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Policy Brief

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Young People and Digital Intimacies

What is the evidence and what does it mean?

Where next?

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Executive Statement

The digital age makes new forms of connection possible, enabling 'digital intimacies' including the many practices of communicating, producing and sharing intimate content ('sexting'; selfies; making, viewing and circulating sexual content; using hook-up apps; and searching online for advice about sex). Where young people engage in digital intimacies, policymakers have tended to respond with alarm and commissioned research premised on demonstrating negative outcomes. Young people's take up of technologies is contrasted with previous generations and ideas of 'healthy', 'natural' and 'normal' sexual development which ignores and marginalises diversity of sexuality and sexual expression, and leads to campaigns that seek to supervise and regulate youth sexuality. This in turn results in legislation and censorship with consequences including blocking websites for sexual abuse support and sexual education.

The government has suspended introduction of Age Verification for pornographic websites but is pressing ahead with its 'Online Harms' White Paper which plans for broader and more comprehensive regulatory frameworks in the interests of protecting children and young people in online spaces. The UK government has positioned itself as a world leader in developing new regulatory approaches to tackle online harms but the evidence base for those approaches is neither robust nor nuanced enough to respond to the increasing mediatization of everyday life and sexual identity.

This briefing advocates for a broader recognition of young people's investments in digital intimacies, acknowledging what growing up and learning about sex in the digital age means for young people in order to inform future policy and practice. Policies that are informed by robust research and understandings that accommodate the nuanced practices of digital intimacy will provide the support that young people need and deserve as they navigate their media lives, develop awareness of ethical and unethical behaviour, and what is right for them.

KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Young people use digital media technologies for a range of reasons and purposes, including communications with family and friends, for learning and entertainment and, for many, those communications, learning and entertainment are sexual. Research, policy and practice need to work together to understand young people's engagements with digital media technologies.

Message 1: 'digital intimacies' are a collection of practices with significant importance to young people;

Message 2: adults' concerns are not the same as those expressed by young people - teens will ignore perceptions of the 'problems' and dismiss solutions if they are irrelevant to their concerns;

Recommendation 1: acknowledge young people's motivations for engaging with digital technologies, particularly how they negotiate the trade-offs between risks and rewards;

Recommendation 2: investigate how different social and institutional settings (e.g. home vs school) impact the meanings and experiences of digital intimacies;

Recommendation 3: avoid conflation of taking risks (for example, sending a naked selfie to a potential partner) with harmful behaviour (such as posting an image without consent i.e. revenge porn);

Recommendation 4: recognize young people's rights to sexual expression, the importance of comprehensive and inclusive sex education and responsive programmes for digital literacy;

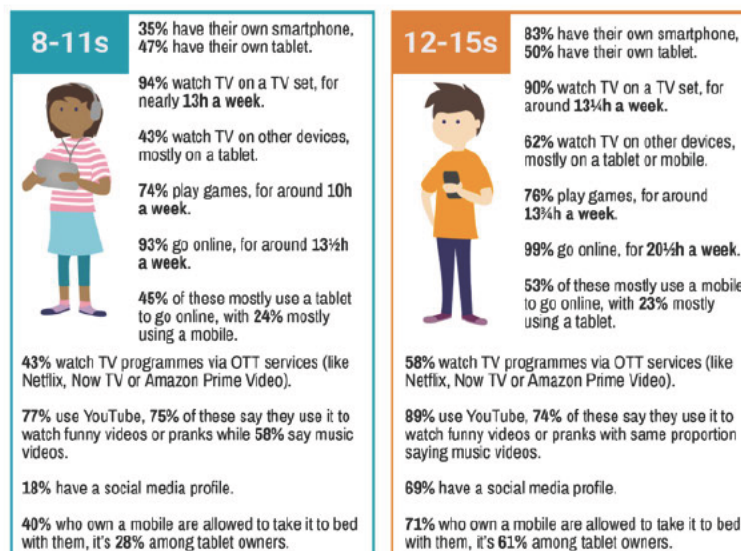
Recommendation 5: shift from abstinence and prevention to ethical decision making and consent to address and challenge problematic social norms;

Recommendation 6: explore alternatives to legal solutions, ensuring that any interventions centre young people's interests and needs.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The take up of digital and mobile technologies is ubiquitous in the UK, and young people in particular are constantly connected to media platforms. Parents, caregivers and policymakers want to protect young people from harmful content, or perceived harmful outcomes of engaging with digital intimacies. Policy approaches to date have focused on prevention and prohibition. However, such approaches will fail to support young people effectively if they do not recognise the inevitability of young people's involvements with digital media, or attempt to understand the complexity of how young people negotiate the risks and rewards of engaging in digital intimacies and how those motivations and tradeoffs of engagement are shaped by wider social processes.

