on PSHE and RSE(.)so like(.)you know(.)the government wants  
6 us to like teach our kids and I think because a lot of  
7 times(.)children(.)students don't go to their parents for things(.)  
8 um you know(.)whether it's positive or negative(.)um maybe it's  
9 reassurance(.)or maybe they just want some advice(.)I know that  
10 because parents don't spend(.)you know(.)if you think about it(.)a  
11 child has dropped off to school they spend a lot of time in  
12 schools(.)I think(.)sometimes they'll create a bond with the  
13 teacher(.)and they would come to the teacher with things that they  
14 wouldn't come to you with that(.)you know they wouldn't go to with  
15 their parents(.)so I think yes(.)it is the responsibility of the  
16 school(.)and I think that government supports having wants us to be  
17 involved in managing relationships and teaching students how to  
18 respond(.)you know(.)making them aware of you know what goes on in  
19 the world in terms of relationships but I think parents at the same  
20 time(.)always have a responsibility of knowing what their child is  
21 doing(.)making them aware of things that could occur(.)and also have  
22 to respond so that when their child is(.)so for example if you know  
23 that your child is in a relationship you know(.)making them aware(.)  
24 so that at some point(.)if it was to occur you know(.)the child  
25 knows what to do(.)or you know the parents are aware that is  
26 occurring(.)obviously I know it's not a very comfortable topic to  
27 tell your parents but you know if you just create that awareness and  
28 have that relationship with the child is also your responsibility as  
29 a parent to have that(.)and then(.)back up of course(.)obviously the  
30 school would be there and you know they would also educate the child  
31 in a non-personal kind of way so that I think some of the  
32 differences are(.)when you do lessons in school(0.3)it's(0.4)it's a  
33 generic lesson that's taught to everybody(.)it's not that personal  
34 but when the parent has that conversation or educates a child at  
35 home it's very personal(.)and sometimes that can be quite  
36 intimidating(.)I think both should play their part(.) both(.)  
37 parents at school

Here, Hailey tackles whose responsibility it is to discuss sexting with adolescents. She positions educators and parents as responsible, and discussions/raising awareness as a category bound activity (Sacks, 1992) for both. In line 6, Hailey invokes a shared cultural knowledge through the words “you know”. This shared cultural knowledge is further enhanced by invoking the governmental call for educators to teach kids issues such as those tackled in PSHE. Students are described as “our kids”, perhaps to showcase stake and



investment (Edwards & Potter, 1992). The deployment of governmental instructions could create consensus. There is a sense of power in the Foucauldian way (Foucault, 1980), through which the government regulates the knowledge around the body. The need to invoke the knowledge apparatus of the government could be perhaps due to sexting and the conversations around sexting being controversial topics. As they involve talking to minors about sex, it could be that Hailey invokes the idea that it is a governmental request rather than just a personal opinion.

Hailey then proceeds to formulate a script (Edwards, 1994) by describing children as hesitating to talk to their parents about a plethora of things. This script is further enhanced by the phrase “a lot of times” (lines 7-8), which further attests to the statement's prevalence. In line 11, there is a repair. While Hailey starts talking about parents perhaps spending time with their children, she then changes the statement to emphasise the children and the significant amount of time they spend in school, possibly to avoid blaming parents.

Hailey constructs adolescents as children who often create bonds with teachers, perhaps as a substitute for parental bonds or help. This script is formed tentatively “if you think about it”, “sometimes”, and “I think” (lines 11-15). This hesitant formulation of the position of the teacher could be perhaps attributed to the culturally accepted idea that parents know best when it comes to children.

Teachers are constructed as preparing students for the demands of life and relationships. This script is then contrasted with parents, whose position opens through responsibility in the form of monitoring (line 21) as they need to be aware of their children's actions and potential outcomes. In line 27, Hailey formulates a script (Edwards, 1994) of sexting/sexual issues being an uncomfortable topic to discuss with one's parents, which further justifies adolescents reaching out to teachers. This idea is justified in lines 32-37,

whereas sexting education is constructed as more appropriate for schools as they are less intimidating than parents. In lines 28-29, we see the parenting-related category-bound activities unfolding (Sacks, 1992); these are to create awareness and have a close relationship with the child. The school is then constructed in a personified manner, which highlights the institution's agency in backing up parents. Hailey discusses the position of parental responsibility concerning sexting as something that is a universally accepted truth. Thus, what perhaps is confessed as more controversial is that parents might not always be capable, which further formulates the script that teachers are also positioned as responsible.

School/educators are constructed as equally invested as parents but in a different manner and as a significant part of adolescents' lives. Thus, it is a widely accepted cultural reality that they should also contribute to their education. These positions appear to be conflicting with the idea of adults as needing further education in relation to the cyberspace (section 7.7.).

### **7.5. Consent: conflicting interpretative repertoires**

As Reynolds & Wetherell (2003) suggest, a characteristic of IRs is that they are often high in variability. Indeed, when it came to consent, three different IRs emerged. In the first one, sexting coercion was constructed as the possibility of disseminating the picture. In the second one, consent was constructed through a legislative frame and a *de jure/de facto* distinction; no matter whether the adolescents engaged in sexting willingly or not, the concept of consent is not valid, as their age constitutes it illegal. In the final repertoire, lack of consent was constructed as a result of power imbalances. These constructions of consent were conflicting and were often employed together, creating an ideological dilemma. In the sections below, I will explicate the repertoires in use.

### 7.5.1. IR: *Non-consensual distribution*

In the first interpretative repertoire in relation to consent and coercion, coercion was framed as the distribution of sexts. Teachers often resisted the idea of consent in sexting due to the possibility of non-consensual dissemination of images. This is evident in the following excerpt, where Isla discusses consent:

#### Int 28-Isla, F, Hospital education teacher

1 **A** thank you(.)and when we talk about sex(.)we refer to consent(.)how  
2 do you think this concept applies to sexting  
3 **I** it is really difficult(.)isn't it(.)consent when its sexting I think  
4 (.)consent is(.)it's hard(.)if it's between somebody and they're in  
5 a relationship(.)if it's between a pair of people are in a  
6 relationship(.)then the consent they should still be act(.)the other  
7 thing I think is that(.)where would that picture go(.)where would  
8 that be seen if you consented to send that picture of you consented  
9 for that other person to see it(.)if you consented for them to show  
10 somebody else(.)you know because(.)it's difficult to consent to that  
11 image being just that single person(.)I think that was difficult  
12 to(.)to manage(.)how(.)I don't know how consent would be  
13 policed(.)for sexting

The answer starts with an evaluation of the concept of consent in sexting. Isla works up a construction which frames sexting consent as a difficult subject by adding the word “really” (line 3) to emphasise the perplexity of the topic. Isla clarifies that consent is difficult in sexting. This could imply that it is more complicated than offline sexual/physical consent. This sentence is followed by a second evaluation, where consent is framed as “hard” (line 4). This further establishes the complexity and maybe the novelty of the topic.

Isla introduces a relationship script to show that consent shouldn't always be taken for granted, even in such a normative context. This is then contrasted with a second script formulation (Edwards, 1994), this of coercion as dissemination of the sexting material. In the second scenario, whilst the photo might have been sent consensually, the scenario worked up constructs a possibility of non-consensual dissemination. The participant describes the picture, the by-product of sexting, in an active voice and rather personified, as if the picture is

a person (“where would picture go”, line 7); perhaps to highlight the lack of agency the sender has.

There is an agent-subject distinction as the picture is afterwards described as “being seen” in a passive voice, perhaps to express that once the picture is “out there”, it becomes a passive medium for consumption, no longer in the sender’s control. The issue of dissemination is portrayed through a three-part list of consenting to the picture, the other person to see and then show. A script is formulated (Edwards, 1994) (evident by using the words “you know”, which indicate a shared understanding), whereas the picture being seen by others besides the original intended receiver is constructed as a frequent occurrence. In a sense, Isla is resisting the idea of consent in sexting, as it is constructed as an oxymoron. It is implied that consent needs to be policed to avoid potential dissemination, perhaps creating a de jure/de facto distinction; consent can exist, but it needs to be policed due to its nature.

Coercion in the form of dissemination is formulated as a normative script of sexting, something that is intrinsically tied to sending a sext. However, in the original first scenario of sexting in a relationship, consent was not assumed-implying the context-sensitivity of consent in sexting, and the need to re-affirm it.

### **7.5.2. IR: Consent as illegal**

In the second consent repertoire, teachers constructed consent as an oxymoron: it was impossible to exist due to the illegality of adolescent sexting. Consent becomes biopolitical (in the Foucauldian sense) with a de jure/de facto distinction. While the adolescent might want to engage in sexting, the legal state of things automatically constitutes this consent non-existent. Consider the excerpt below:

