

Parental constructions of adolescent sexting and gender: A critical discursive analysis

Feminism & Psychology
1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/09593535251324029

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Abstract

Sexting is the interpersonal exchange of self-produced, sexually suggestive photographs, videos, or messages via technological means. Our study explores parental constructions of adolescent sexting and gender. Using critical discursive psychology, we analyse 15 dyadic interviews with UK-based parents/carers of adolescents ($N = 30$). Two interpretative repertoires were evident across the data set. The first, “sexting consequences that demand ‘real’ awareness” functions to solidify protectionist discourses and sets abstinence as the only act of “real” agency. Participants positioned gendered adolescent agency with girls as “Insta-girls” sexting for popularity, “mean girls” who use sexting as form of power play, and boys as “the initiators and perpetrators of sexting.” The second repertoire, “sexting as a lasting and dangerous problem” constructed sexting as problematic in terms of the likelihood that images would be nonconsensually shared, and explicated how adolescents were positioned regarding gender and victimhood with “girls as victims of the patriarchal culture.” “Boys face challenges too” constructs boys as facing

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challenges that obscure the nature and effects of their harassment. We discuss the findings in relation to Butler's gender performativity theory and the sociopolitical discursive terrain, highlighting their ideological implications and the need for positions that prioritise youth-centric conceptualisations of sexting.

Keywords

discourse, parents, sexting, United Kingdom

Sexting, defined as the “interpersonal exchange” of self-produced sexual texts, images, or videos via digital platforms (Döring, 2014, p. 1), is a behaviour observed across age groups, but serves as a significant way for adolescents to explore and understand their identities and sexuality (Setty, 2019). However, such exploration involves distinct gendered pressures and expectations that align with broader societal norms (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). While adolescents and parents may interpret these pressures differently, little research has explored parental perspectives on adolescent sexting. Our study focuses on this missing context around adolescent sexting by providing insights into how parents and carers construct adolescent sexting in the UK, specifically in relation to some key feminist concerns regarding gender and sexual agency—that is, the capacity to act in relation to sexuality (McNay, 2004). Doing so informs research and practices that seek to support the ways we discuss emergent adolescent sexual agency in a safe way. First, we situate our study in the current literature regarding adolescent sexting, sexual agency, and research with parents.

Adolescent sexting, sexual agency, and the role of parents

A key developmental step for adolescents is making sense of their status as sexual beings (Bay-Cheng, 2019). Consensual sexting often serves as an avenue for adolescents to establish familiarity with potential partners, sometimes in preparation for in-person intimacy (Scarcelli, 2020). Sexting then may be an arena where adolescents can learn to navigate a process of personal sexual agency. Yet, studies show that gendered norms shape sexting practices, with girls consistently encountering social backlash and reputational damage for sharing sexual content, while boys gain social approval for doing so (Ringrose et al., 2013). Studies also indicate that girls experience more coercion than boys to sext (Ringrose et al., 2013), and heightened scrutiny related to the threat of non-consensual distribution of images (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021; Thorburn et al., 2021). Though boys may not face the same scrutiny as girls, those who do experience coercion may struggle to articulate or address such incidents and experience social isolation (Hunehäll Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021).

Recent research has begun exploring how adolescents make sense of these gendered power dynamics in the context of sexting. This work shows that adolescents are aware of the gendered double standard and risks associated with sexting and express concern about

forwarding private images (Scarcelli, 2020). Girls express frustration over their limited agency, as they are caught between conflicting gendered power dynamics created by traditional expectations of female passivity and innocence and newer permissive discourses encouraging active female sexuality (Thorburn et al., 2021). For example, Thorburn et al.'s New Zealand participants noted a no-win situation in which girls are stigmatised regardless of their choice: labelled "sluts" if they participate in sexting, and "prudes" if they abstain.

In contrast, Meehan (2022), also researching in New Zealand, found that boys are often pressured by their peers to share sexts nonconsensually. This peer pressure supports boys' coercion of girls while excusing it as part of male socialisation based upon a construction of hegemonic masculinity that normalises such behaviour. Indeed, adolescent girls often presented boys as likely to coerce girls into sending them images. Yet, when boys share girls' images without consent, girls are frequently held responsible without recognition of the larger misogynistic context (Meehan, 2022).

Supporting the above findings, feminist research emphasises that young people's motivations for sexting often extend beyond merely succumbing to external pressures. Scholars critique the moral panics common in academic and popular discussions, which overlook the sociocultural context and gender norms shaping adolescent choices by limiting their capacity for informed decision-making (Lee & Crofts, 2015; Scarcelli, 2020; Setty, 2019; Thorburn et al., 2021). Instead, feminist scholars advocate research foregrounding adolescents' sexual agency, highlighting the complexities of adolescents' choices (Thorburn et al., 2021) in relation to the constraint of cultural norms (Evans et al., 2010; Gavey, 2012; Setty, 2019).