This briefing paper responds to the current open consultation on the DCMS White Paper into Online Harms¹ and the ongoing discussions within various government departments regarding young people, their use of mobile and online technologies and the perceived dangers of pornography, sexting and forms of cyberbullying. While some commentators in the press are skeptical of the need for further research in these areas, this briefing proposes that the evidence base underpinning current regulatory moves is neither as robust nor as self-evident as its advocates might insist.



From Ofcom Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2018

(Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2018>)

LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACES

The traditional research base underpinning policy has tended to polarise practices as 'healthy' or 'harmful', and effects of media as 'good' or 'bad'. The lack of nuance in this approach means that legislation and other interventions proceed apace while understanding little about what young people are actually doing online, their motivations, or their experiences.

Claims of 'addiction' have been made against social media, video gaming, taking selfies and pornography, but these claims, and responses to them, fail to acknowledge that we all, young people included, live in an increasingly digital world. To support young people as they navigate the digital world, policy needs to start from understanding their perspectives.

Psychological or epidemiological research tends to dominate the policy agenda. Most studies in this area will explore whether or not a particular practice has 'effects' (for example, how might adolescents' use of pornography affect their attitudes towards sexual equality) and use cross-sectional study designs which are unable to determine whether any relationships found are causal or not. More than this, they cannot tell in which direction the associations travel, although they often start from the assumption that the combination of new media technologies and sexual content can only be 'harmful' for young people.

While prevalence studies are assumed to be significant, their findings vary widely, for example some studies report that less than 20% of young people have ever viewed porn, while others put the figure at over 90%. Additionally, studies conceptualise some aspects of sexuality and sexual expression as problematic, reporting behaviours such as 'casual sex', anal sex, or 'more permissive sexual attitudes' as negative outcomes, findings which run counter to contemporary sexual mores and acceptance of diverse sexualities. Underlying much of the public discourse is the assumption that practices like viewing pornography are harmful, with only negative impacts. That assumption is rarely queried in policy circles nor is there any critical evaluation of who considers pornography a problem and why.

Often, evidence that fits with very traditional norms of sexual behaviour and common-sense solutions (e.g. in calls for regulation) is favoured in media reporting and policy planning, while

the more complex historical and social contexts which shape young people's decisions, attitudes and behaviours are side-lined.

Both boys and girls may be acknowledged as at risk of victimisation through tech (e.g. cyber-bullying) and research often points out gendered issues – e.g. girls feeling pressured into sex and boys treating girls as 'sex objects'. However, in the absence of recognising other underlying inequalities, such research often replicates 'victim-blaming' and sexist explanations of boys' 'natural' attraction to pornography and girls' lack of resilience and 'low self-esteem'.

Legislation and campaigns have reproduced moral norms where youth sexuality is seen as a problem to be supervised and regulated, imposing out-dated and often problematic standards of behaviour, rather than recognising that many young people don't see sexual experimentation as inherently shameful or that they may be both producers and consumers of images of intimacy and sexuality across platforms. Most policy approaches refuse to recognise that the digital world offers important forms of learning and development for teens and young adults and seeks to punish where there ought to be support.

Much of the current media and policy framing of young people's digital intimacies poses significant obstacles to establishing useful and effective strategies for ensuring young people's sexual health and wellbeing.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY

There is a wealth of research in media and cultural studies, sociology, gender and sexuality studies dedicated to understanding the complexities of participating across different social media platforms, technologies and communities but while some of this has been taken up by practitioners working with young people, very little has found its way into policy making or media reporting.