#### **Int 12-Sharon, F, Assistant headteacher, wellbeing**

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1 A so when we talk about sex(.)we refer to consent(.)how do you think
2 this notion applies to sexting
```

3 s I think that(.)again(.)when they are at that age they can't consent  
4 to it legally(.)so it's like(.)there is no consent(.)even though  
5 they might feel that they want to do it(.)they can't consent to  
6 it(.)when they(.)you know when I teach under 16(.)you know(.)so none  
7 of these children can consent to that because it's not they are not  
8 old enough to(.)I guess that's why I'm saying like maybe when(.)  
9 when you are old enough to if that is what you want to do(.)and  
10 you're willing to take that(.)then(.)that's your(.)you know that  
11 you're consenting to that(.)but when they're youngsters(.)you  
12 know(.)they(.)they can't consent to it(.)so yeah I guess that 'show  
13 I see it(.)even if they really want to and they think i(.)its a good  
14 idea because of their age(.)they(.)they can't

In this excerpt, Sharon constructs her argument by placing age in the centre of the discursive terrain as a justification for why adolescent sexting consent does not exist. She uses the word “can’t” (line 3) to suggest a genuine lack of agency due to legislative issues, as afterwards, legality is invoked. In a sense, by invoking the law, the claim is constructed as factual, reflecting the collectivist societal thinking that often the law indicates/symbolises. This way, consent transitions to the sphere of biopolitics. What follows is a careful construction that delegitimises adolescents’ agency. Their personal evaluation of whether they want to engage in sexting is worked up delicately with tentative words such as “might”, “feel”, and “wanting” (lines 5,6) to then be juxtaposed with the repetition that they are unable to consent. Again, their inability to consent is constructed based on a socio-biological factor (their age) rather than their willingness or unwillingness to sext. We see a *de jure/de facto* distinction. Whilst in theory adolescents might want to sext, in practice they cannot sext due to their age and legislative restrictions.

The phrase “cannot consent” is disrupted by the statement that they might want to do it, only to be followed with a repetition of the words “cannot consent”. This could be a show concession (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999). During the concession, the speaker showcases that they are aware of all of the cases of an argument before reaching their final point to appear

less biased (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999). The speaker invokes their own experience/expertise (“when I teach”, line 6), perhaps to make the claim more legitimate.

Sharon further formulates a script of children as unable to consent through employing an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) (“none of these”) and a categorisation of adolescents as children, perhaps to showcase the lack of capacity to consent due to their age. In lines 9-11, Sharon invokes a list (Jefferson, 1990) of conditions under which she considers sexting consensual (old enough, wanting to do it, willingness to take it). This, again, could be employed to show the participant as rational and considering all the alternative scenarios prior to the aphorism of sexting. Indeed, as we see afterwards, this adult notion of consent is again juxtaposed with young people and the repetition of the phrase they cannot consent. The delicate and emphatic construction of consent as a legal subject could be due to the controversial nature of the topic or the delegitimisation of adolescents’ experience, which might be a sensitive subject.

It could be that the idea of adolescents being sexual is so uncomfortable that any construction that presents them as perhaps sexual individuals needs to be opposed through the law- as law combines with power in ways that expand knowledge and societal rules, thus legality produces forms of knowledge through which we govern life (Turkel, 1990).

### ***7.5.3. IR: Coercion as a power imbalance***

In this repertoire, teachers constructed consent and coercion as separate and based on power dynamics. Teachers particularly juxtaposed consensual sexting with coercive sexting. The framing of coercive sexting was worked up based on notions of power imbalances, pressure and peer influence. This repertoire acknowledges the differences in sending photos due to one’s agency and will and juxtaposes it with sending photos due to interpersonal

power struggles. This construction can be observed in the excerpt below, where Eve brings up the power imbalances that can emerge and influence sexting:

#### Int 7-Eve, F, English Secondary

1 **A** thank you(.)so when we talk about sex(.) we refer to consent(.)how  
2 do you think this notion applies to sexting

3 **E** I think(.)is not really that much around consent(.)I think it's  
4 very much a thing(.)where it doesn't have to just be male or  
5 female(.)I feel if someone asks for(.)it they feels pressured into  
6 doing it to look cool or not looking cool(.)I think it's very(.)  
7 it's a very hard situation because I don't feel like don't actually  
8 understand the fact that you can say no to somebody(.)without  
9 realizing that this is what they're consenting for

10 **A** so do you think for example that they differ(.)sexual consent and  
11 sexting consent

12 **E** a little bit(.)I don't think they should(.)but I feel like they  
13 do(.)if you're in a relationship with(.)if it you were with just  
14 somebody in person(.)you kind of have the time to sit down and say  
15 look(.)you're able to actually consent to it rather than while over  
16 the phone you might have a bit of back and forth saying I don't feel  
17 comfortable sending this picture or message(.)but then there is  
18 pressure of the other party saying you are not really a girl(.) you  
19 are not really a boy you're like very childish(.)and I feel like  
20 they get pressured into doing it(.)so I feel like the consent can't  
21 be very candid and not wanting obviously is not the place for all  
22 some people will be very willing to do it(.)but I think sometimes  
23 it's just the pressure of (inaudible)

Eve starts her reply with the statement that there is not much information around consent (line 3). Perhaps this is a statement foreshadowing the pre-existing repertoires around consent or attesting to the lack of existing affordances in relation to sexting. Eve then declares that consent is not related to gender despite the researcher not bringing up any gender-related issues. It could be that Eve is attending and replying to the discourses in relation to gender and clarifying that the power imbalance is not related to what appears to be the culturally established gendered notions of sexting (lines 4-5). Sexting is constructed as something that could make adolescents have some form of social capital (line 6, “looking cool”) and thus, adolescents can get pressured into it. Again, adolescents are painted as unable to understand consent and lack thereof (lines 7-9).

It is noteworthy that Eve invokes the possibility of adolescents not being aware that they can say no. Whilst this could reflect the overall script formulation (Edwards, 1994) of adolescents as incapable of understanding issues around consent, it could also be an indication that the affordances around coercive sexting are extremely limited. Consent is constructed through de jure/de facto contrast. The participants' ideal construction of how consent in sexting and sex should be the same "they should" (line 12) is juxtaposed with the reality in which "they do" (line 13). This juxtaposition adds to the factuality of the statement, whilst the speakers distance themselves from the ideological pragmatism of the current cultural reality.

The script formulation (Edwards, 1994) presents consent in sex as more tangible, due to two factors: time and ability to discuss it. It is noteworthy that a relationship scenario is evoked, as later it will be juxtaposed with what is implied as a sexting exchange between strangers. Sexual consent is contrasted with sexting, which Eve paints through a script formulation; it appears to be a struggle over communication (employment of words back and forth). Eve employs reported speech ("I don't feel comfortable", in lines 16-17) to make the scenario more realistic and add to its factuality. The scenario of vocally expressing a lack of consent is met with further pressure from the other party. The coercion here is painted as exerting pressure/power imbalance despite a pre-existing declaration one does not want to engage in sexting. The adolescent is pressured to prove their adulthood, or they might be considered childish due to their unwillingness to sext. The participant provides a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of reported speech to indicate what the other party could mention to pressure the sender (lines 17-19), such as doubting the gender of the co-sexter or calling them childish. It is implied that in order to exert peer pressure, sexting is framed as an adult construct, as a passage to adulthood.

The answer finishes with the show concession (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999), as Eve states that consent cannot be candid. She acknowledges an alternative scenario, which is what



she formulates as consent: an enthusiastic willingness to engage in sexting. Yet she returns to the original point through the concession reassertion. She suggests that sometimes adolescents experience pressure. It should be highlighted that despite the power dynamics being acknowledged, sexting consent or lack thereof are still discussed as problematic/controversial, a construction stemming from the widespread negative discourses around sexting (Doring, 2014).

### **7.6.IR: Sexting as a sign of times**

A prevalent interpretative repertoire was that of sexting as a symptom of a new epoch. The offline to online shift subverts the understanding of sex and relationships, which reflects via sexting. Moreover, the increasing accessibility/prevalence of technology this generation experiences is often contrasted with previous generations.

In this repertoire, the emergence of new media creates a pervasive digital cultural hegemony, which radically influences the understanding of adolescent sexual desire both online and offline. This repertoire emerged in various points of the interview schedule, which attests to the importance of the current social climate of how desire materialises in the cyberspace. A similar construction can be observed below, whereas Nate replies to my question regarding under which the circumstances or context adolescents sext:

#### **Int 4 -Nate, M, English, Secondary**

1 N (...) I think it's more complicated than we might think(.)I think  
2 young people today have a different experience of sex and  
3 relationships than my generation did(.)because of technology(.)  
4 because of pornography because of the way in which they talk so  
5 openly(.)about sex sexual matters(.)creates a climate whereby  
6 there's there's an openness to online and digital communications  
7 pornography sex(.)sexting which(.)so your question is(.)is it in  
8 relationships or not(.)well those whole boundaries seem to have  
9 shifted around in ways which I've wanted to claim to understand what  
10 I mean by in a relationship(.)might be very different from what  
11 they actually(.)like in a relationship I suppose what I'm trying to  
12 say is that things are more ubiquitous in terms of how the  
13 communication what they say in terms of barriers and boundaries(.)  
14 what they seem to like varies enormously

15

The answer starts with the words “I think”, foreshadowing that what follows is an opinion. Then, the participant evaluates the construct of sexting and the circumstances during which adolescents sext as complicated. The deployment of the pronoun change (line 1) “I” to “we” to perhaps indicate a shared understanding (Wiggins, 2016) (and, as seen later, perhaps a generational one). This pronoun shift is seen again when “we” changes to “young people/they”, which highlights the “us” versus “them” categories of the adolescent and the adult world. The participant emphasises the contemporary understanding with the word “today” (line 2). This temporality is further evidenced when the participant juxtaposes young people today with people of their generation. Therefore, we can see two categories (Sacks, 1992) unfolding. The markers of the categories or their differences are expressed through differences in erotic experiences, emphasised via a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) (technology, pornography, open conversations in relation to sex in lines 3-5). The participant employs the word ‘climate’, which signifies the newfound cultural hegemony of social media, and further describes the openness through which young people approach such issues.

It is noticeable that this construction is not just sexting, its relationships which then reflect sexting. The participant constructs the change in the relationship norms as so radically shifted that he does not understand it anymore. This could be an outcome of the “us” versus “them” generational constructions. What separates the two generations that represent students and teachers is not only technological proficiency but a shared hegemonical understanding of relating in romantic contexts. This shift of boundaries is expressed through a personification perhaps implying the intensity of change (lines 8-9). The participant makes relevant two positions. The first position that opens is the teachers’ older generation, who has an outdated understanding of relationships due to the lack of social media/technology during their era. Teachers are again positioned as digital immigrants who do not speak the digital natives’

language. The second position that opens is adolescents as digital natives who are fluent in the language of new hegemonies of relating. The generational gap and the positions it opens have radically shifted the boundaries of what relationships are, and thus the participant feels unqualified to answer the question, further positioning themselves in the digital immigrant/older generation category. Sexting is not formed as an action itself. Instead, it is framed as a relationship between individuals that is mediated through media, which in turn change the cultural hegemony of our contemporary understandings of relating.

### **7.7. IR: Sexting education as insufficient**

A prevalent interpretative repertoire was that of the limited sex(ing) education and awareness. The interview schedule included questions that tackled issues of sexting education for adolescents (see Appendix section C.3), and sexting education for teachers, in order to be able to detect and cope with such issues. Often, participants brought up the issue of sexting education prior to being asked or referred to adolescent and teacher sexting education interchangeably, constructing them as interrelated. Yet, most teachers either framed sexting education as non-existent or part of school policy that tackled issues such as revenge porn, healthy relationships or bullying. Teachers also highlighted the need for sexting education either for themselves or the students. However, it is noteworthy that in all cases, abstinence was the core of the intended sexting education and the need to deal with the consequences. In the following excerpt, Vina answers my question regarding how prepared the school staff feels to tackle incidents of sexting:

#### **Int 23-Vina, F, Sociology teacher in college**

1 I(.)yeah I think that that school staff should(.)should receive  
2 some sort of training and less I mean(.)my awareness of it  
3 isn't brilliant and(.)you know(.)a few years ago I was  
4 teenager(.)I have(.)you know(.)seniors in my departments in my  
5 college are 65-70 (.)I don't(.)I think we all need to have this  
6 information because I think it's easy to forget the sort of  
7 differences(lines omitted)(0.3)and I think we do need training  
8 on what to do because you know(.)even having this interview  
9 I've been thinking(.)I actually wouldn't know that the best

10 advice to give somebody if the message was forwarded and it was  
11 then out of their control(.)I would you know support them and  
12 empathize and(.)and point them in the direction of somebody  
13 better qualified than me to help but actually wouldn't know the  
14 perfect response(.)I think(.)if someone's come to you(.)they  
15 haven't gone to their parents or their friends they've come to  
16 YOU and then it's one of your roles and responsibilities as a  
17 teacher(.)to have the best advice with them(.)so(0.5)yeah(.)I  
18 think(.)perhaps more so tutors might need that sort of  
19 intensive training(.)but I think most definitely(.)you  
20 know(.)training of some sort of(.)teachers(.)maybe even sort of  
21 training teachers(.)you know(.)I actually go through my PGCE  
22 nothing was actually taught to me merely about sex education or  
23 sexting even though it's so prevalent and big(.)so yeah I think  
24 training would help me(0.4) certainly

In the present excerpt, Vina suggests that teachers should receive some training in relation to sexting. The statement is accompanied by the modal verb “should” indicating accountability/obligation (Wiggins, 2016). This construction perhaps highlights the necessity of teachers undertaking such training. The training is glossed over by the words “some sort of”. What is perhaps implied is that teachers receive no training at all. A change of pronouns follows this: whilst the participant referred to teachers in general, she now invokes her own, personal experience, and manages stake (lines 2-3). The participant claims that her knowledge of sexting is not great. This statement is accompanied by an invocation of her own insider perspective, as she places herself as belonging to the teenager category until recently (indeed, the participant was an adult in her early 20s). This invocation of personal experience is contrasted with older colleagues (lines 4-5). What is implied here is that despite her recent teenage identity, which leads to a technological proficiency, she needs training and more so her colleagues who are significantly older and perhaps unfamiliar with technology. Here, the positions of adolescents as digital natives and older adults as digital immigrants are unfolding.

Vina uses the word “need”, highlighting the necessity of teachers' sexting education, emphasised through the affirmative phrase “we do need”. A sense of lacking power, despite

the teacher's agency, is formed. The need for sex education due to the novelty of sexting is highlighted through Vina's suggestion that even during the interview she thinks about what she should do (line 10). What is implied is that even the idea of an imaginary scenario is challenging and thus, any real scenarios would be more challenging. It is noteworthy that the scenario Vina invoked, involved the dissemination of sexting material rather than sexting per se (perhaps linking to the repertoire above in relation to consent and dissemination). She then employs a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) to paint a vivid picture of what she would do in such a case (being supportive, empathising and pointing them in the right direction) (lines 11-12). These actions are then contrasted with not knowing what to say and what the most effective response would be. Here, the good intentions of educators are juxtaposed with the lack of sexting education which creates a sense of powerlessness.

Vina formulates a script (Edwards, 1994), whereas someone goes to their teacher for help, followed by the clarification that they did not go to their parents or friends. This specification indicates the cultural importance of these alternatives. It contrasts and emphasises the importance of adolescents reaching out to their teacher. Being able to advise students is constructed as a moral responsibility, and the word "best" emphasises the need for being adequately equipped in terms of being able to help. Vina concludes by constructing training again as a necessity, and an intensive one. Vina employs an invocation of personal experience and stake (Wiggins, 2016) to suggest it would help her. Through this excerpt, one can see the power imbalances unfolding; teachers are constructed as powerless. This lack of power goes against the culturally prescribed traditional notions of power in schools, where teachers are an expert/powerful figure. Here, power is interrelated with a moral responsibility to help adolescents. However, one cannot exert power in a domain they are unaware of, and thus sexting education and training for teachers is constructed as a need, which will help them provide the best help they possibly can.

Other times sexting was formed as part of broader policies like the anti-bullying policy, citizenship, or healthy relationships. Whilst it was theoretically part of the curriculum, sexting education was usually constructed as insufficient. Consider the excerpt below:

**Int 6-Barbara, F, English in secondary school**

- 1 **A** now(.)regarding safety and monitoring whose responsibility do you  
2 think it is to have conversations with adolescence regarding  
3 sexting(.)do you think it's parents schools or anyone else
- 4 **B** I think it's everyone I think it is(.)it isn't taught in  
5 citizenship(.)I mean sex is(.)such(.)a sex education IS but we  
6 should probably have a subset about sexting(.)we have a bit about  
7 grooming we have a bit about online behaviour we have a bit about  
8 child porn(.)and like everything and I think it should be approached  
9 with quite an open mind(.)because as I said(.)it can be a positive  
10 thing(.)there are certain traps and pitfalls that students need to  
11 be aware of that they don't fall into to make it not a positive  
12 experience(.)I do think it's everyone and same as safeguarding is  
13 everyone's everyone who works for children(.)everyone is around  
14 children it's everyone's responsibility to make sure students are  
15 safe(.)I think it's everyone's responsibility to have those  
16 conversations(.)if they should arise organically or even  
17 uncomfortably(.)have them with your tutor group in the morning

While the initial question was not necessarily about sexting education, the participant made it relevant, implying its importance. The participant constructs sexting as non-existent in the curriculum. The necessity of education is constructed through the use of a modal verb (should). Modal verbs manage accountability or responsibility (Wiggins, 2016). What could be implied here is that schools and educators are responsible for educating adolescents (which foreshadows the discursive constructions at the end of the excerpt regarding responsibility). Sexting education is constructed as needing to have its very own subset of educational material and is contrasted to a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990). This three-part list emphasises the plethora of topics available to adolescents in terms of education. It highlights that, while several topics are tackled in schools, sexting is still absent. There is a sense of sexting education being constructed as a necessity (line 10, use of the word “need”) in the face of online adversity. It is needed so students are not in danger. Sexting education can perhaps stop them from making mistakes which will undermine their experience.

In lines 12-15, an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) is employed repeatedly (everyone around children). This extreme case formulation emphasises the universality of the responsibility of adults who work with children and the careful construction of sexting education as a moral duty. This is further evidenced by the construction of sexting education as a way of ensuring students' safety. Sexting education is intertwined with teacher duties. Moreover, the conversations around sexting are suggested as an informative practice, and not the traditional lectures that are often indicative of sex education practices.

### **7.8. Discussion, evaluation and conclusion**

In the present chapter I explicated the interpretative repertoires, subject positions and ideological dilemmas that I found in the datasets, after interviewing teachers. The findings are indicative of the novel and often polarising nature of adolescent sexting. They highlight the cultural history of and the re-birth of gendered subjectivities in the cyberspace. In this section I will evaluate the findings and discuss them in relation to past research and potential impact.