To this end, Gavey (2012) emphasises the need for critically examining the concept of sexual empowerment, which overlooks the sociocultural environment. She argues for consideration of "the cultural conditions of possibility for girls' sexuality, embodiment and relationships" (p. 719). Extending this perspective, other feminist scholars emphasise women's agency in restrictive contexts. Bay-Cheng (2019) suggests recognising girls' sexual agency even when exercised through compliance and compromise, advocating addressing systemic constraints on their agency and well-being.

Overall, feminist scholars largely agree that there is a "missing discourse" of girls' desire, pleasure, and sexual subjectivity (Tolman, 2012), and a need for further investigation into girls' sexual agency. In the context of sexting, a novel but important avenue of enquiry is how parents' conceptions of adolescent sexuality and sexting enable or constrain girls' sexual agency. Research on parental understandings of adolescent sexting is currently limited, and there is a growing call for further investigation (Charteris et al., 2018). Though this call stems largely from a protectionist perspective (based on the assumption that parents might mitigate the risks associated with adolescent sexting; Jeffery, 2018), we argue that parents' understandings of sexting and adolescent sexuality may have some bearing on adolescents' sexual agency.

The small body of research with parents and caregivers has highlighted parental concern about adolescent sexting practices, particularly in relation to their innocence or pressure to conform to gendered expectations. These concerns often rest on prevailing discourses that depict adolescent sexual activity as deviant, potentially harmful, or laden

with negative consequences. Hence, when discussing their children's sexuality, parents often adopt narratives that frame their own children as asexual while viewing other young people as either overly sexual or sexually naive (Elliott, 2010). Such deficit views of adolescent sexuality support a protectionist discourse that disempowers young people. For example, qualitative studies with parents and caregivers in Australia (Charteris et al. 2018) and in the US (Fix et al., 2021) highlight how parental concerns about sexting are shaped by dominant discourses that position adults as gatekeepers of sexual knowledge, ostensibly to protect their children's sexual innocence. Adults are constructed as knowledgeable and independent, and children as innocent, immature, and dependent, reinforcing a power hierarchy (Charteris et al., 2018).

In addition to reinforcing adult-child power relations, gendered perceptions of adolescent sexuality play a role in establishing gendered power dynamics. For example, boys are associated with nonconsensual sharing of sexts, driven by social validation within peer groups, while girls are portrayed as assertive participants in sexting, seeking attention or intimacy (Fix et al., 2021). Likewise, mothers in one study constructed girls as hypersexual, suggesting they pressure boys into sexual activities to establish relationships (Elliott, 2010).

These findings underscore the need for further exploration of how parental constructions reflect and reinforce sociocultural norms and gendered expectations surrounding adolescent sexuality and sexting. Our study explores the ideological discursive terrain surrounding sexting and gender from a parental standpoint. We explore how discursive constructions can have ideological and practical consequences, highlighting competing discourses regarding gender and how gendered bodies are positioned/governed (Wetherell & Edley, 2009), portrayed, and regulated. We approach this work through the following research questions: "How do parents of adolescents construct sexting?" and "How do parents of adolescents construct sexting in relation to gender?"

Methodology

Using critical discursive psychology (Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1999), we illustrate a novel understanding of how our participants, situated in the UK, navigate differing gendered constructions of adolescent agency, victimhood, and culpability in relation to sexting. Critical discursive psychology is grounded in social constructionist epistemology and premised on the view that ideologically dominant discourses are established as common sense, such that collective historical discursive resources also dictate the affordances of what can be said and done, and by whom, in relation to particular issues, such as digital sharing of sexual content. Although individuals are understood as constrained by the prevailing discourses in a society, they are also seen as having agency to use, resist, or modify prevailing social meanings (Edley, 2001).

Interviews are widely used with critical discursive psychology (Wiggins, 2016), and we viewed this as a useful approach to explicate what is ideologically hegemonic. We conducted dyadic interviews (joint interviews with two individuals) with UK-based adults holding care responsibilities for adolescents aged 12–18. Joint interviews combine the benefits of focus groups and individual interviews; they are interactive yet

offer space for detailed narratives and negotiations (Polak & Green, 2016). Including other adults with caregiving responsibilities along with parents ensured that two participants could be present for the interview. A carer was defined as an adult with responsibilities that are usually associated with parenting (Molyneaux et al., 2011). For example, carers were often relatives or close family friends who knew and regularly cared for the adolescents, or step-parents and co-parents of a joined/merged family.

The study was designed according to the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021) and approved by the Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Nottingham Trent University (Reference No. 2021/297). The data are stored at the Nottingham Trent University's data archive (Rousaki, 2024).