Funded by the Wellcome Trust [207971], we explored research into digital media and young people's practices – first reviewing the growing number of rapid evidence assessments and systematic reviews and then moving onto more qualitative research which examines how young people are performing and recording their intimate lives: chatting on Facebook messenger, sending selfies and curating their lives on Instagram, swiping left and right on dating apps, flirting through Snapchat's disappearing images and more. We wanted to gather an overview of research exploring the ways digital technologies might allow for experimentation and exploration of intimacy and how young people have embraced those practices. So, rather than going back, as most of the recent government commissioned reports have done, to research undertaken in the pre-internet era we focused on contemporary studies relevant to the following questions:

Harm is not the only outcome of young people's interactions with digital media, and prevention and prohibition are not necessarily the best ways to support young people as they navigate growing up.

- How do young people perceive, define, understand, engage with, negotiate and use digital technologies and content?
- What meanings do young people place on digital intimacies? What functions do digital intimacies play in the context of friendships, relationships and the peer group?
- In what ways are young people constrained by adult concerns when it comes to digital intimacies?
- How do young people negotiate the complexities of their own environments, for example ethics, morals and social standings, and what importance do the groups that young people belong to have for their experiences and practices with regard to digital intimacies?

We considered a broad range of literature, paying particular attention to respecting young people's sexualities and their sexual agency, pleasure and rights; valuing sexual diversity (rather than heteronormativity); recognising that meanings in mediated images are socially negotiated by people in varied contexts; and examining how young people navigate, understand, consume, react to and engage with such material. We gave greatest weight to research that:

- made its theoretical framework and methodology clear and transparent;
- focussed on people's access to, engagement with, and/or understanding of digital technologies, rather than, for example, on assumptions about the impact of digital content;
- was centred on young people;
- was relevant to current and emerging trends in the way that young people access and engage with digital technologies;
- investigated media use in the context of everyday practices and understood digital platforms and technologies not as opposed to or separate from 'real life'.

None of the research highlighted below takes exclusively positive positions on young peoples' engagements with technology, or sexual content, or intimate behaviours. Instead these interdisciplinary approaches seek to explore the importance and significances for teens and young adults of being online, communicating via social media, experiencing intimacies and exploring sexual identities.



[Young people] do not see themselves as using social media but as LIVING in them, as a digital environment that is akin to the urban and natural environments that envelop their daily lives.²



Young people's practices of digital intimacy, summarised in the boxes below, include actively producing, sharing, viewing, communicating, and searching in ways which shape their lives and relationships.³

Social Media

For some time now, stories in the press have suggested that social media makes young people depressed and isolated, but a very recent study has suggested that any such 'effects are tiny—arguably trivial'.⁴ Other research has examined how social media are important to young people in many and complementary ways, as forms of self-production, where young people curate images and/or their identity.⁵ Waite (2011) found that social media interactions give young people a sense of belonging, making their friendships visible in spaces that are relatively safe.⁶ Making sophisticated judgments about privacy and safety, reflected in the information they choose to share online,⁷ young people are continually developing 'tacit rules and understandings'⁸ through their participation on social media. Messaging in particular plays a key role in maintaining every day relationships,⁹ and mobile technologies are valued because of their immediacy; they increase intimacy by offering contact with someone else at any time.¹⁰ Technology enables relationships. For LGBT young people in particular, online communications counter the isolation and stigma experienced in offline spaces.¹¹

Selfies

Selfie practices, particularly by girls, have often been described in moralistic and politicised terms.¹² Teenage girls' selfies have been condemned as responsible for or symptomatic of their 'struggle with low self-esteem'¹³ and as evidence of social isolation, that 'selfies were for people without friends'.¹⁴ These accounts reflect social norms and anxieties, and maintain negative stereotypes that justify control over young women's behaviours while ignoring the importance of selfies in youth culture.¹⁵ Sharing images with friends ('fretting') and production and exchange of images within (female) friendship groups¹⁶ is seen as low-risk and enjoyable, and displays and builds trust, intimacy and connection.¹⁷