The first IR was sexting as a threat. Adolescents were positioned as unwillingly synergic to a societal problem. Sexting was constructed as extremely negative, and was often framed as non-consensual dissemination of sexts, or bullying. Such constructions reflect the dominant discourses around sexting in the educational sector (Doring, 2014). There are some similarities with the limited studies that have been conducted with teachers. In a recent study by Maqsood & Chiasson (2021), teachers suggested that adolescent sexting can lead to reputation damage, cyberbullying, and revenge porn. Moreover, 29% of teachers consider sexting one of the main barriers to using cell phones in class (Thomas & O'Bannon, 2013). As the past studies on the topic were not discursive, comparisons between the findings can be challenging. However, due to its CDP framework, the present study is the first one that

provides insight into the meaning-making and discursive constructions of teachers in relation to sexting and the available, dominant affordances. In such repertoires, abstinence is often discussed due to the consequences of sexting. However, it would be more beneficial to initiate new affordances regarding the exertion of pressure to receive photos and to resist the normalisation of coercion in sexting, or the assumption that every exchange is consensual.

Yet, as seen in section 7.2.1. teachers were often faced with an ideological dilemma: recognising the positives of sexting while resisting them and employing the idea that it is negative. The dilemma highlights that there is a discursive terrain that takes into consideration that there is no universality when it comes to sexting and emphasises its contextual elements. As showcased in the literature review, sexting is context-sensitive. Despite the challenges they pose, these conflicting constructions are more oriented to a realistic construction of it and share the same principle that adolescents create, that sexting is not always completely negative (Döring, 2014). Past studies on adolescent risky exchanges in the cyberspace and via mobile phones, highlights that risks are accompanied by opportunities (“risky opportunities”, Livingstone, 2008). Thus, to explore sexting as a risky behaviour, one should analyse the current sexting research in relation to risks and opportunities (Livingstone et al., 2011).

The position of girls as victims of the patriarchy and boys as the perpetrators of coercion, is progressive and reflects the current political era (Hayes & Luther, 2018). This position recognised the significant societal pressures girls experience, whilst males often face more lenient societal responses when it comes to sexual aggression (Hayes & Luther, 2018). Moreover, the idea that sexting is a form of social capital for boys emerged often in the data. This idea echoes multiple third-wave feminist concerns (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015).



However, there are still improvements to be made, and they lie in the non-existing positions. For example, there are no positive positions for males and no positions opening about their potential victimisation because of the patriarchy. Such positions should be carefully constructed without the temporary and culturally relevant “not all men” constructions (Nicolas & Agius, 2017). Finally, the lack of affordances in relation to LGBTQ adolescents and the heteronormative assumptions in the discursive terrain could be due to the novelty of gender politics and the limited discursive resources and history of such subjectivities. However, it would be beneficial to subvert such lack and insert them into the cultural history of sexting, a point also discussed in Chapters 2 and 4.

However, girls were placed in another position that was confessed as problematic. Teachers positioned girls as using sexting as a means to obtain self-esteem through the approval of their male peers, or to gain the interest of their male peers. This discursive construction positioned the male adolescent peer as the centre of the discursive terrain; the girl was the Other (DeBeauvoir, 1953). There are a few points I am inclined to make when it comes to this position. The first one is in relation to their otherness. As mentioned earlier, during the second wave of feminism, Simone de Beauvoir (1989) suggested that woman is defined as the Other of man (discussed in Chapter 5). Therefore, masculinity is socio-culturally constructed as the dominant norm based on which contemporary ideas regarding humanity are discursively constructed and defined. This, of course, reflects on our understandings of gender, sex, and desire which also translate in the cyberspace. This constructs girls as discussed against males. Girls are defined through the male gaze. As a result, girls are not autonomous creatures but try to fit the discursive frames of the patriarchy.

The second point is in the overall discursive construction of female existence in the patriarchal cyberspace. As Susan Sontag (1973) stated:

"The question is: what sexuality are women to be liberated to enjoy? Merely to remove the onus placed upon the sexual expressiveness of women is a hollow victory if the sexuality they become freer to enjoy remains the old one that converts women into objects" (Sontag, 1973, p.188).

Such positions are not the by-product of novel discursive constructions in the cyberspace but of the systemic oppression of girls and women. As Frye (1978) suggests, the powerful determine what is said and sayable, so when they baptise it, it transforms according to this baptism. It is only when women exclude men, that this practice itself changes the meaning of "man" along with the meaning of "woman". Perhaps the solution to such positions is not a sexting education that aims towards equality but one aiming towards liberation. This, of course, extends outside the classroom domain; no matter the positions we try to open, society consumes violently misogynistic porn and new forms of cybercrime and discursive imbalances emerge every day (Wilkins & Miller, 2017). Therefore, the opening of new discursive positions would not be enough. Instead, girls and women should be able to re-imagine and re-construct discursively what their own desire is, apart from in relation to men. The discourses around pornography and desire cannot negate to what men have said in the past (Tong, 1984).

The rhetoric regarding femininity appealing to the male gaze/wanting attention is not new. As Wilkins and Miller (2016, p.1) suggest:

"public discourse is replete with talk about the fragility of young women's self-esteem, linking poor self-concept to a range of social problems associated with girlhood".

This discourse of the attention-seeking girl has been embedded in pop culture and academic literature. It perpetuates the idea that girls that do not need validation are secure (Wilkins & Miller, 2016). This rhetoric is not liberating; it classifies girlhood and regulates

sexual desire. Girls are being held accountable for submitting to patriarchal pressures or merely being sexual. They are also blamed for potentially being treated better (e.g., receiving attention) after doing so. Moreover, girls are positioned negatively for displaying sexual behaviour, which often does not happen with boys, who can boast about their sexting. Despite boys being framed negatively for sexting, it is not framed as contributing to their own demise or even attention-seeking.

Moreover, the two positions available for females are that of the victim, or appealing to the male gaze and contributing to their own demise. One is perhaps “idealised” and confessed as problematic. The other one is again confessed as problematic but also as controversial. This could vaguely reflect the ideological tensions that girls have lived in for the past few centuries. It is not the researcher’s role to define these new discourses. Both researcher and participants are byproducts of a society which reinforces discourses based on the capitalist spectacle, patriarchy, othering and compulsory heteronormativity. Moreover, the researcher cannot account for the highly patriarchal long history of the constant marketisation and exploitation of female sexuality. However, I suggest society should move from understandings that are based on othering, which I will also discuss below.

When it came to sexting education, both for teachers and students, the majority of the participants constructed it as insufficient. In the few cases sexting education was present, it was framed as a part of citizenship, informal conversations when problems emerged or discussions around bullying and grooming. These results were similar to York et al. (2021), who found that sexting was discussed as part of the online safety courses or through informal discussions. These results were also similar to Bradshaw et al. (2013) and Burns and Hendriks (2018) who suggested that teachers would feel uncomfortable intervening in sexting. They felt like there wasn’t enough training compared to other forms of bullying or aggressive behaviour in schools. In both studies, abstinence was often the centre of the

conversations. Whilst the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (2017) highlights that normative sexting between adolescents should be dealt with within the school, most school sexting education attempts are insufficient and abstinence-based (Lloyd, 2018).

It is not the researcher's role to evaluate sexting education. The qualitative nature of the study focuses on the meaning-making of educators who constructed it as inefficient. However, cyberspace is morphing to a reflection of our current socio-political discursive reality, necessitating sexting education, which becomes a vital tool for educators as well. Such a practice, owing to its novelty and academics' increased awareness, can improve the discursive terrain, which can subsequently lead to the avoidance of victim-blaming, a repeated instance in incidents of sexual violence.

Regarding consent, three co-existing repertoires formed the discursive terrain. The first framed consent and coercion on the possibility of the non-consensual dissemination of sexting material. The second repertoire consisted of a *de jure/de facto* element; whilst consent could exist theoretically, the legislative part of sexting constitutes consent non-existent. In this repertoire, agency in terms of consent was recognised yet was resisted by employing the legislative framework. Finally, the third IR frames coercion as power imbalance and pressure. Whilst the sexting research on educators' perspectives is limited, similar results to the ones highlighted above, were found in a study by Barrense-Dias et al. (2019). Their study explored the definition of consent by teachers and parents. The results highlighted that pressure to sext and dissemination of images were included in their definition and understanding of sexting. Teachers considered sexting as inherently negative and aggressive. However, the present study approaches consent from a CDP scope, highlighting that the discursive terrain on consent is more complicated than just the rhetoric around dissemination as consent. My study further enhances our understanding of sexting as it showcases the three different-and contrasting- affordances regarding consent/coercion and how they constitute an ideological

dilemma. Thus, my study moves beyond definitional scopes of consent sexting and shows the complex ideological elements of the discursive terrain.

There are numerous implications regarding the complex discursive terrain of sexting consent. As sexting is a new phenomenon, and its consent is rarely discussed/ studied, negative or complex constructions of coercion/consent are expected. Moreover, the understanding of the gendered power imbalances is a novel territory, considering the limited cultural history of this subject. Yet, despite their complexity, these repertoires are not polarising; they all emphasise the potential dangers of sexting. These constructions and their implications were discussed earlier in 7.5.1 and 7.5.3.

However, potential implications of the legal constructions are noteworthy. Whilst legally sound, they also undermine adolescents' agency. More importantly, by adding coercive and consensual sexting in the same category, the negative psychological effects that adolescents experience when they are coerced are undermined. The victim is assigned a legal status that does not necessarily differentiate them from the perpetrator, and their negative experience gets disregarded. However, one should not be punished for being pressured. Miller (2007), when criticising the biopolitical constructions of the rape legislation, mentions "rape is a crime not because there is an absence of consent, but because sex is an assault on politically defined biological boundaries" (Miller, 2007, p. 114).

Likewise, sexting is constructed as a crime not due to the absence or presence of consent, but to its inherent illegality and institutional prohibition, regardless of the impact its distinction might have to adolescents. On the contrary, the construction of coercion as a power imbalance can be better due to its emphasis on adolescents' agency and the distinctions it creates in terms of dynamics. Moreover, it can acknowledge the harms which often result from being coerced into sexting.

When it came to the IR of teachers and parents as co-responsible, teachers positioned themselves as having a duty to discuss sexting with adolescents. This moral responsibility was also shared with parents. Parents and teachers were positioned as the pillars of the adolescent life, and thus one category should act when the other could not. This position is rather progressive and matches several academic suggestions in various fields that encourage teacher and parental awareness concerning sexting (Lemke & Rogers, 2020; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). In a study by Jørgensen et al. (2019), young people indicated that whilst teachers should not have access to information regarding an adolescent's personal life, teachers could be a substitute for non-supportive parents. Thus, it is a position that seems to match the adolescent's needs (Jorgensen et al., 2019). Perhaps the heavy emphasis on abstinence could be re-considered; instead, the focus should be on messages emphasising respect and consent. However, as mentioned earlier (section 7.6.) and in chapters 5 and 6, both parents and teachers often feel unequipped-thus sexting education is deemed necessary

When it comes to the IR of adolescents as naïve, similar results were suggested by pastoral care staff and stakeholder organisations who indicated that adolescents lack awareness (York et al., 2021). Adolescents are vulnerable, especially in an era widely exhibiting social media sexualisation (Van Ouytsel & Walrave, 2014). However, this repertoire clashes with the idea that adolescents are digital natives yet cannot understand sexting in general. Moreover, the view that coercive instances of sexting are a byproduct of naivety can be reductionist and does not reflect the context-sensitivity of sexting.

When it comes to the IR of sexting as a sign of times, it is challenging to tackle how morality and agency are materialised through media practices such as sexting. However, it has been established in this thesis that sexting is context sensitive. Despite adolescents' agency, the positions adolescents are often interpellated to occupy are subjective and reflect the societal discourses of agency and danger. Adolescents are essentially a byproduct of the

morality that adults and societal norms provide them (Bauwens & Mostmans, 2020). Van Ouytsel et al., (2014) also highlight that sexting is emerging in a context of overall sexualisation online, where relationships become commodified, and celebrity culture allows open sex-related conversations. As mentioned above, in this repertoire, sexting was constructed as a symptom/relationship mediated by media and pop culture. In his work, known as *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (2012) tackles the issues of class alienation, mass media and culture. More specifically, “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord, 2012, p.17). Moreover, Debord suggested that what used to be a lived experience is now a representation. Despite the conceptualisation of the spectacle a few decades before social media emerged, teachers seem to share similar concerns with Debord. Once again, this highlights how interrelated our discursive constructions are to the socio-political landscape.

To conclude, the repertoires in relation to sexting seem to emphasise its potential risks. Yet the repertoires available are characterised by ideological dilemmas as they are inherently conflicting. Often, the “appeal” that sexting presents for adolescents is recognised, despite being predominately resisted. The lack of repertoires that recognise sexting as something that can stem from adolescent sexual curiosity can have implications (which are discussed in Chapters 5 and 8).

What can be challenging are the positions available in relation to gender. The positions available to females are either this of the victim or being synergic to their victimisation and being defined through the male gaze. Moreover, the only position available for boys is sexting for power, whereas there are no positions available for non-cis heteronormative teens. Furthermore, the conflicting yet complementary repertoires in relation to consent highlight the need for more repertoires in relation to sexting coercion. This, combined with the repertoire of sexting education or sexting teacher training as insufficient,

and sexting as a sign of times, can produce a fruitful impact in terms of interventions and implementation of an evidenced-based sexting education.



## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

### **8.1. Introduction**

In this thesis I explored the discursive constructions around adolescent sexting, consent, coercion, and gender. I managed to gather and produce a significantly large dataset, by employing three different participant samples, consisting of key stakeholders. While exploring each group, I focused on three main research questions and accompanying sub-questions relating to gender and consent. In this concluding chapter, I discuss the summary of my findings.

Sexting is a complicated, context-sensitive topic, which justifies my analytic take. Due to its complexity, the topic can be approached by different analytical, epistemological and ontological interpretations. However, the context sensitivity of sexting justifies the exploration of the constructions of the three different key stakeholders. As evidenced by the previous empirical chapters, different constructions of gender and consent influence the discursive production of sexting. Moreover, as feminists often say, “the personal is political” (Hanish, 2000). By employing CDP, I connect the micro elements of the discursive terrain (personal) and the macro-level (political), which places the individual as both the producer and product of the discourse in the broader socio-political and cultural/historical context. I additionally managed to do so in three different key stakeholder groups which further highlights the different production and eventual construction/positioning of the producers of the discursive terrain. Thus, my research is helpful in a plethora of ways.

My thesis considers the competing discursive constructions of sexting/gendered dynamics of engagement with sexting both within each stakeholder group (adolescents, parents/carers/teachers) and across them. It allowed adolescents to tackle the issue of consent

in a way that has been conceptualised by them, rather than relying on scholar-imposed notions of consent (a point I have tackled in Chapter 2). Moreover, my research explores the meaning-making of understudied groups such as parents/carers and teachers. Their intervention is always suggested as a panacea to sexting issues, yet little is known about how they discursively construct and negotiate sexting and gender. Furthermore, I tackled issues related to the discursive construction of sexting consent and coercion; not only has this topic been severely understudied, but I provided varied perspectives from all stakeholder groups. Thus, my thesis can inform further understanding on how to ameliorate sexting discourses in education, psychology, and everyday life in relation to participant samples.

Moreover, my thesis highlights the points that need to be raised in our overall discursive constructions of consent and gender in relation to these groups. Finally, this thesis provides one of the few explorations of the discursive terrain in relation to sexting from a critical discursive perspective (Wetherell, 1998). Indeed, similarly to Wetherell (1998), I showcase the occasional and contextual plurality that characterises subject positions, and how accountability is often formed regarding power and agency. I approach sexting, gender and consent, as personal and ideological entities, abstaining from notions that any of these constructs are non-essentialist (Wetherell and Edley, 1999). I also showcase how the emerging ideology is not a fixed entity, but rather affected by the ever-changing socio-cultural context, creating, sustaining and reproducing dilemmas of such nature (Wetherell & Edley, 1999).

## **8.2. Summary of findings**

### ***8.2.1. Chapter 4, Study 1***

The first empirical chapter answered the question “How do adolescents construct sexting?”. This was achieved by tackling sub-questions regarding how gender impacts sexting behaviour and how adolescents justify, negotiate, and resist coercive sexting. This

chapter highlighted the ideologically dilemmatic nature of sexting constructions; adolescents framed it as both normative and negative. I then discussed the ideological dilemmas that sexting imposed concerning power and popularity. I explicated how adolescents framed both the decision to sext, or abstinence thereof, as potentially harmful to social status. This was then followed by the illustration of the gendered positions that opened; adolescents oriented to the reputational damage that sexting causes for girls and the reputational benefits for boys. Another position that adolescents opened was boys as vulnerable due to the societal misconceptions regarding males not being victims of coercion. Finally, non-heteronormative adolescents were positioned as vulnerable to humiliation by their peers due to homophobia in the peer group. I then discussed the interpretative repertoire of consent and coercion; consent was framed as affirmative and enthusiastic, whilst the absence of enthusiasm or active participation was framed as lack of consent. These constructions, however, were later juxtaposed to the ideological dilemmas that consent presented when it came to the negotiation and justification of the vignette scenarios.

The results further indicated that sexting terminology is a contested category; this could help grant insight into youth culture and potentially improve interventions/sexting education. This could be achieved by focusing on the meaning-making and terminology of adolescents and avoiding imposing adult constructions. The chapter evaluated the ideological dilemma of sexting being framed ambiguously, and the Foucauldian notions of the ideological dilemma of sexting as power are further discussed. I highlighted the need for adolescents to occupy positions based on self-determination. I proposed a sexting education programme that focuses on peer group insights instead of distanced, counterproductive rhetoric. Here, the findings echoed the transition of long-standing sexual scripts and cyberspace rape myths. For example, the responsibility attribution during the FGs framed the victim as responsible for not saying “no” in what was deemed an appropriate way/early

enough and the incident was constructed as a misunderstanding. Following such findings, I further evaluated the limitations of our current consent training and activism, such as the motto “yes means yes/no means no” which frame consent as the female’s responsibility and oversimplify such encounters’ complexities. Finally, I discussed how sexting education and discourse could be improved through elaborate context and culture-sensitive consent conversations that reflect the complexity of power and gender dynamics.