Participants

Recruitment was conducted via social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit) due to COVID-19-related restrictions. The first author created a Facebook page for the project and advertised it in parenting UK groups and through her Twitter and Reddit accounts. We recruited 30 parents/carers, 19 women and 11 men, all cisgender and heterosexual.

Eight participant dyads were the biological parents (mother and father), while the remaining seven comprised a combination of a biological parent and another carer. All dyads had pre-existing relationships, which can enhance communication as they illuminate distinct constructions held by each participant and address gaps with the intervention of a second person with clear social permission to offer such intervention. Nonetheless, this pre-existing relationship can also impede openness when answering interview questions, as pre-existing social structures can heighten concerns about expressing unconventional opinions (e.g., about gender) within pre-established social relationships (for further details, please refer to Table 1, supplemental material; Seale et al., 2008).

Data collection

Our data set consisted of 15 joint interviews with 30 parents/carers. The questions were not about participants' own children due to the topic's sensitive nature and because we were more interested in examining the wider sociocultural discursive terrain. Instead, questions were about adolescent sexting in general. We sought to examine how participants constructed adolescent sexting and the impact of gender and sexuality on how sexting and sexting consent are framed. As coercion is a key focus of adolescent sexting research, we wanted to consider how parents made sense of gendered adolescent agency.

The interview guide therefore had four focus areas: (a) how participants frame sexting (e.g., the meaning of and reasons why adolescents sext); (b) consent (e.g., how does consent apply to sexting?); (c) safety/monitoring (e.g., what responsibility and resources do parents have? How can parents ensure safety?); (d) gendered impact (e.g., what are the similarities/differences and consequences of sexting across genders? How well are gendered adolescents equipped to resist coercive sexting?). We left explicit questions about

gender and sexuality towards the end of the schedule as we wanted such discussions to come from the participants rather than being researcher-led. We asked about safety due to media and academic discourses, which often encourage parents to monitor adolescents' online activities and safety (Jeffery, 2018).

The interviews were conducted by the first author—a young, White, immigrant female—via online video call or phone, and were audio-recorded. The recordings were transcribed through a simplified version of Jeffersonian transcription (see supplemental material; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants' identities.

Data analysis

Critical discursive psychology is a synthetic approach to discourse analysis (as explained above) and combines micro and macro elements in analysis: the fine-grain elements of speech characteristic of traditional discursive psychology, and the broader sociohistorical elements of discourse as in poststructuralist/Foucauldian discourse analysis (Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Locke & Budds, 2020). Our analysis draws upon two analytic concepts: *interpretative repertoires* and *subject positions*. Interpretative repertoires represent relatively coherent ways of talking about phenomena and are part of our shared understanding of social life. They are familiar groups of arguments which people draw upon, yet they are often contradictory in nature (Edley, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Due to this, individuals have access to a range of rhetorical opportunities and subject positions they can make available (Edley, 2001). Wetherell and Edley (1998) combine the notion that individuals are positioned by discourses in the Foucauldian sense yet can also actively recreate positions for themselves.

Data analysis was iterative. The first author mapped out interpretative repertoires and subject positions across the interviews and then discussed and reviewed these with the other authors. We focussed on prevalent constructions, along with how discursive subjectivities and formulations were framed and the functions they achieved. Emphasis was given to contextual variability of the “discursive affordances,” the capacities and limitations of particular discursive constructions in terms of what can and cannot be said within the current societal context. Interpretative repertoires and subject positions must outline both discursive and material implications (Edley, 2001); therefore, the analysis demonstrates which subject positions are referenced and which are absent.

Findings

We discuss two interpretative repertoires identified across the data (a) “sexting consequences that demand ‘real’ awareness” and (b) “sexting as a lasting and dangerous problem.” In the first interpretative repertoire, participants framed the decision to participate in or refrain from sexting as a reflection of an individual's ability to make informed, agentic choices; adolescents were positioned as largely lacking this capacity in ways that undermine or problematise their agency. This took on gendered patterning, with three main subject positions: “Insta girls,” “mean girls,” and “boys as perpetrators of sexting.” In

the second repertoire, participants constructed sexting as intrinsically related to nonconsensual distribution and sexual deception in ways that effectively undercut young people's agency. Drawing on this repertoire, girls were positioned as victims of the patriarchy, while boys were depicted as overshadowed by female-centric societal conversations regarding sexual violence.

Across both repertoires, there was a significant lack of positive constructions of sexting, including a marked absence of reference to sexual desire despite the interview schedule focusing on both positive and negative aspects of sexting. This discursive pattern reflects the dominant constructions of sexting (Schröter & Taylor, 2017), as does the overall heteronormative discursive terrain of the talk. Despite the interviewer asking about LGBTQ perspectives across all interviews, participants reproduced traditional hetero-gendered discourses, albeit with some novel twists.