Sexting

Connected to selfies are the more sexual forms of image sharing, broadly known as '**sexting**' although that term doesn't reflect young people's practices and experience, and they don't use the term sexting themselves.¹⁸ Young people share images for many reasons, with different people, across different types of relationships (committed and casual), as well as during a pre-relationship stage.¹⁹ Estimates of numbers of young people engaging in this practice vary widely; one systematic review found the figure ranged from less than one percent to 60% in different studies.²⁰ Many young people don't consider these pictures inherently shameful,²¹ although media stories of risk, shame and blame around sexting meant that many young people were not sure it was a 'good idea' even if they had had positive experiences. Young people were less concerned about the possibility of peers seeing a naked picture of them than of their families seeing it (that was considered mortifying).²²

Risks

While adults want to lessen the risks young people face, research has found that some young people share nude images of themselves precisely because it *could be* risky. Risky-ness was sought for because it offers particular pleasures such as feeling 'empowered, free, and excited or aroused... find[ing] a connection to their bodies that they could not elsewhere'²³. Some young people want to exercise and practise emotional skills through risk-taking. This is a complex area requiring more, and sensitive, exploration.

Image Sharing

Image sharing practices are shaped by social norms on gender and sexuality.²⁴ Qualitative research shows that boys' unethical and harassing behaviour is taken for granted, and that it is considered that girls cannot and should not trust boys, whatever the circumstances. Importantly, the gendered nature of image sharing practices are not specific to image sharing, but rather are 'extensions of the kinds of gendered behaviours already going on in the school grounds'.²⁵ Solutions will require more than simply teaching young people not to share images as research has demonstrated that this may inadvertently create a victim-blaming culture in schools, thus victimising individuals further and perhaps discouraging future disclosure of actual injury.²⁶

Pornography

Pornography and young people's access to it are perhaps the key issue for parents and policymakers, although young people generally regard porn as just a part of everyday life²⁷. For some young people, viewing pornography enables sexual exploration and recognition of their sexuality. In the absence of high quality formal RSE, pornography can be a source of information about sex;²⁸ and can be particularly important for LGBT young people.²⁹ Little is known about *what* people learn (positively or negatively) or the relative significance of what is learned in pornography compared to what is learned from other sources.³⁰ A problem with pornography as sex education is that it does not necessarily offer a sex positive celebration of sexuality *per se*,³¹ and does not reflect the diversity of sexual experiences or the complexities of consent and power relations between partners, although lack of concern about consent is not only restricted to pornography. As Marston argues 'focusing solely on pornography risks becoming a distraction [... as] we ignore the wider social context that supports coercive practices' (p.2).³²

Information

Finally, young people use digital media to seek **information**, in myriad ways. Digital technologies provide alternative informal sources of sexuality which young people find more engaging and relevant than formal sexuality education.³³ The internet allows young people to seek out and access information about sex autonomously and independently³⁴ and to share and produce that information amongst themselves. Numerous studies suggest this provides an opportunity to disrupt and challenge (although also to reproduce) dominant norms about bodies and sexuality via channels that are relevant, engaging and meaningful to peers.

The research outlined here offers discussions of intimate relationships (platonic, romantic and sexual friendships) as they are made, maintained and sometimes lost on- and off-line. Stories of consent and non-consent, pleasures and disappointments, good times and bad, difficult emotions and the impacts of gendered and sexual inequalities are tangled.

It is vital that young people know where and how to seek help when they need it, and feel able to do so. An important finding of McGeeney & Hanson's research (2017) was that most young people did not know how to respond to hurtful or harmful things they saw online. This included both things that were harmful to them and others doing hurtful or harmful things. Perhaps because they did not know how to respond, there was a tendency to blame the person experiencing the abuse. The responses of schools, parents and authorities are also

important. For schools, Dobson and Ringrose (2016) suggest that approaches that depict the school as a hostile environment rather than as a place of support, care and social justice, can have potentially negative impacts on students who need support. For example, where the school environment blames the sender of a nude photo for the negative consequences that they experience after it is non-consensually shared, the sender will not feel able to seek help.