### **8.2.2. Chapter 5, Study 2**

The second empirical chapter (Chapter 5) explored how parents and carers frame and construct sexting and how incidents of sexting are contextualised, gender-wise. Parents constructed the IR of adolescents as immature, whereas adolescents were constructed as indifferent to sexting’s consequences. I then explicated the repertoire of maturity, power and agency, mapping the gendered constructions of immaturity in the dataset. Agency was problematised for all genders/sexualities besides non-heteronormative adolescents. Then, I discussed the positions parents/carers opened for girls and their often dilemmatic and negative framing. Moreover, the chapter showcased the position that opened for males, and argued that parents/carers positioned non-heteronormative individuals as sexually open.

The chapter mapped out the IR of sexting creating victims, whereas sexting was associated with revenge porn; it juxtaposed the positions that parents made available for adolescents in relation to this repertoire. More specifically, females were positioned as victims of sexting due to the patriarchy. Males were positioned as victims due to stereotype-induced, gender-specific challenges (e.g., males equalling coercive perpetrators). Finally, non-heteronormative adolescents were positioned as vulnerable to coercion/harassment. I discussed the ideological dilemmas that emerge from these positions, such as that in both binaries, sexual agency is invoked and problematised; solely LGBTQ and non-binary adolescents are painted as curious.

The chapter entails an evaluation of the available, existing positions. The positions available to girls challenge traditional notions of feminine passivity and signify gender trouble. When discussing the violence girls experience, the repeated suggestion that sexting victimisation affects boys, derails the conversation. Moreover, the position of men facing challenges when it comes to sexting forms a resistance to the stereotype that boys are inherently aggressive. However, parents/carers suggested that the current visibility/emphasis on female victimisation is what constitutes boys as sexting victims; I propose that the new constructions of masculinity portray males as victims of feminism. Finally, regarding non-binary and LGBTQ adolescents, I suggest that their historical visibility is a recent phenomenon, allowing them to afford a positive construction. I further highlight the need for new, more positive, and emancipatory positions.

### ***8.2.3. Chapter 6, Study 2***

In Chapter 6, I analysed the same dataset from Chapter 5 (Study 2). Yet, I focused on different questions and findings. While this chapter still explored how parents/carers frame and construct sexting, it focused on constructions of adolescent sexting, consent, and monitoring. First, I discussed how constructions of sexting consent constitute an ideological dilemma. Parents/carers framed consent as an oxymoron, which constituted consent as impossible to entirely give/obtain. I then highlighted the polarised repertoires in relation to monitoring; a significant number of parents/carers were critical of monitoring adolescents' sexting/devices, while other parents/carers constructed monitoring as a necessary parental duty. I then explicated the interpretative repertoire "Performing parenting". In this IR, monitoring practices were framed as a signifier of one's good/bad parenting.

The de-jure-de facto construction of consent that parents/carers formulated, derails the conversation from the coercive elements prior to the sexting exchange and emphasises non-consensual distribution instead. I further showcased how this reflects existing cultural

representations of sexting. Finally, I discussed antithetical positions available to parents/carers and the interpretative repertoire regarding performing parenting framing sexting as a reflection of one's parenting. Moreover, such constructions take away the focus from the adolescent and stigmatise parents/carers. The chapter comments how such findings form the foundation for creating interventions based on the current socio-political climate.

#### **8.2.4. Chapter 7, Study 3**

The fourth empirical chapter (Chapter 7) answered the question “how do educators of adolescents make sense, construct, manage and negotiate adolescent sexting?”. This chapter examined how teachers construct their role in relation to adolescent sexting, sexting education and monitoring practices and how incidents of sexting and consent are contextualised regarding gender. I presented the interpretative repertoire of sexting as a societal threat; sexting was constructed as a danger for adolescents because of non-consensual dissemination. I then highlighted the complex discursive terrain of sexting by discussing it as an ideological dilemma, where different constructions of sexting (positive, negative, normalised) co-existed.

In the gendered positions that teachers opened, males were positioned as dominant/capitalising socially from sexting and females as victims of sexting/facing pressures to be sexual. I presented and discussed girls being positioned as the attention-seeking other who sexted to impress male peers. This chapter introduces another position that opened for adolescents as naïvely incapable of comprehending sexting's consequences. Next, I explicated the positions parents and schools co-occupy, in which they are framed as co-responsible for sexting discussion or monitoring. I illustrated the antithetical nature of the interpretative repertoires concerning consent and evaluated their implications in the overall rhetorical construction of sexting. Moreover, the conflicting repertoires show a discursive terrain that successfully reflects the context-sensitivity of sexting. I then discussed the

implications of gendered positions and how they reflect contemporary notions of gender. The results further showcase the IR of inadequate sexting education, which highlights this sample's need for sexting education. Finally, I considered the practical implications of positions that teachers opened for themselves and parents.

### **8.3 Original contributions of the three stakeholder studies: comparisons, similarities and differences**

The findings of the three studies are characterised by similarities and differences, which can prove fruitful in research and practice. Some of the findings have idiosyncratic, population-specific character/nature (e.g. teachers' constructions regarding sexting education). However, research questions share some thematic pillars (e.g., sexting, consent, gender) that I will compare in this section.

Adolescents framed sexting as relatively normative despite recognising its negative consequences. However, adolescents additionally constructed sexting as an ideological, power/popularity-related dilemma. Sexting helps gaining social capital, and not participating in sexting stigmatises them as frigid. These repertoire of normalcy or power were not as present in the other groups.

Parents and carers, contrary to adolescents, employed the interpretative repertoire of sexting creating victims and associated it with revenge porn. This is a significant finding; parents are often positioned by both academics and media as the caregivers and protectors in relation to sexting. However, for parents to be able to guide or protect adolescents in coercive incidents, or even to initiate conversation in relation to consent, they need to be able to understand sexting. More specifically, to have open conversations with adolescents regarding sexting and consent, they need to understand adolescents' meaning-making. This could lead to a better engagement with adolescents in relation to such topics; whilst the nature of

sexting, consent and coercion can be challenging to acknowledge, it could result in fruitful, informative, and even protective conversations between parents/carers and adolescents.

Teachers' discursive constructions seem to be situated somewhere between parents and adolescents. Teachers formulated a negative repertoire related to sexting: the "sexting as a societal threat" repertoire due to the association of sexting with non-consensual dissemination. However, sexting was also framed as an ideological dilemma with good, bad, and "normal" constructions. Teachers, like adolescents, included constructions of sexting in a normalised way. Teachers additionally constructed sexting as an outcome of the increasing accessibility of technology this generation experiences. This construction echoes some of the discursive constructions adolescents employed in the IR regarding sexting being also normative, where they highlighted that such technological interactions are normal for their generation.

However, the positions that opened in relation to gender were significantly different amongst key stakeholders. Adolescents positioned girls as shamed for sexting due to the patriarchal double standards. In contrast, boys, for whom sexting was a form of social capital, were positioned as being praised. Moreover, adolescents constructed male sexters as vulnerable due to the possibility of being coerced in sexting but not believed due to stereotypes regarding hegemonic masculinity. Finally, they positioned LGBTQ adolescents as vulnerable; however, their sexting was framed as a form of exploration. Parents/carers employed the interpretative repertoire of "sexting creating victims". This IR presented similarities with the positions adolescents opened, as parents also positioned girls as victims of sexting due to patriarchy. Similarly to adolescents, parents positioned non-heteronormative adolescents as vulnerable due to their "otherness" and thus vulnerable to coercion/harassment. Finally, there is significant difference between adolescents and parents concerning framing positions of male vulnerability. For parents, this position was justified



due to the widely shared stereotype that boys are perpetrators of coercion; this resulted in a societal lack of awareness regarding the problems boys face and focus on the violence girls experience. For adolescents, however, this vulnerability was framed as the consequence of the stereotype that men cannot be coerced.

Moreover, parents opened another repertoire, which adolescents did not. In this IR, sexting is framed as an issue of maturity, power, and agency; however, numerous available positions are negative. According to parents, girls can only occupy two positions; the mean-girl position where girls sext to bully their peers and “insta-girls” who sext as a way to become popular. This differs from the positions that adolescents opened, as they positioned boys as the ones gaining social capital from sexting and being praised for such engagement. Moreover, the female positions parents constructed differ from those of adolescents, who positioned girls as the ones often shamed for sexting, losing social capital and being humiliated for engagement. Yet, similarly to the position adolescents opened, parents positioned boys as the initiators of sexting. Another similar construction can be noticed among parents and adolescents within the non-heteronormative positions; only LGBTQ sexting positions were framed positively, despite participants acknowledging they were othered. Non-heteronormative teens were constructed as sexually open and more curious by parents, while their sexting was framed as exploratory by adolescents.

Teachers seemed to navigate a discursive terrain similar to both adolescents and parents. Due to their work (which entails working with children) and adult status, they are simultaneously producers and products of parental and adolescent rhetoric. Initially, teachers positioned females as vulnerable and males as the perpetrators of sexting or those benefiting from it as social capital; both parents and adolescents opened similar positions. However, they opened another position for females; that of the attention-seeking other. Girls were

constructed as sexting to impress male peers, which perhaps echoes worries similar to the insta-girl position.

Whilst adolescents did not position themselves in relation to maturity, both parents and teachers opened such positions. More specifically, parents opened positions for adolescents in relation to maturity where sexting is a sign of immaturity, and mature adolescents abstain from it. Similarly, teachers positioned adolescents as naïve and unable to understand sexting's consequences. Moreover, the employment of the notion of pseudo-power and agency that parents employed in the IR "Maturity, power and agency" contrasts sexting as power capital repertoire of adolescents. However, the positions that both parents and adolescents often made available, highlight males as socially dominant in sexting. Nevertheless, parents constructed a sense of power/agency in the "mean girls" position, whilst adolescents highlighted girls as victims of double standards.

Parents constructed sexting consent as an ideological dilemma. They framed sexting consent as an oxymoron; the choice to send a picture was juxtaposed with the lack of control of said picture regarding distribution. Adolescents formed consent as affirmative and highlighted the importance of the dialogue prior to the exchange. However, perhaps due to the vignettes, adolescents incorporated some victim-blaming when negotiating coercion, which constituted their notion of consent as dilemmatic-albeit in a different way from parents.

Teachers, interestingly, formed three interpretative repertoires concerning consent. The first one seemed akin to the consent construction adolescents formulated; consent was constructed as a process prior to the exchange of sexts. Coercion was framed as a lack of affirmative consent, which teachers framed as power imbalances. The other IR teachers constructed was similar to the notion of consent parents employed, as consent was formulated

on the basis of non-consensual dissemination of pictures. Finally, teachers also formed a new repertoire of consent that the other two groups did not form. They formed a repertoire of consent through legal arguments by framing consent through a de jure/de facto distinction.

#### **8.4. Discussing and evaluating comparative findings**

The differences and similarities in the discursive terrain amongst the three key stakeholders (parents/carers, teachers and adolescents) constitute a novel finding. The similarities and differences provide us with insight of the context-sensitive meaning-making of these three key stakeholders. Parents and teachers are often interpellated in the discursive terrain as responsible of helping adolescents navigate issues around sexting/consent, yet to have “open” conversations, they need to understand how adolescents construct sexting. I have further discussed how each study relates to past literature in their respective chapters. However, as suggested in Chapter 2, parents and especially teachers, have been highly understudied groups, and thus insight to their similarities and differences is minimal.

The only study that I am currently aware of that offers a qualitative comparison of the perspective of the participants mentioned above has been conducted by Barrense-Dias et al. (2019). Barrense-Dias et al. (2019) emphasised definitional differences in sexting between parents, educators and adolescents and young adults. They explored the medium difference between written word and image and whether suggestive content was considered sexting or pornography. Finally, they highlighted that young people defined sexting as such only when it was respectful, whilst coercion and blackmail were not discussed as part of the definition.

However, the study above differs significantly to those outlined in the present thesis. Definitional issues constitute one minor aspect of sexting. In my thesis, however, I employ CDP and explore sexting in relation to consent/lack thereof which incorporates an exploration of gender and context-sensitive constructions. Barrense et al.’s (2019) study did

not explore parents and teachers separately. Instead, the constructions of parents and teachers are often grouped under the adult label. Moreover, in Barrense-Dias et al. (2019) adolescents are grouped with young adults. However, the present thesis provides us with an understanding of the co-construction between adolescents. It additionally provides us with an understanding of the co-construction between parents and carers as well as the individual discursive constructions of teachers. However, unlike the vast majority of past literature (Barrense-Dias et., 2017) that has merged consent and coercion, my thesis provided insight into how these terms are discursively constructed and how they contrast and apply to each group.

Finally, there are limited studies exploring parents and teachers, and the overall discursive literature is almost non-existent (for further comments, Chapter 2). Thus, this study contributes to research in terms of comparative findings; it has extended current understanding of sexting by providing insight into the similarities/differences of two under-researched groups. Moreover, this thesis tackles gender and gives insight into the similarities/differences of these groups' constructions. I have illustrated that the discursive constructions in relation to sexting, the dilemmas and the positions that open are different and often unique in each group, and I have provided detailed, critical insight into how they differ both on a macro and a micro-level.

A plethora of socio-cultural factors could underpin these differences in discursive constructions. A potential causal factor is the online world's nature, which is ephemeral and temporal; different applications and sites emerge and offer different affordances (Kofoed, 2017). Moreover, the use of internet/technology depends on generations; for example, Gen X uses technology less often than young people and for different reasons (Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2020). Thus, cyberspace and online intimacy or aggression are constantly

evolving in an accelerating pace with the technological landscape continually changing, which could explain the findings outlined above.

Moreover, the findings concerning gender and consent could also be explained through a socio-historical lens. Jen Gilbert (2018) refers to the socio-historical changes in consent activism/rhetoric as histories of consent. Equally, histories of consent are heavily influenced by feminism (Gillbert, 2018). Feminism historically is everchanging with different waves and understandings of gender (Harnois, 2008). As feminist activism is changing, so does consent activism which, during the past decade, is becoming more prevalent. For example, as Gillbert (2018) suggests sexting education changed from “no means no” to affirmative conceptualisations of consent during the past two decades; a change that reflects on the discursive terrain.

Moreover, these differences could be explained through the concept of monoglossia and heteroglossia as conceptualised by Bakhtin (2010). As Francis (2012) suggests, at the macro discursive domain there is “monoglossia”, a form of steadiness. However, at the micro discursive terrain there is incompletion, metamorphosis. Bakhtin (1981) suggested that discourse is not impartial and unbiased. It reproduces power structures, and is never fixed; it is rather characterised by resistance.

Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present ... These “languages” of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying “languages” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 291 as cited in Francis, 2012, p. 4).

## **8.5. The impact of the findings and future research**

The research excellence framework (REF) for qualitative research suggests rigour highlights the quality of qualitative research projects (Brooks et al., 2021). Part of what the BPS writing for the REF 2021 (Brooks et al., 2018) guide described as rigour is employing a sophisticated qualitative approach and justifying the analytical pillars of the study. While I have done so in Chapter 3, where I explain the nuanced and broader analytical elements that CDP combines, I will now discuss the novelty of my approach and overall research.

Part of the novelty of my thesis lies within the epistemological and ontological aspects of CDP, which has not been used before in sexting literature; therefore, this is the first study that uses CDP to explore sexting. CDP combines the daily and culturally available discourse (Wiggins, 2017). CDP explores the individual's interaction and discursive production within social, cultural, and historical settings (Locke & Budds, 2020). Thus, the methodology employed here is rigorous by its conception; historically CDP emerged due to the inability of other strands to either position interaction in a socio-historical context or due to their lack of empirical rigour (Wiggins, 2016).

Moreover, CDP is used to address issues such as gender and power. Thus, it aligns with sexting, which is strongly underpinned by both (as mentioned in the literature review and the thesis' findings). In the methodology chapter, as the REF (2018) required, I have showcased a clear engagement and knowledge of the approach. In my findings I do not simply employ comparisons of past research with my current findings; I further evidence the complexity of this thesis by adding political theory, feminist theory, and addressing consent and gender through historical notions. I will now highlight my contributions to knowledge and novelty of my findings per study.

For my first study, I recruited and analysed a substantive dataset. There have been critiques that sexting research must explore the meaning-making of adolescents and their rhetorical productions in relation to sexting; much of the literature entails academic understandings imposed on adolescents (Barrense Dias et al., 2017; Lucero et al., 2014). The present study manages to do so by employing focus groups that further discuss coercion and context-sensitive issues through vignettes. Moreover, Study 1 extends the understanding of sexting by providing a novel, in-depth analysis; perhaps the first that shows its dilemmatic nature as constructed by adolescents. My findings contribute to knowledge by highlighting the duality of how adolescents construct sexting as both normative and negative. My thesis also contributes to the overall sexting research; the finding that adolescents construct sexting as a dilemma in relation to popularity, status and power is novel and has not been approached through a Foucauldian scope.

Additionally, my research contributes to specific domains of sexting research; namely, gender and sexting. Most of the studies exploring sexting are quantitative, exploring prevalence in relation to gender (Martinez-Prather & Vandiver, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Such studies are useful in outlining key gendered differences in practice yet lack a nuanced understanding of how gender discourse unfolds in situ, how adolescents practice gender through sexting or how the practices associated with masculinity are performed/reproduced in everyday rhetoric. Moreover, they do not explore the power structures gender creates and how they are discursively reproduced (Wetherell & Edley, 1998). There have been some qualitative attempts to explore sexting in relation to gender (Ringrose et al., 2013; Ringrose et al., 2021; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015) which highlight gendered double standards such as the normalisation of boys pressuring for sexts and girls being harassed. However, such studies often explore, involve or study other practices besides sexting (e.g. posting).

Therefore, my study provides a contemporary conception of the topic at hand and contributes to the understanding of sexting by showcasing the positions that open in relation to gender, how they are discursively framed and reproduced and how they are formulated concerning consent or coercion. Similarly to the studies mentioned above, adolescents discursively constructed the power inequalities and double standards amongst males and females; they emphasised the praise boys experience and the humiliation girls face. Yet the opening of positions regarding vulnerability when it comes to male coercion and LGBTQ adolescents is a novel finding. This finding adds further to our current understanding of how discursive constructions of gender affect sexting and gender performativity.