Interpretative repertoire: Sexting consequences that demand “real” awareness

The first repertoire frames engagement in sexting as a problematic activity leading to negative consequences and thus requiring “real” awareness, which adolescents are positioned as lacking. Specifically, the function of this interpretative repertoire appears to justify abstinence by constructing sexting as involving dangers, and adolescents as unable to make informed decisions due to their lack of awareness and lack of maturity. The following extract illustrates how youth are positioned as lacking “real” awareness. Here, adolescent naivety is portrayed as intricately linked to their agency and decision to engage in sexting (for further extracts and the meaning of Jeffersonian transcription symbols, please refer to the supplemental material).

Extract 1: Katie (female, parent) and Steven (male, parent)

A sharing (.) sexually suggestive images or videos (.) not text (.) but images or videos (.) is illegal for people under the age of 18 in the UK↑(.) um (.) what do you think young people feel about this kind of (.) law

S (2) it its illegal (.) yeah (.) um chance is that (.) is (.) is (.) is something that (.) doesn't limit them ummm or you know (.) one there could (.) be lack of awareness for one thing (.) or you know at a point they will (.) say (.) you know who cares just yeah (.) the other (.) person on the other side (.) will see it so (.) uum (.) chances are (.) even if they are aware (.) you know the::y you know (.) they would ignore it (.) because they can't (.) they assume at that point of time that the dis that the communication you know in whatever (.) form you know (.) it's [private

K [right

S so but in the moment it's not necessarily private

K right

Public and media discourses often refer to the legal aspects of sexting (Strohmaier et al., 2014). The interviewer's question (A) primes the participants to theorise how adolescents “feel” about the legality of sexting, thus positioning the participants as

pseudoscientists reporting on adolescent behaviour (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). They respond by merging antithetical constructions. A two-second pause highlights the delicateness of Steven's response (Wiggins, 2016): acknowledging the illegality of sexting visual content. He marks this illegality as "something that (.) doesn't limit them" (i.e., stop them from sexting), thereby constructing adolescents' agency as problematic. However, he then presents two hypotheses to explain why legal sanctioning might not deter youth from sexting. These explanations position adolescents as ignorant, first as unaware of the law ("there could (.) be lack of awareness"), and second as naive ("they assume ... it's private"). The implication is that sexts could be shared nonconsensually, and the potential outcomes of sexting are worked up as dangerous. This positioning underscores the gap between what adolescents assume and the "reality" according to an adult version of the world. Adolescents' lack of "real awareness" and inadequacy to manage sexting responsibly are reinforced by the active voicing of a typical adolescent response, "Who cares?" positioning adolescents as reckless.

"Real" awareness was a key aspect in determining whether sexting is an appropriate adolescent activity, in ways that question or problematise adolescent sexual agency. This took on a gendered patterning: girls (but not boys) are primarily depicted as dupes—easily influenced by social media, celebrities, and online trends. This portrayal underscores a broader social construction of femininity as passive and susceptible, ultimately questioning girls' agency. At the same time, when girls' agency is acknowledged, it is framed negatively through the "mean girl" discourse. In contrast, boys are constructed as benefitting from greater sexual freedom and fewer consequences, thereby reinforcing a view of them as active (and sometimes predatory) agents in the context of sexting. We identified three main subject positions: "Insta girls," "mean girls," and "boys as perpetrators of sexting."

Subject Position 1: Insta girls. Participants often constructed external pressure on adolescent girls to sexualise themselves and noted the glamourisation of online sex work or media stories of celebrity sexualisation. Adolescent girls were positioned as employing sexting as a generator of popularity and social capital through self-objectification. However, they were often positioned as misguided, and therefore such female agency and power were framed as illusory. Below, Gabriella and Nate discuss pop culture when asked about how adolescent gender identities factor into sexting, and whether this was different for boys, girls, or gender nonbinary adolescents:

Extract 2: Nate (male, parent) and Gabriella (female, parent)

G I think like um social media and magazines and all that sort of thing have a massive impact on young um (.) girls young (.) young teen (.) teenagers

N it's also being popular

G yeah body shape and things like that so when they're showing off their body shape in a skimpy top or whatever um (.) they think that that's the image they want to try um and [um

N [portray]

G portray because they wanna emulate all the so (.) called glamour models or what have you (.) in the (.) in the limelight or whoever's on Love Island or what have you um (.) and I think that can be quite dangerous (.) as well um (.) sorry I've gone off topic

(lines omitted)

N yeah but some of them it's that thing of popularity as well how many likes can I get how many positive comments (.) can I get

This Insta girl position merges the private (sexting) with the public (social media, celebrity culture) domain; the culture of sexualisation seems to be constructed as intertwined with female sexting. Gabriella constructs "young girls" as impacted by "social media and magazines and all that sort of thing" employing a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) to generalise the media impact. "Young girls" is then repaired to "young teen (.) teenagers"; though later "skimpy top" which often implies feminine attire, reverts to a focus on girls. Nate further frames sexting as being about popularity, and Gabriella agrees. Gabriella proceeds to construct "showing off their body shape" potentially as a negative assessment, in that it connotes attempting to impress. This image is framed as something adolescents "think" that they want to portray to emulate "glamour models" (typically describing female models) and "Love Island" contestants in the "limelight" which are constructed as potentially dangerous; in many ways, such constructions work them up as misguided.