As Sex and Relationships Education will become compulsory from 2020 we have the opportunity to give young people the tools to navigate their relationships on- and off-line. In research exploring the impacts of comprehensive sexual education, four interventions were found to be useful – 1) getting young people to reflect on romantic relationships and helping them question whether jealousy and possessive behaviours are signs of love; 2) developing their skills to communicate about sexuality, inequitable relationships, and reproductive health; 3) encouraging care-seeking behaviour; and 4) addressing norms around gender and sexuality, for example demystifying and decreasing discrimination towards sexually diverse populations.³⁵

Our review highlighted the role qualitative research, which puts young people at its centre, can play in deconstructing the healthy/harmful, good/bad dichotomies which dominate public debate. **Moving away from the idea of 'harms' (which are rarely defined) would not undermine the concept of risk but the shift in focus would enable more detailed conceptualisations of how particular practices might be risky, how best to manage those risks while enabling young people to understand their own motivations in order to develop the knowledge and skills to ensure against being *at risk*.**

By shifting focus away from the polarised positions, policymakers could create systems and interventions that offer young people the holistic support they need to understand and negotiate their and others' digital intimacies.

KEY MESSAGES

In order to reveal the complexity and diversity of young people's digital lives research has to take interdisciplinary approaches and centre on the concerns as young people perceive them.

Young people engage in digital intimacies in different ways, for different reasons, and with different people. Their motivations and experiences are diverse and vary between different populations and in different settings.

The online and offline worlds are not separate. Media platforms and technologies are part of family life, friendships, identities and romantic relationships. Smartphones are now integral to young people's everyday lives, creating virtual bonds through 'co-presence' and the ability to be both 'here and there' that facilitates intimate relationships.

Young people (to various degrees) are interested in sex and sexuality and in the absence of adequate educational and health resources they will seek out content which answers their questions about sex.

Digital intimacies can present risks - technologies make it easy to share material, sometimes in unsafe ways, and technologies may facilitate bullying and harassment, but focusing solely on harms comes at the expense of understanding the significances of digital technologies in young people's lives, the opportunities they offer, and the complicated but important experience and negotiation of risk as part of growing up.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Focusing on practices such as 'sexting' or 'viewing pornography' as entirely separate actions which can be legislated against fails to comprehend the connections between sexual and non-sexual ways of interacting via mobile technologies and social networks.

Online activities are not without risks or problem-free but if interventions are to be useful or considered relevant by young people they will need to recognise those young people's commitments to, agency and rewards in, self-expression and sexual development.

Problematic issues, such as non-consensual image-sharing, should not be treated as examples of the 'bad behaviour' or the 'moral-laxity' of individuals; instead, the social contexts of gendered and sexual inequalities need to be recognised in research design and, in practice and policy settings, to be challenged in comprehensive sexual health and sexuality education interventions.

Parents and other stakeholders want to protect young people from harmful content but calls for time limits or abstinence from media in the digital era are not plausible solutions - instead young people need comprehensive support as they navigate their media use and develop understanding of what is ethical and unethical behaviour, and what is right for them.

Risks and safety implications are often raised and just as often followed by calls for censorship, legislation or abstinence (from media practices) – all crude responses bringing their own consequences. As we have already seen web filters can end up blocking sexual abuse support and sex education sites, while calls for abstinence remain oblivious to the strong social pressures to participate in both on- and off-line media environments. Policy should be developed with meaningful reference to research which has investigated and appreciated young people's investments in participating across media forms.

Shifting the focus from abstinence and prevention to ethical decision making and consent would help to address and challenge problematic social norms that put pressure on both young women and young men to behave in certain ways, whilst recognising young people's rights to sexual expression.

One way of recognising both the positive affordances of technologies in young people's sexual lives and their potential risks would be to start with what good looks like. This thinking would allow a perspective that moves beyond preventing harm to think about what good, positive, and healthy relationships look like, both online and offline. A narrative that shifts the focus onto how to achieve 'good', rather than how to prevent harm, would explicitly recognise young people's sexuality, pleasure and rights, as well as the ways in which young people negotiate some of the risks that accompany the practices that they engage in and the skills they need to do this.

The Government's White Paper suggests the need to empower users of online technologies and sensibly proposes a new online media literacy strategy will be developed in consultation with a range of stakeholders. Unfortunately, there is little indication that young people will be invited to contribute meaningfully to that strategy. Any media literacy programme intended for young people needs to start from their experiences - positive and negative - and interests – sexual and non-sexual - in order to meet their needs now and into the future.

Future policy must recognise young people as capable, acknowledging their sexual interests and rights within the broader contexts of digital cultures and experiences of intimacy.

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