Furthermore, my research addresses other significant research gaps in the field. When it comes to consent and coercion the few existing studies explore prevalence. However, survey data do not provide insight into the contextual nature of sexting coercion. The studies regarding gender and coercion have established a link of girls being coerced by boys but lack a more nuanced understanding (Englander, 2015; Kernsmith et al., 2018). Researchers have called for more in-depth data in such phenomena to explore the context that surveys fail to address, revealing the topic's nuances (Safdar et al., 2016). Simply put, this study contributes to knowledge by offering insight to the ideological terrain of consent and coercion in sexting. Therefore, my thesis is innovative as it is the first one that explores how consent and coercion are conceptualised, discursively constructed, and negotiated. My study further adds to the debate regarding the differentiation of consent and coercion that is an issue in academic literature (as mentioned in Chapter 2), whilst informing this debate from an adolescent scope. The finding that consent constitutes an ideological dilemma has not been tackled in the existing body of research. This finding is novel and can initiate new understandings of looking at sexting and consent through the prism of eliminating rape myths or focusing on the power dynamics prior to the exchange instead of non-consensual distribution. Moreover, my



study is the only existing study that shows how rape myths and sexual scripts transcend on discursive constructions of consent and how the context affects and reproduces adolescents' conflicting constructions.

At present, research on parents/carers and adolescent sexting is still at its infancy. Thus, this thesis contributes important findings in the overall understanding of how parents construct adolescent sexting; it sheds light on under-researched participant samples and approaches the topic with a ground-breaking critical discursive theoretical approach, offering a novel insight to the existing literature. Current research consists of cross-sectional studies exploring the relationship between parenting monitoring/mediation and adolescent engagement in sexting (Atwood et al, 2017; Wolfe et al., 2016). This thesis is the first study that further extends the quantitative research on monitoring/mediation and parenting. My findings are novel as they highlight the existence of two conflicting positions that emerged in relation to monitoring (the strict parent and the liberal parent)-something that has not been tackled before. Moreover, my thesis sheds light on a novel finding: I discovered that parents open a third position to occupy as the understanding, attentive parent in order to negotiate the conflicting discursive terrain and navigate the dilemmatic positions in relation to parenting and sexting monitoring.

As mentioned in the literature review, there have been limited, cross-sectional studies on gender and parenting. However, they focus on monitoring and thus do not provide further insight into how these gendered double standards are constructed and reproduced. There has been only one discursive analysis of parents' constructions of sexting and gender, suggesting that parents are worried about the male gaze, the gendered double standards and slut shaming; however, the sample consisted of only two parents (Charteris et al., 2018). Fix et al. (2021) attempted to explore similar issues through grounded theory and suggested that girls were also constructed as more sexually aggressive than boys.

Some of my findings indeed reflect these worries. However, this thesis constitutes the first comprehensive investigation of how parents/carers discursively construct gender in relation to sexting. Unlike previous studies, my findings move beyond simply exploring concerns in relation to female sexting. Firstly, the findings reported here do not simply tackle parents' gender-related constructions; they expand our current knowledge by shedding light on the nuanced available positions adolescents are positioned in. Secondly, such findings further capture the complexity and plurality of gendered constructions as they shed light on the ideologically dilemmatic nature of gender in sexting. They highlight how these positions change in relation to the speaker's intentions and what positions need to open for all genders/sexuality orientations. Finally, instead of simply discussing gender as a fixed societal resource, my research highlights the ever-changing discursive terrain that adolescents are interpellated to occupy and examines how these positions relate to wider, culturally available positions in relation to gender.

Furthermore, this project is the first comprehensive investigation of parents' constructions of consent. To my knowledge, there has been only one study on parents and sexting consent (Barrense-Dias et al., 2019) discussing definitional issues. One of their findings is that parents and teachers do not formulate coercion as sexting. My results contrast these findings; it should be noted that the Barrense-Dias et al. (2019) study merges the findings concerning parents and teachers and their parent sample consisted of 11 participants. This thesis employs a larger sample and provides insight into sexting consent and its discursive framing; it does not treat consent as a stable definition but as a perpetuating discursive construct.

Most importantly, my findings provide a new understanding of the complex and ideologically dilemmatic nature of consent and coercion. In addition, this study provides new insights on the discursive parental/carer construction of sexting consent by highlighting its

oxymoronic construction. Finally, there is no research on how the macro understandings on such phenomena construct the micro constructions of parents/carers, who, as seen above, seem to have different power and safety understandings from adolescents when it comes to technology. These findings reflect the existing cultural representations of consent in relation to sexting, which are centred around non-consensual distribution.

Finally, this study's results challenge the few overall findings on parents and sexting. For example, in Fix et al.'s study (2021), parents constructed sexting as normal behaviour, while other parents were concerned about its frequency. However, my research indicates that parents/carers formulate their constructions in relation to the negative consequences of sexting. Moreover, the finding of parents/carers constructing adolescents as immature and not caring about the consequences challenges past findings in which children are portrayed either as innocent, shocked by sexting or as the knowing child—both innocent and knowledgeable of their sexuality (Charteris et al., 2018). I found that parents/carers construct sexting on the basis of victimisation, and I shed light on how these positions change in relation to gender. The gendered positions are an advanced interpretation of the foundation laid by previous literature that has not been tackled before which shows the fluidity and ideological nature of discursive positions.

Furthermore, Chapter 7 is the first study that qualitatively explores teachers' constructions of sexting. Most current studies do not examine sexting and teachers per se. The few existing studies on teachers briefly classify and explore sexting quantitatively, as a co-category of problematic online/offline behaviours in educational contexts. As mentioned earlier, Barrense-Dias et al. (2019) explored teachers' definitions of sexting, but the findings merge teachers' definitions with parents. Thus, this project is the first qualitative, comprehensive investigation of teachers' construction of sexting and the discursive terrain; I

was able to provide ground-breaking findings due to the novelty of the topic and the under-representation of the sample in research.

For example, the finding that teachers formulate sexting as a societal threat whilst the other repertoire available entails positive, neutral, and negative constructions is a novel, complex theorisation of sexting. Prior to this thesis it was difficult to make claims about gendered discursive constructions of sexting by teachers. However, the findings indicate the dilemmatic nature that girls are interpellated to occupy: that of the victim or the attention seeking Other. Moreover, this is the first study whose empirical findings provide us with an understanding of consent and the polarised repertoires teachers employ in relation to it. Finally, this study is the only empirical investigation of how teachers construct sexting education. As a result, I provide further advances by finding that teachers construct sexting education and their own sexting training as insufficient. This finding can have significant theoretical and practical implications, a point I will elaborate below.

Finally, my thesis contributes to the literature by providing new, comparative insights. The similarities and differences concerning the discursive constructions of sexting, consent, and gender between these three key stakeholder groups constitute a novel finding. There has been only one study comparing and contrasting key stakeholders (which I elaborated on in section 8.4.) and it focuses on definitional issues. Thus, this is the in-depth insight on differences in the constructions of these groups. This thesis further expands knowledge by comparing and contrasting the positions that these three groups open in relation to gender and consent and the complex dilemmas sexting imposes and participants construct. Throughout this thesis, I connect the micro elements with the macro elements of these constructions. I showcase how each discursive terrain of each participant group has a socio-political context. I discuss the possible potential positions that should open in the future. Moreover, I justify and evaluate why these differences of consent and gender exist by placing them in a

cultural/historical context. As mentioned earlier, existing studies often offer advice regarding how parents and teachers should handle such incidents. By exploring and comparing the findings, similarities and differences amongst these samples, I can make claims about what is specific regarding such populations.

Future research should explore the topic through the employment of naturally occurring data, such as sexting education lectures and online fora. This would provide us with in situ datasets of how the discourse unfolds in other and often different contexts. Moreover, due to the evident power and gendered dynamics of sexting, employing a critical discursive psychology approach would be beneficial to explore further issues relating to sexting, race and class. Furthermore, parents and teachers have been highly under-researched and under-represented and thus both quantitative and qualitative research would highly contribute into the existing literature. More research is needed regarding sexting education; especially from a discursive perspective, to tackle the constructions mentioned in Chapter 2. Finally, further research regarding coercive sexting is needed, as well as their differentiation from other forms of online aggression; perhaps future research could attempt to explore, differentiate, define and create typologies of such phenomena.

## **8.6. Limitations**

Whilst the thesis has multiple strengths, it is also characterised by a number of limitations. Due to Covid-19, recruitment and data collection had to occur online, which might have excluded multiple participants, especially those who cannot afford an online presence or are not technologically proficient (Dolcini, 2021). Despite my critical feminist approach, I did not tackle issues relating to class and race, which could provide further insight in the construction of sexting and gender. The samples in all studies are predominately female; as a result there is less emphasis on the discursive productions and interactive elements in relation to gender. Moreover, study 1 has a relatively small sample as

it was particularly difficult to recruit adolescents despite my repeated attempts, as I faced severe time limitations due to the difficulties Covid 19 caused. Finally, study 1 included a number of mini focus groups, due to the difficulties that emerged regarding conducting bigger group interviews. As a result, it is possible that regular focus groups could have produced different data and constructions.

### **8.7. Reflecting on participants: limitation regarding ethnicity**

The present research focus is based in a white, UK and Western context. The justifications for that are based on two main pillars: one practical, one ideological. With the safeguarding and legislative context, it would be challenging to recruit outside of the UK. Tackling potential dangers associated with the topic would not be easy from abroad. Moreover, the potential differences in the legislative contexts would prove difficult to attend to.

The second one is my positionality, reflexivity and issues around ideology. I was sceptical regarding tackling race as I am a Western, white woman. Feminist scholars suggest that just positioning the researcher by highlighting their identities should be avoided; instead, one should create a narrative of how these identities influence their research related constructions (Davis, 2014). As Davis (2014) highlights, the dominant basis of whiteness is to not consider being white as a race. I do recognise that I am white. Yet my “whiteness” is not constructed as the typical European whiteness. In terms of ethnicity, I originate from a culture that has been stereotyped as the lazy, morally bankrupt Other to the European West, through orientalist notions, and as a result I understand the complexities of ethnicity too (Mylonas, 2018). Yet, ethnicity aside, in terms of race, I do hold several privileges. Therefore, I am also aware that often our experiences, geo-political influences and other contextual factors make us “unable” to see some nuances in the datasets. Such potential “blind spots” can create problematic power imbalances despite one’s good intentions (Davis,

2014). I was afraid that my interpretation of race and sexuality would end up being a problematic one, whilst I was also concerned regarding power imbalances, due to the pre-existing sensitivity of the topic. CDP offers the potential for the researcher to adopt a macro scope (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). I felt proficient addressing gender but I also felt that my whiteness could perhaps influence how I address intersectional issues.

As a result, I decided that participants should be the one to decide whether the issue of ethnicity and race should be interpellated in the discursive terrain. I was afraid that if I did it, it would constitute an ethically sensitive area. As a white woman I have significant privilege/power, and research on sensitive issues should present more benefits for those participating than risks. Therefore, potential socio-political aspects or contexts should be taken into consideration (Corbin & Morse, 2003; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). As the topic was already sensitive and its intersection with sexuality, gender and race could raise numerous issues. Finally, very few of my participants disclosed their ethnicity, and the majority of those who did were British and Greek. Yet I often wondered about race and felt that not tackling it was a betrayal to my ideological beliefs. However, I considered that it would be beneficial to tackle it in the future while working with co-authors whose expertise is decolonisation.

## **8.8. Reflexivity throughout the thesis**

### ***8.8.1. Reflecting on Study 1***

In many ways, the digital “nativity” of adolescents felt familiar. I belong to the first generation that had access to the internet from a young age, as I managed to get internet access and social media accounts when I was 13. The social media terrain was not the same as now, as access to the internet in Greece was quite new. As a result, the internet was an

uncharted territory which often presented dangers and challenges for young users. Teens nowadays are perhaps more proficient than I am, have more the extensive guidance and have access to the internet from their childhood. Yet the temporality of social media means adolescents face new challenges regularly due to the changing landscape; a feeling I sympathise with.

During my doctoral studies, I was often told my topic was sensitive. Tackling gendered inequalities was the point in my research during which I felt genuine discomfort. When adolescents discussed the gendered power imbalances online, I started comparing them with the discursive terrain my generation faced. Whilst a decade had passed, the gendered discursive terrain was similar to a decade ago. I felt hopeful when adolescents tackled gender norms, but I also caught myself feeling melancholic due to the lack of change; many of the issues raised by adolescents were also raised by my own generation and I was hoping that things would have improved.

I also felt discomfort when discussing adolescents' sexting agency. As a Marxist feminist I often felt that the idea of agency in an era of patriarchal spectacle was difficult to pinpoint. Yet, I often juxtaposed the idea of agency with incidents of coercive sexting and realised that whilst my discomfort was reasonable when de-contextualised, it was important to discuss agency in relation to context.

It is noteworthy that despite immigrating from a country that faces significant financial challenges, I am still a white western cisgender woman; perhaps the questions I asked would not be sufficient or the important things would remain unasked. As a result, I often did not tackle race and class (a topic I further elaborated on above, in section 8.7)



### ***8.8.2. Reflecting on Study 2***

I am currently not a parent. This perhaps affects my understanding of parental constructions of sexting. Much of what has influenced my analysis appears to be my feminist and post-structuralist understanding of discourse. Whilst I attempt to connect my findings with potential new discursive positions that can materialise, I realise that it is perhaps a form of outsider knowledge I am imposing. While conducting research and thinking about potential impact my thesis could have, I often thought that it is easy for me to potentially discuss new ideas about agency when I am not a parent; I do not have lived experience of the burdens of parenthood.

Yet, this juxtaposition of the binary of parent/nonparent, gave me a deep insight of sympathy, as I also found myself empathising with parents. Many of the parents I interviewed belong to a generation that did not grow up online, unlike Generation Z and younger Millennials. I, despite being a technologically proficient millennial, struggled with having these conversations and navigating the cyberspace. Therefore, I thought it would be way more challenging with the burden of responsibility as a parent and with perhaps less knowledge of how to navigate it.

### ***8.8.3. Reflecting on study 3***

Whilst I am not a teacher myself, I am a lecturer to young people and as a result I felt that I understood the teacher perspective up to a certain extent. I also related to the digital identity of this group; whilst having an awareness regarding the cyberspace, often due to the nature of their profession, they also find it challenging to navigate it. I am additionally a member of my institution's equality, diversity and inclusivity committee and as a result, I felt familiar with the stress of trying to implement institutional policies, education and agonising over the safety of students.

#### ***8.8.4. Reflecting on the comparative findings of the studies***

In many ways, I related to all my participant groups. Similarly to adolescents, I have been technologically proficient from a young age. Yet, I also sympathise with parents as I also consider the emerging technologies challenging and an uncharted territory to which adolescents are much more proficient than I am. I also seem to relate to teachers, not only due to my lecturer identity but also because I am positioning myself somewhere in between young people and parents in terms of familiarity with the internet. Moreover, my feminist approach has significantly influenced my knowledge production in relation to gender. My neo-Marxist political positioning seems to also influence my perspective on methodology (as seen in the methodology chapter).

#### **8.9. Implications for practice**

The findings and the similarities/differences that emerged in this thesis can provide fruitful insights into potential future endeavours both on a research-level and in non-academic settings. The findings discussed above highlight the positions that need to be challenged, such as those that reproduce and maintain ideas that sustain systemic oppression, in relation to gender, sexuality and emphasise only in the non-consensual distribution/potential consequences of sexting. Moreover, they suggest the new ones that need to be opened and the rhetoric and the dilemmas that need to be tackled. The potential new positions that could be opened should reproduce new constructions, related to social justice and tackle power struggles and gender roles.

Since sexting is context-sensitive, addressing such topics will always be a challenge, especially with the emergence of new technological means. One of the benefits of CDP is that it highlights how the individual discourses shape and are shaped by our collective understanding (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Thus, such constructions can be challenged by

attempts to change the collective and the individual discursive terrain. The findings of this thesis highlight that each participant group has different dilemmas to navigate, conflicting positions to open or occupy, and interpretative repertoires to reproduce and challenge. Thus, the present research can be used to inform policy and practice.

I have highlighted more detailed, context sensitive potential suggestions regarding sexting education and the subsequent discursive terrain in chapters 4,5,6,7. This study's findings and the rhetorical domain discrepancies suggest that sexting education programs need to be distinct, and the key stakeholders should be tackled separately. Much of the academic literature requires parents and teachers to address adolescent sexting. However, it is evident that these groups also need support, awareness training, and sexting education workshops. Further awareness regarding the challenges sexting consent and coercion pose is also deemed beneficial; the discursive terrain here, as in many media and education campaigns, is embellished with catastrophic messages regarding sexting leading to revenge porn. This awareness could be achieved through educational campaigns. Academics could pioneer the ideological hegemony of sexting and formulate new positions through media as their knowledge reflects some sort of expertise (Foucault, 1980). Therefore, they have rhetorical power and can inform public opinion which could constitute a challenge to the current sexting ideological hegemony. It should be highlighted that a finding stemming from this thesis is that for each group different repertoires regarding consent need to be tackled. For example, sexting education in relation to adolescents should tackle the persistence of rape myths in the cyberspace while parents should be made aware of coercion and power dynamics prior to the sexting exchange rather than non-consensual dissemination.

Moreover, the findings indicate that consent and image-based abuse trainings, interventions, awareness and policy need to discuss sexting in relation to not only its consequences, but also in relation to gender and power. It is clear that sexting can be context

sensitive, and participants heavily oriented to notions of gender and power. What was clear from the findings is that some of the older positions that exist for adolescents need to be replaced. New positions need to be opened in relation to gender; ideally, positions based on self-determination. Such positions can be further achieved by consent training, sexting education, academic science communication, and feminist activism. Finally, this thesis could inform policy understandings regarding sexting legislation or interventions related to coercive sexting

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## Appendices

### A. Study 1

#### A.1. Information sheet

### **Adolescents, sexting and consent; a discursive approach**

Thank you for agreeing to consider participating in this research project. Please take the time to read the information sheet carefully and discuss it with anyone you wish. If you have any questions and require any further information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me using the details below.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of sexting and how people your age (16-18) perceive it. I will be conducting semi-structured focus groups (group discussions), to understand how people your age describe sexting and their opinions on issues related to it such as use of threats or pressure to sext. By doing this I hope to gain an understanding of why people sext, and how gender influences sexting.