While one could view the curation of images as agentic, this agency is questioned and problematised via reference to emulating "celebrities," Nate reiterates and expands upon his construction of this being about popularity. Positive comments and likes are the predominant desire of "some of them." Girls are constructed negatively for self-objectifying. The active voicing "how many ... can I get" showcases how girls attempt to be popular. Likes/comments are worked up as a form of currency exchange for their self-commodification, perhaps implying that the sexualisation attempts in any online domain constitute a form of social capital. Yet this notion is critiqued, framing girls negatively for surrendering to performances of femininity (Kearney, 2013). A similar construction is employed below, where Taylor is discussing their perceptions of sexting in relation to gender:

Extract 3: Clara (female, parent) and Taylor (female, parent)

T in the short term (.) it could be quite a boost for their confidence you know it's similar to popularity but it might give them that confidence boost you know something (.) people are going (.) you know (.) you look nice or you've got nice boobs or something like that (.) but again (.) I I think the negative (.) very often that will turn itself around that positive won't it

While Taylor discusses how sexting can boost one's confidence, the specification "short term" works as a prelude to the negative evaluation, highlighting that the sense of agency one gets from sexting is temporary. The confidence that stems from sexting

is worked up as akin to popularity, and the employment of “people” works up an imagined audience. While the construction initially seems gender neutral (“you look nice”), the later reference to “nice boobs” connotes a female body. The sense of confidence and popularity is constructed as illusionary, further enhanced by the phrase “will turn itself around.” Despite the perceived positives, Taylor’s construction still functions as a warning that sexting can have consequences and further legitimises abstinence/protectionist discourse.

Subject Position 2: Mean girls. Participants also constructed girls’ sexting as a power play and positioned them as bullies. Girls were positioned as “sneaky and conniving,” actively employing deception through the archetypal “mean girl” discourse (Brown, 2011). For example, the extracts below followed a question about which gender felt more pressured to comply with requests for sexually explicit pictures.

Extract 4: Linda (female, parent) and Peter (male, parent)

L [I think girls are more likely to be a bit more (.) bitchy (.) if I can say that

P more likely to share it with their (.) friends

L yeah (.) more likely to try and con (.) either another female men (.) male gender non binary to (.) to pose I think they’d be better at lying to get someone to send those photos to then use them against them (.) I think they’re (.) probably a bit more sneaky and conniving certain (.) certain girls are (.) than um (.) than others (inaudible) think

P yeah

L that would be my biggest concern I think (.) there to

P bit of (.) power reasons

Extract 5: Nicole (female, parent) and Marta (female, parent and cocarer friend)

N when it comes to an image (.) unless they’re in a (.) deep relationship where they do actually value and respect each other and (.) and they feel (.) that they have you know genuine feelings and a and a strong relationship (.) maybe I’m just being naive but I but I I think think that teenage girls can be such ↓ bitches ↓ that the:y (.) the:y (.) um are as likely to (.) to (.) you know (.) get a photograph of a boy and it is a big joke (.) isn’t it they can (.) they could be (.)↑ pretty nasty ↑

M yeah

In both these responses teenage girls are granted agency, but this is framed negatively by drawing on the mean girl discourse. In Extract 4, Linda positions girls as more likely to be “a bit more (.) bitchy” (with the phrase “if I can say that” possibly suggesting the statement’s controversy). Peter then constructs girls as more prone to sharing sexting messages with friends. Linda positions girls as more likely to “con” a range of individuals. Girls are constructed as better at lying to manipulate others to post material, which they “then use them against them.” Linda positions girls as “probably a bit more

sneaky and conniving” yet downgrades this to “certain girls.” Girls are constructed as likely to sext to abuse their power. Peter constructs a juxtaposition between power and sexual reasons.

In Extract 5, Nicole positions most teenage girls as having the potential to be “such bitches” and “pretty nasty” using sexting as a form of bullying, as they “get a photograph of a boy” (which implies deception) to make a joke of him. Yet, she manages her stake and identity by invoking naivety (Potter, 1996), and the use of the tentative “can” and “could” to soften her claim’s impact. Depicting agentic female sexting as a by-product of bullying behaviour reinforces dominant discourses that maintain panic around youth sexuality and advocate their abstinence from sexual curiosity/desire. The exception to this, at the start of the extract, is those girls in a “deep,” “strong” relationship, invoking agency (for girls and boys), a rare positive framing of sexting across the data set.

