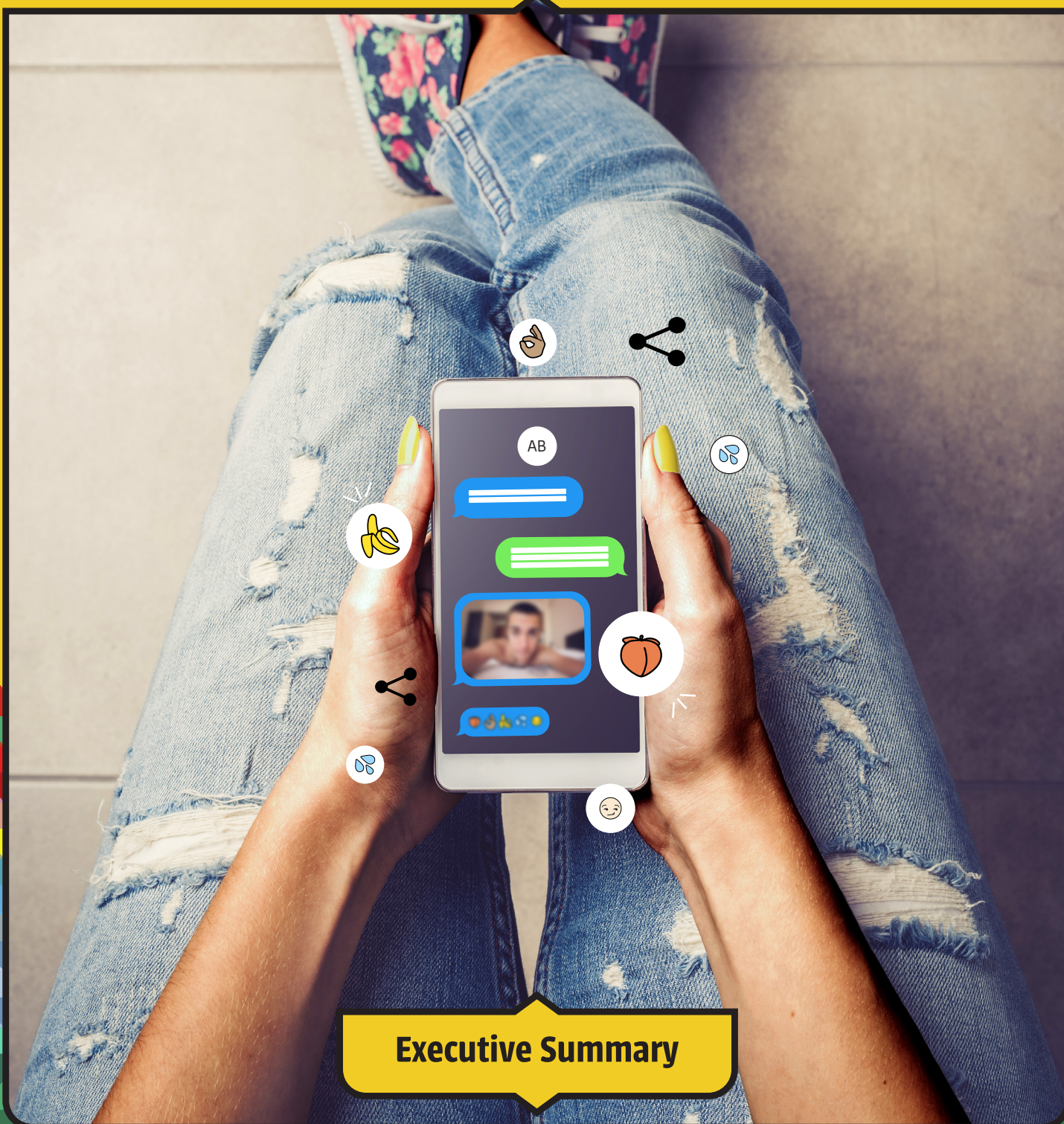


# Understanding and Combatting Youth Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse

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**Executive Summary**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND

Many researchers emphasise how 'sexting'—i.e. the consensual exchange of sexual images—can be a form of sexual expression and intimacy formation for teens (Burkett, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2014; Villacampa, 2017). Distinct from these consensual digital practices, image-based sexual harassment and abuse describes a subset of nonconsensual and harmful online behaviours that constitute as digital sexual violence and require immediate intervention:

### **(1) Image-based sexual harassment (IBSH)**

Image-based sexual harassment describes two forms of digital sexual violence: (a) unwanted sexual images (e.g. cyberflashing or unsolicited dick pics), and (b) unwanted solicitation for sexual images (McGlynn and Johnson, 2020). We define 'images' broadly to encompass all forms of visual content, such as photographs, videos, live videos, chats, etc.