**It is important to highlight that the study will explore your opinions on sexting and NOT your personal experiences, stories or engagement in such activities.**

#### **Who is running the study?**

The study is being run by myself, Anastasia Rousaki and will form part of my doctoral thesis at Nottingham Trent University. My project supervisors are Dr Sarah Seymour Smith, Dr Mike Marriott, and Dr Rosie Kitson-Boyce (Please see their contact details below).

#### **Why have I been chosen to take part?**

You have been selected for the focus groups because you are between the age of 16 and 18, and I believe your opinions on sexting and gender will provide the researchers with vital insight.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

No, your participation in this research is entirely voluntary – you do not have to take part or need to explain why you do not want to be involved. If you do decide to take part, you only need to answer questions that you feel comfortable with; and you can leave the focus group should you feel uncomfortable during it.

#### **If I take part, can I withdraw later on?**

You can withdraw from the study up to two weeks after the focus group without any consequences or explanation. To let me know that you want to withdraw your contributions

from the focus groups, all you need to do is email me (Anastasia – see contact details below). All statements made by yourself during the focus group will be removed. The study is completely independent and does not influence school results or attitudes towards teachers, parents or students. Not participating, or withdrawing from the study, will have no academic or other consequences. If you decide not to take part, you will not be asked to provide any explanation. Your right to withdraw at any time is not affected by the receipt of the £10 Amazon Voucher. You will still receive the Amazon voucher in case you decide to withdraw from the study.

If you decide to take part, please read the information on this sheet. Once understood, please sign and complete a separate informed consent form.

### **What do I need to do?**

I would like you to take part in a focus group lasting approximately 1 hour through phone/online interviews (Skype, Microsoft Teams).

The focus group will be taking place throughout [insert dates]. The focus group will be carried out by me. I will ask for your permission to audio record the focus group to ensure the data you provide is accurately documented.

There will be three focus groups: a female one, a male one, and a mixed gender/gender non-binary one. Please feel free to choose the group you identify with in the consent form.

If you agree to take part, I will need the following to set up the focus group:

- . your email address
  
- . a signed consent form sent to me in any of the following ways (whichever is easiest for you):
  - a) printing and signing the consent form I send you, scanning it (on a printer), and sending it back to me.
  - b) If you do not have access to a printer/scanner/ any relevant equipment, you can give me your verbal consent. I will then need to verbally record your consent prior to the focus group as I will not have your signature.
  - c) printing and signing the consent forms and sending me a photo of the completed consent form by email attachment.

Finally, post focus group, you will receive the code for an Amazon voucher via email, as compensation for participating in the study.

### **What will happen to the information I provide in this study?**

The recording of the focus group will be transcribed (a written record of what is said) and analysed. This information will then be used in the conclusions of the research. Your contributions will form part of research publications, talks, and teaching.

All transcripts, audio data and contact information will be kept on the NTU Data Store, to ensure your data's security. The data will be destroyed in a secure manner ten years after my graduation from NTU, unless you consent to open access data publications (please see below).

If you consent to a phone/online interview format and we exchange emails regarding the consent forms, I will delete all your contact information after my graduation, or in case you decide to withdraw your data, I will delete them right away.

### **Open access**

**Psychology is moving towards open access. By 'open access' we mean its freely availability on the public internet, where ANY users can read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. They can also use them for any other legal purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers (other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself). In the consent form you can choose whether you are letting me use your data for open access publications.** This means that when the research gets published in scientific journals, transcripts of the study will be available for anyone having access to any articles on the topic published in open access journals. However, the researcher will exercise all possible care to keep your identity anonymous by assigning you pseudonyms (fake names) and will be removing any identifying features (e.g. places, names, school's location).

**Any audio recordings will be available through open access, however access will be restricted which means that only a few certified researchers relevant to the field will have access to that material.** Any identifying feature of said audio recordings will be removed to keep your identity anonymous.

### **How will the research team deal with confidentiality and protect my anonymity?**

All transcripts will be fully anonymized (you will be given a fake name) and will be kept in a secure location at all times. Any identifying features will be redacted from the audio recordings. Only I, my research supervisors and a few certified researchers will have access to these documents and recordings of the focus group. You will not be named or otherwise identified in any publication arising from this research, as pseudonyms will be used instead of names. I will exercise all possible care to ensure that your school will not be identifiable in the findings. However, direct quotes will be taken from the focus groups and will be used in the project report, publications, talks and for teaching purposes. While the quotes will be anonymized, I cannot guarantee complete confidentiality; yet it is extremely unlikely given the steps above that you will be recognised as all identifying features will be removed.

To avoid breaches of confidentiality, it is important that all participants commit to keeping the information confidential that is discussed in the focus group. Confidentiality is important to create a safe space where everyone can express themselves without the fear of being judged. By ensuring confidentiality, we ensure good, ethical practice and that everyone can express their opinion without fear. The information discussed might be of sensitive nature and disclosing anything said outside the focus groups might cause significant distress to

anyone participating. If you disagree to the above stipulation you should mention it to the researcher as you will be ineligible to participate in this study.

Regarding confidentiality and storage, all audio data will be deleted from the recorders as soon as the focus group is over. They will be stored onto NTU Data Store, which is a highly protected online storage space. This space is based on an NTU server, in line with General Data Protection Regulation guidelines

### **What happens to my contribution post the study?**

The data (the group discussion) will be deleted ten years after the researcher's graduation. If you consent to open access-the data will not be destroyed.

### **Are there potential risks/harm?**

Sexting is a topic of sexual nature that many people tend to find controversial. It is possible that during the session you might feel distress. If you feel any distress during the recording, you are encouraged to let the researcher know so it can be stopped and you will be given the opportunity to withdraw from the study. You will be provided with an information sheet including a number of organizations and help lines you can contact if this topic is causing you distress.

Sexting in people under the age of 18 is also raising legal issues and child protection issues under the Child Protection Act. It is important to note that disclosure of harm to yourself or others may lead to the researcher breaking confidentiality due to the need to inform the police. ANY personal disclosure about sharing an image/video (even of yourself) will need to be reported. If you disclose any of these behaviours the researcher is legally obligated to stop recording and report any incidents to the police.

If you wish to complain about the way that you have been approached or treated during this study please contact Dr Sarah Seymour Smith, my supervisor. Her details are included at the end of this sheet.

### **What will happen with the results of the research?**

The results will be used for my doctoral thesis. Moreover, data may be used for scientific publications in journals. Finally, they might be presented in conferences or in lectures.

### **What are the potential benefits?**

I hope you will find the research interesting. Moreover, I hope you will feel satisfaction by shedding light in a very under-studied research topic. Finally, you will receive a £10 Amazon Voucher for participating in the study.

### **How can I find out more about this project and its results?**

For more information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can send you an electronic copy of the report, upon request, once the research is completed.

### **Who is funding this study?**

The Amazon vouchers for this study are funded by the Social Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society, under their Pump-Priming and Dissemination Fund.

### **Has the study been reviewed by anyone?**

The research has been approved by the University's Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. It has been designed with reference to the British Psychological Society's code of ethics.

### **Contacts and further information**

Please feel free to contact me or my research supervisors:

Anastasia Rousaki: anastasia.rousaki2018@my.ntu.ac.uk

**Dr Sarah Seymour Smith:** sarah.seymoursmith@ntu.ac.uk

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If you are unsure about any part of the process, please contact me to discuss it further before the focus group.

## **Study 1**

### **A.2. Consent form**

### **Adolescents, sexting and consent; a discursive approach**

I have read the Participant Information Sheet.

I understand what my role will be in this research.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I agree to be audio recorded

I understand that I am able to stop participating in the focus group at any point and

I am still entitled to the study re-imburement

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research up to 2 weeks after the focus group without needing to provide a reason.

I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information

I provide will be safeguarded.

I agree that my anonymised contributions can be used:

in research papers

talks/ conferences

teaching purposes

Data Protection: I agree to the University processing personal data that I have supplied such as name and gender. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me.

I have asked questions if needed.

I understand that I can contact the investigator at any time with queries or concerns.



I have the right to withdraw my data at any point during or after the interview up until the deadline date.

I understand that all materials will be destroyed after a 10 year period.

I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Please indicate which focus group you want to be in:

Female

Male

Mixed gender/gender non binary

**Focus group confidentiality**

Please be advised that although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

**Non-Disclosure Statement:**

I agree to maintain the confidentiality of the information discussed by all participants and the researchers during the focus group session.

If you cannot agree to the above stipulation please see the researcher as you will be ineligible to participate in this study.

If any disclosure of harm to myself emerges, including descriptions of personal experiences of sharing sexual or naked images of myself or others whilst under the age of 18, I understand that the researcher will stop the data collection, contact members of the school staff, their supervisory team and if the risk is urgent, the researcher will contact the police. Moreover, the researcher will share their concerns with a Child Protection Office nominated by the University.

I commit to not disclose personal involvement in illegal activities.

Name of participant

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

Name of researcher

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

**Open access and confidentiality**

The information/video/audio material will be used in scientific publications

- (1) My name will not be published and the researcher will endeavour to ensure that I cannot be identified from the provided information, other than in relation to identifiable material (such as direct quotes) for which I give consent.
- (2) However, I also understand that there is a low possibility that I may be identified from the transcripts.
- (3) If the publication or product is published on an open access basis, I understand that it may be accessed freely throughout the world

I agree to open access

.Name of participant

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

Name of researcher

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

### **A.3. Focus group schedule (including vignettes and spiels)**

#### **Study 1 Spiel**

Hello. My name is Anastasia Rousaki and I am a PhD student at Nottingham Trent University. As part of my doctoral studies, I am conducting a study on adolescent sexting and consent, and I am recruiting participants. It will be a very simple process: in this group I will be presenting two sexting related scenarios, in the form of short stories, and those who are participating will engage in group discussions. In these discussions, they will be able to freely express their opinions on these incidents and issues around them. Afterwards, I will ask the group members questions regarding their overall thoughts on sexting, through questions such as ‘why do adolescents sext’. Please bear in mind that this study is about your perceptions of sexting. It is NOT about your own experiences, so please do not disclose your sexting involvement or incidents that you've engaged in it. Your contribution is important as researchers in the field of psychology do not know much about the topic of sexting. I believe that participating in the study will be a fun experience and you will make a contribution to the field of psychology. I will exercise all possible care to keep your views anonymous and the information you provide protected. Participation in the study is absolutely voluntary and you can withdraw should you feel uncomfortable during it. Please feel free to ask me any questions.

#### ***Sexting***

A term that is often used is the word ‘sexting’. What does this word mean to you? How do you call it? In what forms does it take place? Is it images, videos or texts?

When people sext, is it frequent? In what context?

Why do you think people your age sext each other?

What are the possible consequences of sexting?

Prompt: what about positive?

#### ***The person involved in sexting***

As you probably know, sharing sexual images, videos or even sexual texts of people under the age of 18, even yours, is considered illegal. What do you think about that? Prompt: Does that aspect change people’s decisions to sext?

#### **Vignette no 1**

Nick and Tom are friends who text regularly. Nick suspects that he might be attracted to people of the same sex. However, as he is still unsure about it, he hasn’t shared any of his thoughts regarding his sexuality with his friends, who believe that he is attracted to women. Nick and Tom text quite often in a friendly manner, having various casual conversations. One

day, the content of the messages starts becoming more sexual. As the texting escalates, they engage in sexting through texts, with explicit descriptions of sexual acts but without sending any images or videos. Tom willingly reciprocates. A few days after the sexting incidents, Tom starts discussing the incident with his friend Mary, requesting her perspective. Mary starts disclosing the incident to multiple common friends, saying that Nick and Tom sexted and adds elaborate descriptions of what was said. Soon enough the incidents spreads as a rumour to the entire school.

### ***Intimacy/ construction of relationship***

Why do you think Nick and Tom engaged in sexting?

What does sexting mean for Nick and Tom?

How do you think that their existing friendship makes a difference to the texting interaction?

Do you think this incident will affect the friendship between Nick and Tom?

Prompt: if so, how?

What feelings do you think Nick and Tom will have about this incident?

If either Nick or Tom had refused to engage in sexting, how do you think that would have affected their friendship?

Would the scenario be different if instead of sending just texts they exchanged pictures or videos?

### **Consent**

What would you define as lack of consent in sexting? How does an individual show that they do not consent in sexting?

Do you think this encounter should be considered as consensual? Why?

How do you think the rumour affects Nick? How does it affect Tom?

Why do you think Mary spread the rumour about the incident? How do you think she should have acted?

### **Sexuality/gender**

How do you think sexuality comes into play? Would things escalate differently or similarly if they were female/male/gender non-binary or trans? Prompt: If so, how?

Would the scenario be different if they were a boy and a girl, two girls, gender non binary or trans?

If they were girls/gender non-binary/trans, do you think they would be affected differently by the rumour?

### **Vignette 2**

John and Stella have been dating for awhile. Early on in the relationship, John starts sending photos of his abs to Stella. Stella does not know how to react, so she responds with a positive comment regarding his physique. John suggests that she should send photos to him of her body too. Stella says she doesn't really feel like it, and the thought of sending these photos stresses her, to which John responds by repeating she is beautiful and she doesn't need to worry. Later on in the relationship, John starts sending very sexual photos of himself. Stella suggests she feels uncomfortable, as she doesn't know how to respond. John suggests that a

lot of people do it and it is a normal process for couples. Stella denies, but as time passes by John repeatedly insists she sends him photos. As Stella keeps denying or avoiding the subject, he subtly implies that they might break up if she doesn't. Stella decides to do it, despite having second thoughts. However, after an argument, John shares her photos with their classmates.

### **Intimacy/ relationship construction questions**

Why do you think John requested these photos? Why did Stella send them?

How do you think these sexting incidents affect their relationship?

Does the type of relationship you have with somebody (e.g. friend, or someone you are dating) have an effect on how you feel when someone receives a sext that is not expected? If so, how?

### **Consent/coercion**

Before we talk a bit more about John and Stella, how does an individual show that they are consenting in engaging in sexting?

Can you tell me your thoughts on John sending his photos when Stella did not request them?

Do you think Stella should resist sending photos? If so, how?

Do you think this encounter was consensual or forced? If so, why?

To me it sounds like John was implying that if Stella did not send the photos then he might break up with her. What are your thoughts on his behaviour? Prompt: is this normal/typical? Is it bad?

How do you think John and Stella showed either willingness or unwillingness to engage in sexting?

How do you think Stella should act when John requested photos? How do you think John should act when Stella was hesitant?

### **Gender**

Who tends to initiate sexting?

What role does gender play in the meaning of sexting?

Does reputation get affected by sexting in relation to gender?

If it was the other way round and Stella pressured John, how do you think the scenario would unfold?

How do you think leaked sexts affect Stella afterwards? How do you think John felt about the sexts he forwarded?

If Stella forwarded John's photos, what consequences would they both face?

### **Comparing vignettes**

Do you think the two stories have any similarities or differences in the consequences of sexting? Why?

Do the two stories have any similarities in differences when it comes to coercion or consent? Why?

Do you think there are any similarities or differences in the consequences of the leaked sext between Stella and Nick?

#### **A.4. Debriefing**

##### **Adolescents, sexting and consent; a discursive approach**

Thank you for your participation!

Through this study I aimed to understand how adolescents make sense of sexting. I was interested in the role of sexting in friendships and relationships. Moreover, I was interested in how gender impacts on sexting perceptions, and how you perceive cases of sexting resulting from the use of force, pressure or threats.

For this study, we used focus groups, which can be described as group conversations about specific topics. We employed same sex groups, as well as mixed. This will help us understand the role of gender in sexting and the conversations arising, thus providing us with more in depth, detailed data. Moreover, the interactions when people discuss sexting helps us understand their views on it.

As mentioned in the information sheet, the data you provided can be described as sensitive. Therefore, the following steps will be taken to mask your identity; all the audio recording data will be deleted from the devices in which they will be recorded in as soon as they are obtained, and will be kept stored safely in the NTU Data Store, which is highly protected. To maintain your anonymity, in the transcripts your names will be replaced by pseudonyms, and any potential identifying features such will be deleted. Any identifying audio features in the audio recordings will be removed. The data will be deleted ten years after the researcher's graduation (unless you consent to open access, in which case the data will not be destroyed).

Maintaining confidentiality amongst the members of the focus group is of crucial nature. Please do not disclose any details which may be used to identify participants with anyone who did not participate. It is important that the group discussion is a safe space for everyone to disclose their opinions.

Below you will find some links and contact information to organizations related to sexting, online aggression, mental health or sexual violence. In case you feel upset/concerned/frustrated or just want to speak about sexting, you are encouraged to contact them.

For further information, follow up questions, if you want to withdraw your data, or for any other enquiries, you can contact me

**Anastasia Rousaki:** [anastasia.rousaki2018@my.ntu.ac.uk](mailto:anastasia.rousaki2018@my.ntu.ac.uk)

If you have any concerns about the study, or the way it was conducted you should contact my supervisory team.

**Dr Sarah Seymour Smith:** sarah.seymoursmith@ntu.ac.uk

**Phone:** +44 (0)115 848 2456

**Dr Rosie Kitson-Boyce:** rosie.kitsonboyce@ntu.ac.uk

**Phone:** +44 115 84 84653

**Dr Mike Marriott:** mike.marriott@ntu.ac.uk

**Phone:** +44 (0)115 848 2186

**Contact information in case of distress**

If you feel that you want to end your life, please seek immediate help from the emergency services on 999. If you are being abused you can contact ChildLine on 0800 1111.

**Samaritans**

[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

Helpline 116 123

<https://www.samaritans.org/>

Samaritans is a unique charity dedicated to reducing feelings of isolation and disconnection that can lead to suicide.

**National bullying helpline**

[admin@nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk](mailto:admin@nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk)

Phone number 0845 22 55 787