Thus, when girls are not constructed as passive, they are constructed as mean. Their agency is not related to sexual desire, but to the willingness to engage in harmful behaviour against boys. This positioning could perhaps imply that girls being agentic and sexual is not an available or unproblematic discursive construction that can be drawn upon. Hence, a tension seems to exist between a pseudo “girl power” sexual agency and a troubled framing of girls as confident, subverting the sexual norms. Females engaging in sexting move away from the culturally dominant ideas of female passivity (Kearney, 2013), and therefore, these positions signify “gender trouble” (Butler, 2003). According to Butler’s (2003) idea of gender performativity, those who do not perform gender in a way that is socially sanctioned create what is known as “gender trouble” and are thus punished.

Subject Position 3: Boys as the initiators and perpetrators of sexting. As with the previous subject position, participants also positioned boys negatively as initiators and perpetrators of sexting in a way that presented this as a widely accepted view. Boys are also afforded agency, yet this agency is negatively framed in line with a patriarchal framing of sexuality. After being questioned about the gendered consequences of sexting, Nicolas states:

Extract 6: Sasha (female, parent) and Nicolas (male, carer)

N I would guess (.) that it’s much more common for boys (.) to talk girls into sending or to want girls to send than the other way around but I might be pointing in a stereotype a little bit (.) I get that (.) but I still reckon its pro (.) I mean it’s about like every female friend I have who has been on a dating website has invariably seen many many more penises than she ever wanted to (.) without asking for them you know (.) um and so that seems to be men tend more to be the perpetrator in this kind of thing (.) um not always (.) but you know I would say at least towards boys being more likely to be the ones doing bad um (.) so I I think for girls there’s very (.) there’s more I think (.) there’s more for girls to lose in a weird kind of way because of this horrible patriarchal kind of society that we live in (.) where like there’s still (.) that attitude (.) a little bit of boys will be boys (.) kind of thing and oh it’s just a boy acting like a boy (.) and things get dismissed

Nicolas tentatively positions boys as more likely to persuade girls to send sexts, acknowledging it may be a stereotype. He bolsters his claim with an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986)—mentioning “every female friend” who has received unsolicited sexual photos—which culminates in the “boys will be boys” trope. He also presents “not always” to appear balanced but maintains that in a patriarchal context, there is “more for girls to lose.” This gendered knowledge (patriarchy, boys will be boys, slut-shaming) justifies his position. Boys are constructed as “bad,” not from inherent immorality but owing to social freedoms that permit greater sexual allowance and fewer consequences. Tiffany’s account below further illustrates this dynamic.

Extract 7: Tiffany (female, parent) and Robert (male, parent)

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

Tiffany frames boys as the primary sexting initiators, labelling their behaviour as harassment. She references a “majority” and tempers it with “sorry to say,” signalling the cultural sensitivity around her claim. Despite this hedging, she holds that this depiction accurately reflects boys as forceful initiators. This resonates with the broader pattern in Nicolas’s account of boys enjoying social leeway in sexting contexts.

Thus, in sum, the first interpretative repertoire allows adolescents’ agency to be depicted as problematic (or/and misguided), which takes on gendered patterning.

Interpretative repertoire: Sexting as a lasting and dangerous problem

In this repertoire, participants constructed sexting as an inherently dangerous activity that places adolescents in vulnerable positions. Again, there was no reference to desire or sexual exploration. Rather, sexting was associated with “sextortion” revenge porn, potentially dangerous strangers, and the nonconsensual distribution of visual materials. For example:

Extract 8: Clara (female, parent) and Taylor (female, parent)

C I think it’s (.) very dangerous because once that image is in the public domain (.) um (.) it’s (.) it’s there forever and it can be held against them forever and (.) and can rear its ugly head at a time when they could be much older and applying for jobs and things (.) it’s not a healthy thing to do (.) at all

T Yeah (.) I agree it’s (.) it’s a dangerous thing

In this exchange, sexting is constructed as dangerous in that it inevitably results in permanent public exposure. Clara underscores the lasting consequences by repeating “forever” and personifies the image with the metaphor “rear its ugly head” suggesting it can harm adolescents’ futures (e.g., job applications). She further pathologises the

practice of sexting as “not healthy” reinforced by the extreme case formulation “at all” (Pomerantz, 1986). Taylor’s agreement (“it’s a dangerous thing”) consolidates the negative, victimising construction of sexting.

This “lasting and dangerous problem” repertoire shapes gendered positions of victimhood. For girls, it reflects gendered moral panics that deny agency, contrasting with the limited or misguided agency seen in the “Insta girl” and “mean girl” positions. In contrast, boys are positioned differently here than above (initiators and perpetrators of sexting). We identified two gendered subject positions, which we discuss in turn: (a) “girls as victims of the patriarchal culture” and (b) “boys as overlooked victims.”