### **(2) Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA)**

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) refers to the non-consensual recording, distribution, and/or threat of distribution of nude or sexual images. Although sometimes referred to as 'revenge porn' in popular culture, this term fails to account for the many different contexts in which IBSA can take place.

While these different forms of digital sexual violence are 'new' to the extent that technology enables them (boyd, 2014), these practices are connected to the same unequal, hierarchical gender relations as traditional forms of sexual violence (Henry and Powell, 2015; Powell and Henry, 2017). These forms of digital sexual violence most often involve the harassment and abuse of women and girls (Dodge & Spencer, 2018; Powell, 2010). Unfortunately, these practices are becoming increasingly common as 47% of women aged 18 to 24 years reported receiving an unsolicited dick pic in a recent poll (YouGov, 2018), and 9% of girls in Plan UK's study (2020) were asked to send intimate images of themselves and/or received unwanted images during the first UK lockdown period in early 2020 alone.

## THE STUDY

Our combined qualitative and quantitative research responds to gaps in our understanding of image-based sexual harassment and abuse, as distinct from the abstract category of 'sexting'. We conducted focus group interviews with 144 diverse young people (aged 12 to 18) across seven schools. The majority of participants were under 15 years-old, creating a unique data set with children under the age of sexual consent (16) and under the legal sexting age (18).

The focus groups were structured as part of Sharing Networked Images Practices (SNIP) mApping workshops that explored how young people create images for social media sharing, and also the sexual content that they receive via social media apps. For our quantitative method, we administered an online survey to 336 young people. Survey questions explored their experiences with a range of image-sharing practices, including their experiences of receiving unwanted sexual images, unwanted solicitation for sexual images and image-based sexual abuse.

Through documenting the digital platforms in use and how technological affordances mediate behaviour, capacities and decision making around image sharing, our research contributes a unique viewpoint to the research on digital sexual violence. Furthermore, by documenting young people's experiences of the support they received when faced with digital sexual violence, our findings have important policy and practice implications for a range of stakeholders, including schools, families and communities.

## KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Technology facilitates image-based sexual harassment and abuse**

Social media platforms create opportunities for users to engage in image-based sexual harassment and abuse, through their various technical functions-referred to as 'technological affordances' (boyd, 2014). In particular, Snapchat enables imagebased sexual harassment and abuse through its quick adds, shout outs, streaks, score points and lack of identity verification measures. Instagram facilitates unwanted sexual content through its direct message and group chat features.
- 2 Image-based sexual harassment overwhelmingly impacts girls**

First, adolescent girls often reported receiving unwanted images of male genitals (i.e. cyberflashing) from unknown adult men, and known and unknown boys (same-aged peers). A large majority of girls who received such images reported feeling 'disgusted', 'embarrassed', and 'confused'.

Second, girls commonly reported receiving requests for sexual images from unknown adult men, and known and unknown boys (same-aged peers). Of those who had been asked to send nudes, girls felt more pressure to do so, compared to boys. Solicitation was often initiated through being sent an unsolicited dick pic-referred to as a 'transactional dick pic.'
- 3 Image-based sexual abuse is heavily influenced by gender norms, and an intersectional approach to contextualised harm is needed**

Boys were rewarded for sharing girls' images amongst their peers, as an indication of their masculinity status. Girls were shamed and victim-blamed for having their image shared without their consent. Further, IBSA risk and harms are not simply gendered but also, deeply classed and raced, with young people having variable access to support. Thus, we argue for a nuanced approach to understanding and contextualising digital sexual violence.
- 4 Young people rarely report image-based sexual harassment and abuse**

Young people experienced very little relevant and useful support in mitigating these online harms. Rates of reporting to either the social media platforms or to parents or school were nearly non-existent.
- 5 Need for more effective and age-appropriate digital sex education**

Reflecting on their own stories, young people offered useful insight into their experience of what works well in schools. Emphasising the value of schools focusing on the actions of perpetrators and avoiding victimblaming approaches. Recognising the value of specialist expertise, smaller group formats, with younger facilitators and a move away from whole school assemblies to convey important and sensitive messages.



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