<https://www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk>

The national bullying helpline have a free confidential helpline and information covering all forms of bullying.

## **B.Study 2**

### **B.1. Information sheet (for parents/carers)**

#### **Adolescents, sexting and consent; a discursive approach**

Thank you for agreeing to consider participating in this research project. Please take the time to read the information sheet carefully and discuss it with anyone you wish. If you have any questions and require any further information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me using the details below.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of this study is to explore parental perceptions of adolescent sexting, how parents and carers view their role in monitoring adolescents' sexting engagement, and their understanding of such incidents in relation to gender. I will be conducting interviews with two adults together, who share a significant proportion of the parenting responsibilities for at least one adolescent child (this may often be the child's two parents, but we want to hear from any other possible pairings that you see as appropriate, including step-parents of any gender, extended family, and close friends). By doing this I hope to gain an understanding of the parents'/carers' opinions, the way sexting is perceived and the dynamics during the interaction of the parents, especially in relation to gender.

It is important to highlight that the study will explore your opinions on sexting and NOT your personal or your childrens' experiences, stories or engagement in such activities.

#### **Who is running the study?**

The study is being run by myself, Anastasia Rousaki and will form part of my doctoral thesis at Nottingham Trent University. My project supervisors are Dr Sarah Seymour Smith, Dr Mike Marriott, and Dr Rosie Kitson-Boyce (please see the contact details below).

#### **Why have I been chosen to take part?**

You have been selected for interviewing as I believe your opinions on sexting and gender are useful and will provide the field with vital insight on how parents understand it and their role in monitoring it.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

No, your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part. You do not need to explain why if you do not want to be involved. If you do decide to take part, you only need to answer questions that you feel comfortable with; and you can leave the interview should you feel uncomfortable during it.

#### **If I take part, can I withdraw later on?**



You can withdraw from the study up to two weeks after the interview without any consequences or explanation. To let me know that you want to withdraw your contributions from the interview, all you need to do is email me (Anastasia – see contact details below). All statements made by yourself during the interview will be removed. Moreover, if the individual you are being interviewed with decides to withdraw their data, yours will be removed too. The study is completely independent and does not influence school results or attitudes towards teachers, parents or students. If you decide not to take part, you will not be asked to provide any explanation. If you decide to take part, please read the information on this sheet. Once understood, please sign and complete a separate informed consent form.

### **What do I need to do?**

I would like you to attend a joint interview with the other adult who shares the next most significant part of the responsibility for raising your adolescent child. I would like you to respond to questions, and tell me your perceptions on sexting-related issues.

The joint interviews will be taking place at a time convenient to you both. The interviews will be conducted by me. They will take place at NTU. Alternatively, if you cannot travel, we can consider phone interviews, Skype interviews or I could interview you in your own space. I will ask for your permission to audio record the interview with a voice recorder to ensure the data you provide is accurately documented. **Please note that in case you prefer Skype interviews I will NOT video record you.**

**If you consent to the Skype/Phone interview format, you will have to provide me with your email address, print and sign the consent form I send you, and then scan it and send it back to me. If you do not have access to a printer, a further option will be to email me the completed form back before the interview and explicitly say that you consent to take part in the research (your consent can additionally be verbally recorded at the start of the interview). Alternatively, if you have a printer but not a scanner, you can print and sign the consent forms and send me photos of the completed consent forms.**

### **What will happen to the information I provide in this study?**

The recording of the interview will be transcribed (a written record of what is said) and analysed. This information will then be used in the conclusions of the research. Your contributions will form part of research publications, talks, and teaching.

All transcripts and audio recordings will be kept on the NTU Data Store, to ensure your data's security. The data will be destroyed in a secure manner ten years after my graduation from NTU, unless you consent to open access data publications (please see below). If you consent to a phone/Skype interview format and we exchange emails regarding the consent forms, I will delete all your contact information after my graduation, or in case you decide to withdraw your data, I will delete them right away.

### **Open access option**

**Psychology is moving towards open access. By 'open access' we mean its free availability on the public internet, where ANY users can read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. They can also use them for any other legal purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers (other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself). In the consent form you can choose whether you are letting me use your data for open access publications.** This means that when the research gets published in scientific journals, transcripts of the study will be available for anyone having access to any articles on the topic published in open access journals. **Only the transcripts will be available through open access, whilst the recordings will be classified as restricted access, which means only certified researchers might be able to access them.** However, the researcher will exercise all possible care to keep your identity anonymous by redacting any identifying features from the recordings and transcripts (e.g. names, places, school's location) and by assigning you pseudonyms.

### **How will the research team deal with confidentiality and protect my anonymity?**

Due to the method of data analysis, direct quotes will be taken from the interviews and used in my project report. Whilst these quotes will be anonymised, there is a minimal chance that you could be identified. However, all transcripts will be fully anonymised and will be kept in a secure location at all times. Only myself and my research supervisors will have access to these documents and recordings of interviews. You will not be named or otherwise identified in any publication arising from this research, as pseudonyms will be used instead of names. The location of the research will also be anonymised. I will exercise all possible care to ensure that your childrens' school will not be identifiable in the write-up of findings.

To avoid breaches of confidentiality, it is important that all participants commit to keeping the information confidential. By ensuring confidentiality, we ensure good, ethical practice and that everyone can express their opinion without fear. The information discussed might be of sensitive nature, and disclosing anything said outside the interviews might cause significant distress to anyone participating. If you disagree to the above stipulation you should mention it to the researcher as you will be ineligible to participate in this study.

Regarding confidentiality and storage, all audio data will be deleted from the recorders as soon as the interviews are over, and stored onto NTU Data Store, which is a highly protected online storage space, based on an NTU server, in line with General Data Protection regulation guidelines.

### **What happens to my contribution post the study?**

The data (the recordings of your interview) will be deleted ten years after the researcher's graduation. In case you consent to open access, the data will not be destroyed.

### **Are there potential risks/harm?**

Sexting is a topic of sexual nature that many people tend to find controversial. It is possible that during the interview you might feel some distress. If that is the case, you are encouraged to let the researcher know so it can be stopped and you will be given the opportunity to withdraw from the study. In addition, you will be provided with an information sheet

including a number of organizations and help lines you can contact if this topic is causing you distress.

Sexting in people under 18 is also raising legal issues and child protection issues under the Child Protection Act. It is important to note that disclosure of harm to your children or others may lead to the researcher breaking confidentiality due to the need to inform the police. ANY personal disclosure about your children sharing an image/video will need to be reported. If you disclose any of these behaviours, the researcher is legally obligated to stop recording and report any incidents to the police.

If any child protection issues emerge the researcher is legally bound to contact the local authorities. Moreover, the researcher will share their concerns with a Child Protection Officer nominated by the NTU.

If you wish to complain about the way that you have been approached or treated during this study please contact Dr Sarah Seymour Smith, my supervisor. Her details are included at the end of this sheet.

### **What will happen with the results of the research?**

The results will be used for my doctoral thesis. Moreover, data may be used for scientific publications in journals. Finally, they might be presented in conferences or in lectures.

### **What are the potential benefits and how can I find out more about this project?**

I hope you will find the research interesting. You will contribute to evidence based research on the topic and an applied aspect of providing adolescents with advice regarding their cyber-safety. For more information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can send you an electronic copy of the report, upon request, once the research is completed.

### **Has the study been reviewed by anyone?**

The research has been approved by the University's Business, Law and Social Sciences College Research Ethics Committee. It has been designed with reference to the British Psychological Society's code of ethics.

### **Contacts and further information**

Please feel free to contact me or my research supervisors:

Anastasia Rousaki: [anastasia.rousaki2018@my.ntu.ac.uk](mailto:anastasia.rousaki2018@my.ntu.ac.uk)

**Dr Sarah Seymour Smith:** [sarah.seymour-smith@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.seymour-smith@ntu.ac.uk)

**Phone:** +44 (0)115 848 2456

**Dr Rosie Kitson-Boyce:** [rosie.kitsonboyce@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:rosie.kitsonboyce@ntu.ac.uk)

**Phone:** +44 115 84 84653

**Dr Mike Marriott:** mike.marriott@ntu.ac.uk

**Phone:** +44 (0)115 848 2186

School of Social Sciences

Nottingham Trent University

50 Shakespeare Street

Nottingham

NG1 4FQ

If you are unsure about any part of the process, please contact me to discuss it further before the interview.

## **Study 2**

### **B.2. Consent form**

#### **Adolescents, sexting and consent; a discursive approach**

I have read the Participant Information Sheet.

I understand what my role will be in this research.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I agree to be audio recorded, and NOT video recorded

I understand that I am able to stop participating in the joint interview at any point.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research up to 2 weeks after the joint interview without needing to provide a reason.

I have been informed that the confidentiality of the

information I provide will be safeguarded.

I agree that my anonymised contributions can be used:

in research papers

talks/ conferences

teaching purposes

Data Protection: I agree to the University processing personal data that I have supplied such as name and gender. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with

the Research Project as outlined to me.

I have asked questions if needed.

I understand that I can contact the investigator at any time with queries or concerns.

I have the right to withdraw my data at any point during or after the interview up until the deadline date.

I understand that all materials will be destroyed after a 10 year period unless I agree to open access.

I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

If any disclosure of harm to myself or others emerges (including descriptions of personal experiences of my children or other individuals under the age of 18 sharing sexual or naked images, such as 'I discovered my child is sexting'), I understand that the researcher will stop the data collection, contact their supervisory team and if the risk is urgent, the researcher will contact the police. Moreover, the researcher will share their concerns with a Child Protection Office nominated by the University.

I agree to maintain the confidentiality of the information discussed by all participants and the researchers during the joint interviews.

If you cannot agree to the above stipulation please see the researcher as you will be ineligible to participate in this study.

If any disclosure of harm to people under the age of 18 emerges, including descriptions of personal experiences of sharing sexual or naked images of my child or others whilst under the age of 18, I understand that the researcher will stop the data collection, contact members of the school staff, their supervisory team and if the risk is urgent, the researcher will contact the police. Moreover, the researcher will share their concerns with a Child Protection Office nominated by the University.

Name of participant

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

Name of researcher

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

**Open access and confidentiality**

The information/ audio material will be used in scientific publications

- (1) My name will not be published and the researcher will endeavour to ensure that I cannot be identified from the provided information, other than in relation to identifiable material (such as direct quotes) for which I give consent.
- (2) However, I also understand that there is a low possibility that I may be identified from the transcripts.
- (3) If the publication or product is published on an open access basis, I understand that it may be accessed freely throughout the world

I agree to open access

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

Name of researcher

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

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### **B.3. Interview schedule (including spiels)**

## **Study 2: interview schedule (including spiels)**

### **Study 2 Spiel**

Hello. My name is Anastasia Rousaki and I am a PhD student at Nottingham Trent University.

As part of my doctoral studies, I am conducting a study on adolescent sexting and parental perceptions on it.

I will ask you questions regarding your overall thoughts on adolescent sexting, such as ‘why do adolescents sext’. I will also ask you questions regarding how parents and carers view their role in monitoring adolescents’ sexting engagement. Please bear in mind that this study is about your perception of adolescent sexting and it’s NOT about your own children’s experiences, so please do not disclose their involvement in such activities.

Your contribution is important, as researchers in the field of psychology do not know much about parental perceptions of it. I believe it will be a fun and novel experience. Your contributions will improve our current knowledge of issues around sexting in the field of psychology. I will exercise all possible care to keep your views anonymous and the information you provide protected. Participation in the study is absolutely voluntary and you can withdraw should you feel uncomfortable during it. Please feel free to ask me any questions.

### **Framing sexting**

What does the term sexting mean to you?

How prevalent do you think sexting is? When do adolescents sext?

Prompt: is it often? Relationships? Dating?

Why some adolescents engage in sexting while others don’t?

(Prompt: popularity, pleasure, bullying)

How do you feel about adolescents getting involved in sexting?

Prompt: (is it good, bad, why?)

What do you think are the positive or negative outcomes of sexting for adolescents?

## **Consent**

When we talk about sex, we refer to consent. How do you think this notion applies to sexting?

(Prompts: in what they differ?)

Sharing sexually suggestive images or videos is illegal for under 18s in the UK. What do you think young people feel about this?

Prompt: are they aware of legal repercussions?

Since sexting is illegal for under 18s in the UK, if an adolescent have their sexts forwarded they might not report it to the police in fear of being prosecuted. What are your thoughts on this? How do you think adolescents should act?

## **Safety/monitoring**

Do you think conversations should take place with adolescents regarding sexting? If so, what should they entail?

What role do parents/carers have in terms of responsibility for their adolescents sexting activities?

Prompt: what about schools?

What resources parents have regarding sexting? Who can they ask for help/advice?

Prompts: can they go to the police, school, any specific organizations?

Adolescents sext despite being aware of the dangers. In such cases, how can a parent ensure their safety? Should adolescents be given any strategies to help them avoid risky situations?

Prompt: Do you think restrictions or monitoring should take place, or should they be less involved? Why?

What actions should a parent take after they notice an incident of coercive sexting?

## **Gender**

Thinking about gender, do you feel that sexting is different for boys/girls/gender non binary?

Prompt: Are the consequences different for them?

Of boys/girls/gender non-binary, who might feel more pressured to comply with a request for sexually explicit pictures?



Prompts: How well do you think adolescents are equipped to deal with resisting sexting?  
How might this differ for boys/girls?

Do you think that there are either differences or similarities in relation to sexuality on how heterosexual and LGBTQ individuals sext?

Do you think that an adolescent's gender should or would make a difference to parental restrictions?

#### **B.4. Debriefing form**

##### **Adolescents, sexting and consent; a discursive approach**

Thank you for your participation!

Through this study I aim to understand how parents/carers of adolescents make sense of sexting. I was particularly interested in how you, with your parenting responsibilities, engage with issues related to adolescent sexting and safety regarding protection from sexting. Finally, I was interested in how parents/carers perceive sexting incidents in relation to gender and how this affects your interaction when speaking about such issues.

Interviewing you helps me understand the dynamics gender produces in sexting and parenting, and the conversations arising, thus providing us with more in- depth understanding of the topic to inform policy, initiate a dialogue amongst researchers on the topic and hopefully contribute to the currently limited knowledge regarding parental understanding of the phenomenon.

As mentioned in the information sheet, the data you provided can be described as sensitive. Therefore, the following steps will be taken to mask your identity; all the audio recording data will be deleted from the devices in which they will be recorded in as soon as they are obtained, and will be kept stored safely in the NTU Data Store, which is highly protected from cyber-attacks, viruses or the possibility of data being leaked. To maintain your anonymity, in the transcripts your names will be replaced by pseudonyms, and any potential identifying features will be removed. When it comes to the recordings, any identifying details in the audio recordings will be removed. The data will be deleted ten years after the researcher's graduation (unless you consent to open access, in which case the data will not be destroyed). In case of Skype or phone interviews I will delete all your contact information after my graduation.

Maintaining confidentiality amongst the members of the joint interview is of crucial nature. Please do not disclose any details which may be used to identify participants with anyone

who did not participate. It is important that the interview is a safe space for everyone to disclose their opinions.

Below you will find some links and contact information to organizations related to sexting, online aggression, mental health or sexual violence. In case you need more information on the topic, to request help, or just want to speak about your children's online behaviour, you are encouraged to contact them.

For further information, follow up questions, if you want to withdraw your data, or for any other enquiries, you can contact me

**Anastasia Rousaki:** [anastasia.rousaki2018@my.ntu.ac.uk](mailto:anastasia.rousaki2018@my.ntu.ac.uk)

If you have any concerns about the study, or the way it was conducted you should contact my supervisory team.

**Dr Sarah Seymour -Smith:** [sarah.seymoursmith@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.seymoursmith@ntu.ac.uk)

**Phone:** +44 (0)115 848 2456

**Dr Rosie Kitson-Boyce:** [rosie.kitsonboyce@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:rosie.kitsonboyce@ntu.ac.uk)

**Phone:** +44 115 84 84653

**Dr Mike Marriott:** [mike.marriott@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:mike.marriott@ntu.ac.uk)

**Phone:** +44 (0)115 848 2186<sup>[KR7]</sup> <sup>[SS8]</sup>

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## **Informative leaflet for parents: where to get advice, helplines and contact information**

### **Family Lives**

Helpline 0808 800 2222

[askus@familylives.org.uk](mailto:askus@familylives.org.uk)

Family Lives is a charity with over three decades of experience helping parents to deal with the changes that are a constant part of family life. People contact them about all aspects of family life including child development, issues with schools and parenting/relationship support. They also respond when life becomes complicated and provide support around family breakdown, aggression in the home, bullying, risky teenage behaviour and mental health concerns of both parents and their children.

### **Samaritans**

<https://www.samaritans.org/>

Helpline 116 123

jo@samaritans.org

Samaritans is a unique charity dedicated to reducing feelings of isolation and disconnection that can lead to suicide.

### **Young minds parent helpline**

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-helpline/>

0808 802 5544

Their Parents Helpline is available to offer advice to parents and carers worried about a child or young person under 25. You may have questions about a child's behaviour, emotional wellbeing, or mental health condition.

### **BullyingUK**

<https://www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk/kids.html>

0845 22 55 787

admin@nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk

Information and advice helping parents deal effectively with bullying.

## **C. Study 3**

### **C.1. Information sheet**

#### **Adolescents, sexting and consent: a discursive approach**

Thank you for agreeing to consider participating in this research project. Please take the time to read the information sheet carefully and discuss it with anyone you wish. If you have any questions and require any further information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me using the details below.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of this study is to explore educators' perceptions of adolescent sexting, how they view their role in monitoring adolescents' sexting engagement, and their understanding of such incidents in relation to gender. I will be conducting individual interviews with educators of adolescents aged 12-18 (e.g. school teachers, school staff, teaching assistants). By doing this I hope to gain an understanding of educators' opinions and the way sexting is perceived, especially in relation to gender.