Subject Position 1: Girls as victims of the patriarchal culture. Girls were commonly positioned as victims of patriarchal social norms and lacking agency. This positioning points to the absence of female desire in the broader discursive terrain, so that girls are allowed to occupy only (or mainly) “danger-related” positions (Elliott, 2010). For instance:

Extract 9: Chloe (female, parent) and Dan (male, parent)

A so of boys or girls or gender nonbinary adolescents (.) who do you think (.) might feel pressure to comply with the request for (.) sexually explicit pictures or (.) videos or messages

C £girls£ (laughs)

D yeah girls

C we (.) well I know boys too are taught to be beautiful now but the stock the value of a woman is still (1) her (.) her looks are a commodity and her image is a commodity and her sexuality is a commodity to be (.) traded (.) still and I think women know that in their core (.) perhaps that’s just my own view perhaps that’s my own experience (.) but (.) I don’t think we’re through that yet (.) I don’t think we’re on a level playing field yet and (.) uh I’ve again forgotten the question

C, D, A (shared laughter)

Extract 10: Nancy (female, stepparent) and Phil (male, parent)

P we always say its girls don’t we your immediate thought is it’s girls that are pressured into providing pictures

N and probably that (.) that (.) they’re the most frequent cases I’ve had to deal with are (.) females

The participants portrayed girls as facing more pressure than boys. There was some hedging around this, suggesting participants worked to appear fair and balanced, and perhaps to avoid possible backlash against feminist rhetoric (Nicholas & Agius, 2017). In Extract 9, Chloe also notes boys face body-image concerns, acknowledging “both sides” which, along with framing her view as personal experience, allows Chloe to mitigate responsibility for her view. Similarly, in Extract 10, Phil presents a generalised perspective with the employment of the footing

“we”—“we always ... don’t we”—to describe a common perception, proceeding to depict girls as inherently more coerced into sexting, referencing a widely acknowledged societal norm.

Nevertheless, the position of “female victim” was reinforced. Chloe (Extract 9) emphasises female disadvantage in her three-part list (Jefferson, 1990), portraying women’s looks, image, and sexuality as commodities “traded” in a patriarchal society. This construction of female disadvantage is reinforced by the “level playing field” metaphor and “women know that in their core.” Nancy and Phil, answering a question about gender and pressure to comply with sexting requests, index their experience as teachers dealing with adolescents as they frame girls’ engagement in sexting as a pervasive outcome of coercion. These constructions work up an entrenched inequality in a male-dominated society, further pronouncing their lack of agency. However, even in these discussions of girls’ vulnerability, some participants, like Chloe, referred to the challenges boys face.

Subject Position 2: Boys as overlooked victims. Participants constructed boys as facing challenges that may go unnoticed due to a cultural emphasis on girls’ victimhood, as illustrated below.

Extract 11: Anna (female, carer/relative) and Mary (female, parent)

A we’ve missed out that there will be a whole host of boys um (.) questioning again their sexuality their feelings (.) their genitalia how they understand their bodies um (.) and their own personal development who were (.) if exposed to a picture again of anything of a sexual nature (.) would question (.) you know what (.) what is this what (.) what I mean (.) but we seem to skim over that area because it’s always emphasised particularly even in schools in my opinion on girls being the victims

Extract 12: Rachel (female, parent) and Jonathan (male, parent)

R I think there is a risk (.) that (.) boys will be viewed as (.) aggressive (.) and predatory and bad (.) and the girls (.) can be viewed as victims (.) I think that there’s a real risk (.) of that when that’s not (.) perhaps the case

In Extract 11, Anna suggests that boys’ vulnerability—in terms of body image, sexual identity, and development—is overlooked (“missed”). She uses extreme case formulations (“anything of a sexual nature,” “always emphasised”; Jefferson, 1990) and a list of concerns to stress how girls’ victimhood dominates public and educational discourse. In this vein, in Extract 12, Rachel warns that boys may be “viewed as ... predatory” by default, upgrading her claim with “real risk.” The three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of the negative characteristics attributed to boys reinforces this claim. She challenges the simplistic gender binary of aggressive boys and victimised girls, hinting that not all cases align with this pattern, possibly an outcome of the backlash against social justice rhetoric (Nicholas & Agius, 2017).

The two gendered subject positions discussed above are produced by the intersection of gendered discourses and the “sexting as a lasting and dangerous problem” repertoire. Together, they work to undermine adolescent agency as girls are presented as trapped in a patriarchal system where they are objectified or coerced, while boys’ experiences are depicted as either obscured or problematically cast as aggressive.