It is important to highlight that the study will explore your opinions on sexting and NOT your personal experiences, stories or engagement in such activities. Moreover, the study does NOT explore incidents of sexting that are not part of your professional duty. Please avoid disclosures of incidents that your educational establishment is not aware of.

#### **Who is running the study?**

The study is being run by myself, Anastasia Rousaki, and will form part of my doctoral thesis at Nottingham Trent University (NTU). My project supervisors are Dr Sarah Seymour Smith, Dr Mike Marriott, and Dr Rosie Kitson-Boyce (please see the contact details below).

#### **Why have I been chosen to take part?**

You have been selected for interviewing as I believe your opinions on sexting and gender are useful and will provide the field with vital insight on how educators understand it and their role in monitoring it.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

No, your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part. You do not need to explain why if you do not want to be involved. If you do decide to take part, you only need to answer questions that you feel comfortable with; and you can leave the interview should you feel uncomfortable during it. The study is completely independent and does not influence the school's potential attitudes towards staff. By refusing to take part in the study no consequences, professional or otherwise, will exist.

#### **If I take part, can I withdraw later on?**

You can withdraw from the study up to two weeks after the interview without any consequences or explanation. To let me know that you want to withdraw your contributions from the interview, all you need to do is email me (Anastasia – see contact details below). All statements made by yourself during the interview will be removed. The study is completely independent. If you decide not to take part, you will not be asked to provide any explanation. If you decide to take part, please read the information on this sheet. Once understood, please sign the informed consent form.

### **What do I need to do?**

I would like you to attend an interview. I would like you to respond to questions, and tell me your perceptions on sexting-related issues.

The interviews will be taking place at a time convenient to you. The interviews will be conducted by me. They will take place online. We can consider Microsoft Teams interviews, as well as phone interviews. I will ask for your permission to audio record the interview with a voice recorder to ensure the data you provide is accurately documented. **Please note that in case you prefer Microsoft Teams interviews I will NOT video record you.**

**If you consent to the Microsoft Teams/Phone interview format, you will have to provide me with your email address and email me the completed form back before the interview and explicitly say that you consent to take part in the research (your consent can additionally be verbally recorded at the start of the interview).**

### **What will happen to the information I provide in this study?**

The recording of the interview will be transcribed (a written record of what is said) and analysed. This information will then be used in the conclusions of the research. Your contributions will form part of research publications, talks, and teaching.

All transcripts and audio recordings will be kept on the NTU Data Archive, to ensure your data's security. The data will be destroyed in a secure manner ten years after my graduation from NTU unless you consent to open access data publications (please see below). If you consent to a phone/Microsoft Teams interview format and we exchange emails regarding the consent forms, I will delete all your contact information after my graduation, or in case you decide to withdraw your data, I will delete them right away. Data that is stored in the NTU archive will be available to other researchers in this field or relative fields subject to an appropriate request for academic purposes (such requests would be treated in line with NTU policies and procedures on data governance.)

### **Open access option**

**Psychology is moving towards open access. By 'open access' we mean its free availability on the public internet, where ANY users can read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. They can also use them for any other legal purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers (other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself). In the consent form you can choose whether you are letting me use your data for open access publications. This means that when the**

research gets published in scientific journals, transcripts of the study will be available for anyone having access to any articles on the topic published in open access journals. **Only the transcripts will be available through open access, whilst the recordings will be classified as restricted access, which means only certified researchers might be able to access them.** However, the researcher will exercise all possible care to keep your identity anonymous by redacting any identifying features from the recordings and transcripts (e.g. names, places, school's location, subject you are teaching) and by assigning you pseudonyms.

### **How will the research team deal with confidentiality and protect my anonymity?**

Due to the method of data analysis, direct quotes will be taken from the interviews and used in my project report. Thus, there is a minimal chance that you could be identified by what you have said. However, all transcripts will be fully anonymised and all identifying features removed and will be kept in a secure location at all times. Only myself and my research supervisors will have access to these documents and recordings of interviews. You will not be named or otherwise identified in any publication arising from this research, as pseudonyms will be used instead of names. The location of the research will also be anonymised. I will exercise all possible care to ensure that your workplace/ school will not be identifiable in the write-up of findings.

Regarding confidentiality and storage, all audio data will be deleted from the recorders as soon as the interviews are over, and stored onto NTU Data Store, which is a highly protected online storage space, based on an NTU server, in line with General Data Protection regulation guidelines.

### **What happens to my contribution post the study?**

The data (the recordings of your interview) will be deleted ten years after the researcher's graduation. In case you consent to open access, the data will not be destroyed.

### **Are there potential risks/harm?**

Sexting is a topic of sexual nature that many people tend to find controversial. It is possible that during the interview you might feel some distress. If that is the case, you are encouraged to let the researcher know so it can be stopped and you will be given the opportunity to withdraw from the study. In addition, you will be provided with an information sheet including a number of organizations and help lines you can contact if this topic is causing you distress.

Sexting in people under 18 is also raising legal issues and child protection issues under the Child Protection Act. **Please avoid disclosing any sexting experiences; the nature of the study will be to exploring perceptions of sexting, rather than incidents. Additionally, please note that the disclosure of sexting incidents involving people under the age of 18 that their school, appropriate staff or authorities are not aware of may lead to the researcher breaking confidentiality due to the need to inform the police.** If you disclose

any incidents of sexting that the school/appropriate staff is not aware of the researcher is legally obligated to stop recording and report any incidents to the police.

If any child protection issues emerge the researcher is legally bound to contact the local authorities. Moreover, the researcher will share their concerns with a Child Protection Office nominated by the NTU.

If you wish to complain about the way that you have been approached or treated during this study please contact Dr Sarah Seymour Smith, my supervisor. Her details are included at the end of this sheet.

### **What will happen with the results of the research?**

The results will be used for my doctoral thesis. Moreover, data may be used for scientific publications in journals or potential interventions. Finally, they might be presented in conferences or in lectures.

### **What are the potential benefits and how can I find out more about this project?**

I hope you will find the research interesting. You will contribute to evidence-based research on the topic and an applied aspect of providing adolescents with advice regarding their cyber-safety. For more information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can send you an electronic copy of the report, upon request, once the research is completed.

### **Has the study been reviewed by anyone?**

The research has been approved by the University's Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. It has been designed with reference to the British Psychological Society's code of ethics.

### **Contacts and further information**

Please feel free to contact me or my research supervisors:

**Anastasia Rousaki:** [anastasia.rousaki2018@my.ntu.ac.uk](mailto:anastasia.rousaki2018@my.ntu.ac.uk)

**Dr Sarah Seymour-Smith:** [sarah.seymour-smith@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.seymour-smith@ntu.ac.uk)

**Dr Rosie Kitson-Boyce:** [rosie.kitsonboyce@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:rosie.kitsonboyce@ntu.ac.uk)

**Dr Mike Marriott:** [mike.marriott@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:mike.marriott@ntu.ac.uk)

School of Social Sciences  
Nottingham Trent University  
50 Shakespeare Street  
Nottingham  
NG1 4FQ

If you are unsure about any part of the process, please contact me to discuss it further before the interview.

### **Where to get advice, helplines and contact information**

#### **The Internet Watch Foundation**

<https://www.iwf.org.uk/>

Helpline +44 (0)1223 20 30 30

The majority of their work focuses on the removal of child sexual abuse images and videos.

#### **Samaritans**

<https://www.samaritans.org/>

Helpline 116 123

[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

Samaritans is a unique charity dedicated to reducing feelings of isolation and disconnection that can lead to suicide.

#### **Education support**

<https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/>

Helpline 08000 562 561

[enquiries@edsupport.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@edsupport.org.uk)

A free telephone helpline, email support and live chat, for all teachers, lecturers and staff working in schools, adult, further and higher education. Support includes information and signposting, support and coaching or counselling services. Also they offer debt counselling and emergency grants.

#### **BullyingUK**

<https://www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk>

Helpline 0845 22 55 787

[admin@nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk](mailto:admin@nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk)

Information and advice for adults and children affected by bullying



## **Study 4**

### **C.2. Consent form**

#### **Adolescents, sexting and consent; a discursive approach**

I have read the Participant Information Sheet.

I understand what my role will be in this research.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I agree to be audio recorded, and NOT video recorded

I understand that I am able to stop participating in the interview at any point.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research up to 2 weeks after the interview without needing to provide a reason.

I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded.

I agree that my anonymised contributions can be used:

in research papers

talks/ conferences

teaching purposes

Data Protection: I agree to the University processing personal data that I have supplied such as name and gender. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me.

I have asked questions if needed.

I understand that I can contact the investigator at any time with queries or concerns.

I understand that all materials will be destroyed after a 10 year period unless I agree to open access.

I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

If any disclosure of harm to individuals under the age of 18, such as sexting incidents involving people under the age of 18 that their school, appropriate staff or authorities are not aware of (e.g. I know that a specific student is sexting and the appropriate staff is not aware of it) may lead to the researcher breaking confidentiality due to the need to inform the police. I understand that the researcher will stop the data collection, contact their supervisory team and if the risk is urgent, the researcher will contact the police. Moreover, the researcher will share their concerns with a Child Protection

Office nominated by the University.

Name of participant

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

Name of researcher

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

**Open access and confidentiality**

The information/ audio material will be used in scientific publications

- (1) My name will not be published and the researcher will endeavour to ensure that I cannot be identified from the provided information, other than in relation to identifiable material (such as direct quotes) for which I give consent.

- (2) However, I also understand that there is a low possibility that I may be identified from the transcripts.
- (3) If the publication or product is published on an open access basis, I understand that it may be accessed freely throughout the world

I agree to open access

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

Name of researcher

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

**Study 4**

**C.3. : Interview schedule (including spiels)**

**Study 3 Spiel**

Hello. My name is Anastasia Rousaki and I am a PhD student at Nottingham Trent University.

As part of my doctoral studies, I am conducting a study on adolescent sexting and teachers’ perceptions on it.

I will ask you questions regarding your overall thoughts on adolescent sexting, such as ‘why do adolescents sext’. I will also ask you questions regarding how educators perceive adolescents’ sexting engagement. Please bear in mind that this study is about your perception of adolescent sexting and it’s NOT about any personal experiences or incidents, so please do not disclose such activities if they are not part of your professional duties (e.g. sexting incidents that the appropriate school staff is not aware of).

Your contribution is important, as researchers in the field of psychology do not know much about educators’ perceptions of it. I believe it will be a fun and novel experience. Your contributions will improve our current knowledge of issues around sexting in the field of psychology. I will exercise all possible care to keep your views anonymous and the information you provide protected. Participation in the study is absolutely voluntary and you can withdraw should you feel uncomfortable during it. Please feel free to ask me any questions.

Before we start, can I ask you to verbally agree to the study, giving me your name (which will be removed post transcription) and consent?

## **Interview schedule**

### **Framing sexting**

What does the term sexting mean to you?

How prevalent do you think sexting is?

When do adolescents sext?

Prompt: is it often? Relationships? Dating?

Why do you think that some adolescents engage in sexting while others don't?

(Prompt: popularity, pleasure, bullying)

How do you feel about adolescents getting involved in sexting?

Prompt: (is it good, bad, why?)

What do you think are the positive or negative outcomes of sexting for adolescents?

### **Consent**

When we talk about sex, we refer to consent. How do you think this notion applies to sexting?

Prompts: in what they differ?

How do you think school staff distinguishes whether a sexting encounter was consensual or forced?

Prompt: on what basis do they decide?

Sharing sexually suggestive images or videos is illegal for under 18s in the UK. What do you think young people feel about this?

Prompt: are they aware of legal repercussions?

Since sexting is illegal for under 18s in the UK, if an adolescent has their sexts forwarded they might not report it to the police in fear of being prosecuted. What are your thoughts on this?

Prompt: How do you think adolescents should act?

How well do you think adolescents are equipped to deal with resisting sexting?

### **Gender**

Thinking about the gendered identities of adolescents, what do you perceive as the motivation of engaging in sexting?

Also, thinking about the gendered identities of adolescents who do you perceive as being more involved in engaging in sexting?

Prompt: is it boys/girls/gender non-binary/trans? Why?

Of boys, girls/trans/gender non binary adolescents who do you think faces more societal consequences for sexting?

Of boys/girls/trans/gender non-binary adolescents, who might feel more pressured to comply with a request for sexually explicit pictures?

Prompt: How might this differ across gender?

Thinking about sexuality now, what impact might that have on their involvement in sexting?

### **Safety/monitoring/policy**

Whose responsibility do you think it is to have conversations with adolescents regarding sexting?

Prompts: Parents, schools, anyone else? If so, what should they entail?

What is the school policy regarding sexting?

### **Scenario 1: If they have a policy, the following questions:**

Tell me your thoughts on your schools sexting education/ How do you feel about sexting education?

What restrictions, interventions or/and monitoring take place in your school regarding sexting?

How do school staff feel about their involvement in monitoring student sexting?

Prompt: do they receive training/what training do they receive? (thinking of using this as a separate question too, thoughts?)

What actions do teachers take after they notice either coercive or consensual sexting?

How does the school/teaching staff support/deal with students that has been involved in coercive sexting incidents?

When your school discusses sexting with your students, how do you address the issue of gender?

When your school discusses sexting with your students, how do you address the issue of sexuality?

**Scenario 2: If school has no policy:**

Tell me your thoughts on sexting education/ How do you feel about sexting education?

Prompt: it is necessary/ not necessary, what should it entail etc.

What school restrictions, monitoring or interventions should take place in your opinion?

How do you think school staff would feel about their involvement in monitoring student sexting?

How do you think teachers should act after they notice incidents of consensual or coercive sexting?

How does the school/teaching staff support/deal with students that has been involved in coercive sexting incidents?

When schools discuss sexting with students, how do you think they should address the issue of gender?

When school discusses sexting with students, how do you think they should address the issue of sexuality?

Those are all my questions, is there anything else you want to talk about today that hasn't been discussed already?

**C.4. Debriefing**

**Adolescents, sexting and consent; a discursive approach**

Thank you for your participation!

Through this study I aim to understand how educators of adolescents make sense of sexting. I was particularly interested in how you, with your teaching responsibilities, engage with issues related to adolescent sexting and safety regarding protection from sexting. Finally, I was interested in how educators perceive sexting incidents in relation to gender.

Interviewing you helps me understand the dynamics gender produces in sexting and the conversations arising, thus providing us with more in- depth understanding of the topic to

inform policy, initiate a dialogue amongst researchers on the topic and hopefully contribute to the currently limited knowledge regarding educators' understanding of the phenomenon.

As mentioned in the information sheet, the data you provided can be described as sensitive. Therefore, the following steps will be taken to mask your identity; all the audio recording data will be deleted from the devices in which they will be recorded in as soon as they are obtained, and will be kept stored safely in the NTU Data Store, which is highly protected from cyber-attacks, viruses or the possibility of data being leaked. To maintain your anonymity, in the transcripts your names will be replaced by pseudonyms, and any potential identifying features will be removed. When it comes to the recordings, any identifying details in the audio recordings will be removed. The data will be deleted ten years after the researcher's graduation (unless you consent to open access, in which case the data will not be destroyed). In case of Microsoft Teams or phone interviews I will delete all your contact information after my graduation.

Below you will find some links and contact information to organizations related to sexting, online aggression, mental health or sexual violence. In case you need more information on the topic, to request help, or you are concerned about a young person's online behaviour, you are encouraged to contact them.

For further information, follow up questions, if you want to withdraw your data, or for any other enquiries, you can contact me

**Anastasia Rousaki:** [anastasia.rousaki2018@my.ntu.ac.uk](mailto:anastasia.rousaki2018@my.ntu.ac.uk)

If you have any concerns about the study, or the way it was conducted you should contact my supervisory team.

**Dr Sarah Seymour-Smith:** [sarah.seymoursmith@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.seymoursmith@ntu.ac.uk)

**Dr Rosie Kitson-Boyce:** [rosie.kitsonboyce@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:rosie.kitsonboyce@ntu.ac.uk)

**Dr Mike Marriott:** [mike.marriott@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:mike.marriott@ntu.ac.uk)

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**Informative leaflet for educators: where to get advice, helplines and contact information**

**The Internet Watch Foundation**

<https://www.iwf.org.uk/>

Helpline +44 (0)1223 20 30 30

The majority of their work focuses on the removal of child sexual abuse images and videos.

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Helpline 116 123

[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

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Helpline 08000 562 561

[enquiries@edsupport.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@edsupport.org.uk)

A free telephone helpline, email support and live chat, for all teachers, lecturers and staff working schools, adult, further and higher education. Support includes information and signposting, support and coaching or counselling services. Also offers debt counselling and emergency grants.

### **BullyingUK**

<https://www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk>

Helpline 0845 22 55 787

[admin@nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk](mailto:admin@nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk)



## D. Transcription symbols

The notation used in the present thesis is a simple version of what is known as Jeffersonian transcription, as introduced by Gail Jefferson. For a more detailed guide the reader can visit the Atkinson and Heritage (1984) version.

### Jeffersonian transcription table

| Symbol              | Meaning  |
|---------------------|--|
| (.)                 | Pause  |
| (0.4), (2.6)        | Timed, often prolonged, pause  |
| ↑ word, ↓ word      | Rise or fall of pitch  |
| word [word<br>[word | Overlapping talk, the [ symbol can be used to indicate whether the overlap stops, however that depends on the transcriber's preference |
| .hh                 | Exhaling   |
| (h)                 | Laughter   |
| wo:rd               | Stretching of the preceding sound.   |
| (word)              | Unclear word or sentence   |
| <u>word</u> , WORD  | Underlined words suggest emphasis, capital words suggest shouting  |
| word=<br>=word      | No pause between two speakers' speech or, in case of one speaker, the sound between two words runs together                            |