Concluding discussion

Our findings show how adolescent agency is consistently cast as problematic in parental talk about young people’s sexting. The first interpretative repertoire, “sexting consequences that demand ‘real’ awareness,” enabled participants to construct adolescents’ agency as problematic. Adolescents were depicted as unconcerned or naive about sexting’s illegality, and unable or unwilling to assess its dangers. Girls were particularly constrained: they were either “Insta girls” self-objectifying in pursuit of social capital, or “mean girls,” weaponising sexting to pressure others—yet no position allowed girls to be agentic or sexual without being framed as problematic (Butler, 2003). This repertoire also allowed boys’ agency to be problematised as related to social norms that afford them greater sexual freedom and fewer consequences.

Girls were again predominantly positioned as victims, pressured into sharing images with “stock value” and subjected to slut-shaming; however, participants sought to present “both sides” by acknowledging that boys face pressure and sexuality-based challenges of their own. This reflects a gendered double standard—girls as “sluts” and boys as “players” (Mascheroni et al., 2015)—as well as an emerging anxiety that boys’ issues may be overshadowed by what some perceive as “feminist rhetoric” (Nicholas & Agius, 2017). Furthermore, our findings also show that although the pressures on girls, like sexualisation, are acknowledged, they are positioned in ways that emphasise their culpability. For example, constructing girls’ sexting as attention-seeking positions them as succumbing to societal pressures and thus as responsible for their victimisation without fully considering the costs of rejecting performative femininity (see also Fix et al., 2021; Mascheroni et al., 2015).

Our analysis offers a novel contribution regarding female agency in the context of sexting. Our findings cohere with feminist research as, together, these repertoires highlight a “missing discourse” of girls’ desire and agency (Thorburn et al., 2021; Tolman, 2012). Consistent with Renold and Ringrose (2013), girls were viewed as either passive victims or savvy navigators of hyper-sexualised culture.

Our findings also show girls cast in more aggressive or manipulative roles (i.e., “mean girls”), extending Fix et al.’s (2021) discussion of girls’ sexual aggression. Yet, any form of female sexual agency is cast as deviant, invoking the troubled identity of power-hungry girlhood (Ringrose, 2006). The positioning of girls as likely to sext for revenge rather than out of sexual curiosity or desire echoes both long-standing cultural notions that vilify women who do not adhere to what is perceived as the safe choice (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012) and the absence of discourses on girls’ sexual curiosity. Such constructions signify gender trouble (Butler, 2003) by breaching traditional femininity and further displacing the notion of legitimate female desire (Ringrose, 2006). Agentic female sexuality disrupts the expected traditional dominant male norm, because

hegemonic masculinity is achieved by denying female agency (Connell, 2002); girls exhibiting such agency are positioned as deviant, as represented in our participants' constructions of adolescents in the context of sexting. Sometimes girls were constructed as more likely than boys to distribute images as a form of bullying or sexual aggression, a novel finding. In reality, the nonconsensual sharing of images seems to be about even among girls and boys (Madigan et al., 2018).

Our second contribution focuses on the way that our participants constructed boys' sexting practices. Contrary to girls, boys are portrayed as coercive initiators or victims of overlooked vulnerabilities. As with the #NotAllMen conversation (Nicholas & Agius, 2017), there is a "not always" rhetoric that deflects or dilutes girls' experiences, but the positive subject position of the "respectful boy" who consensually sexts is notably absent; boys can only be either victims or perpetrators of sexting. This points to a need for new positions wherein boys can be sexual without defaulting to macho or coercive scripts, and their vulnerabilities can be acknowledged in their own right, without being cast as a consequence of female emancipation. These constructions are heavily gendered, potentially situated within the current backlash against third-wave feminism (Nicholas & Agius, 2017).

Hence, overall, parents' talk served to undermine adolescent agency, promoting victim-blaming and failing to respond to issues of consent. Moreover, there was a distinct heteronormative bias in parental narratives that merits further study. Future work might explore parental talk in situ (e.g., online forums) to capture more nuanced or personal views less encumbered by the "pseudoscientist" stance in which we placed them by asking them about adolescent sexting in general (rather than, say, their own children's practices; Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Such research might also capture talk of class and race, which were not addressed in our study, and could provide further intersectional insights into the construction of sexting and gender.

In closing, the current discursive terrain offers few acceptable positions for adolescents beyond abstinence/innocence, reinforcing media moral panics (Strohmaier et al., 2014). Adolescents, girls and boys alike, are interpellated into passive or problematic subjectivities, restricting the development of youth-centric, agentic understandings of sexting and sexual exploration. We therefore highlight the need for new discursive possibilities that enable gender-sensitive, agency-focused conversations between parents and adolescents. Moving beyond danger-driven, moral-panic discourses could open the way for more youth-centred sex education, influencing policy and practice to better support adolescents' evolving sexual identities and autonomy (Donoghue, 2018).

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the participants who gave their time to be interviewed for this project. We are also grateful to Dean Fido for his helpful comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

Declaration of conflicting interests


The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


Funding


The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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