

# 'It's a generational thing, really'. Understandings of sexual rights in a digital age

Sexualities

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## Abstract

Deriving from a large-scale research project on intimacy in data-driven culture in Finland, I build on a sub-study examining Finland's presumed sexual digital divide between generations. I analysed in-depth, semi-structured research discussions with six social media users who actively participated in the online discussion following the posting of a video on TikTok by the National Board of Investigation on the potential risks and dangers of sending nude images online. I wanted to know why this particular 'awareness-raising video' gained so much negative feedback from its young audiences on TikTok and other social media platforms. By using the idea of 'generational sexualities', I focus on the shared social imaginary the research participants seem to have on the sexual and digital divide between generations. As a result of my analysis, I propose that the idea of a generational gap regarding the digital modes of sexual engagement is a culturally and socially shared narrative contributing to a disconnective effect between the generations in sexual matters. Furthermore, the analysis of my research materials reveals that young people's 'full sexual rights' operate as a specific generational narrative that organises and structures my research participants' perspectives of what is inclusive and socially just sexual education. The educational efforts must go beyond risk and harm as 'no-sexting' educational materials may contribute to sexual discrimination and marginalisation, increase social inequality and negatively impact young people's sexual wellbeing.

## Keywords

Sexual rights, sex education, generational sexualities, mediated sexualities, sexual digital divide, social imaginaries

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## Introduction

Everyday sexual experiences are not only increasingly mediated and mediated, but they are also highly visualised. Increasing visualisation of sexual exchanges has profound implications for sexual communications and how the sexual expression is enabled and performed in the digital sphere. Digital devices and platforms allow people to explore their sexual interests and desires. People, young and adult alike, can also express their sexuality, pursue pleasure and initiate or expand their sexual relationships via digital means. (Widman et al., 2021; Spišák, 2021; Tiidenberg and Van der Nagel, 2020; Dobson et al., 2018; McGeeney and Hanson, 2017). The digital modes of sexuality have also brought forth severe legal and ethical challenges concerning privacy, safety and protection from, for example, grooming, sexual harassment and shaming, unwanted exposure and sexual exploitation (for discussion, see, for example, Setty, 2020).

In response to these developments, a body of interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry on an intersection of sexuality and digital space has emerged. This scholarship has focused on the role digital environments and technologies play in mediating sexual interaction. Several studies have demonstrated, for example, the potential impact of digital platforms on sexual selfhood projects, sexual practices online and the role of digital platforms in sustaining sexual (sub)cultures (for summary, see, for example, Adams-Santos, 2020). The terms such as ‘techno-sexuality’ (Waskull, 2014), ‘digital romance’ (McGeeney and Hanson, 2017), ‘mediated sexuality’ (Andreassen et al., 2018; Attwood et al., 2017; Albury, 2016; Ross, 2005) and ‘digital sexuality’ (Marston, 2022; Renold and Ringrose, 2017; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2016) have been taken up to put focus on the specific ways in which mediated and digitalised forms of sexuality and the various platform affordances structure and organise everyday life’s sexual practices. Contributions to this literacy have been critical and enriched by various perspectives and intersectional voices. However, given that age is a prominent factor in organising differences within societies, it is surprising that generation is still a relatively disregarded concept for thinking about digital modes of sexuality (some exceptions include studies inquiring after adolescent sexual communication with parents in the digital age, see, for example, Widman et al., 2021; Buchanan et al., 2017).

Deriving from a large-scale research project on intimacy in data-driven culture in Finland (2019–2022/2025), I inquire about the presumed sexual digital divide between generations. I analysed in-depth, semi-structured research discussions with social media users who actively participated in the online debate following the posting of a video on TikTok by the National Board of Investigation. The video tried to educate young audiences about the potential risks and dangers of sending nude images online. I wanted to ask the active young online debaters why this particular ‘awareness-raising video’ gained so much negative feedback from its target audience.

By using the idea of ‘generational sexualities’ (Plummer, 2010), I focus on the shared and embodied social imaginings of generational differences the research participants seem to have on the sexual practices in the digital age. As a result of my analysis, I propose that the notion of a generational gap regarding the digital modes of sexual engagement is a socially imagined one, a culturally and socially shared narrative contributing to and

shaping the idea of a generational gap in connection to the sexual digital divide. I argue that this socially imagined notion of a sexual digital divide contributes to and materialises in vastly differing generational standpoints that have a disconnective effect between the generations. Furthermore, the analysis of my research materials reveals that young people's 'full sexual rights' operate as a specific generational narrative that organises and structures my research participants' perspectives of what is inclusive and socially just sexual education. The educational efforts must go beyond risk and harm as 'no-sexting' educational materials may contribute to sexual discrimination and marginalisation, increase social inequality and negatively impact young people's sexual wellbeing. Therefore, this article also promotes a more sexual rights-focused perspective in sexual education and debate about sexual safety.

### **Setting the scene: No-sexting TikTok video arouses heated uproar among young finns**

In Finland, young people use TikTok, a video-sharing social networking app, for fun and creative dance, lip sync and challenge videos and civic engagement. Young Finnish TikTokers are spreading climate change or COVID-19 awareness, supporting various social movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), #MeToo and Pride events, and discussing different aspects of equality and non-discrimination.

Finnish public authorities have noted TikTok's appeal among younger generations. The former 'no boomer zone' is increasingly occupied by Finnish public officers, civil servants, educators, youth work representatives, health care professionals and the like to reach young Finns in digital environments. The coexistence of different generations with different agendas and interests has been peaceful amongst the Finnish community of the platform. However, the video titled *Rewind doesn't work in real life. Think before you share*; uploaded in November 2020 by the National Board of Investigation (NBI, 2020), rubbed the young Finnish TikTokers the wrong way.

The video illuminates how an intimate photo sent to trusted friends starts to spread via digital means. In the background of the video, a young man offers a cautionary tale of a 'context collapse' (Boyd, 2014), describing the unexpected, unwanted, out-of-control and personally mortifying effects of social media. He explains how 'even his mother' saw this supposedly sexually charged photo of himself. The young man describes how the image ended up on presumably illicit platforms of the Tor anonymity network. The video ends with the moral of the story: 'Initially, I shouldn't have sent that picture to anyone. It would have been even better if I hadn't taken the picture in the first place'. In other words, a 'no-sexting policy' is offered as the solution to avoid unwanted sexual exposure in digital environments in this educational message.

On TikTok, the video gained an outraged response. Young Finnish TikTokers wanted the National Board of Investigation to remove the video as unnecessarily damaging for the possible victims of online sexual coercion, requiring a change in focus as this anonymised user-generated comment from a young TikTok user illustrates:

The way some professional educators or the police are talking about these things is so awkward and moralising. — It seems that it doesn't even come to their minds to shift the focus to the perpetrators. Instead of saying don't send your pictures to your romantic partners, the better way to educate is to say don't share other people's nudes nonconsensually. For example, don't share photos nonconsensually, don't harass anybody sexually and don't do sexual acts without permission.

On TikTok alone, the video quickly received well over 1600 comments and nearly 1800 shares, making this post the most engaging video the National Board of Investigation has published to date. The heated debate spread from TikTok to national news outlets, their respective discussion boards, and other social media platforms.

I was fascinated by the sheer volume of social media comments and individual news articles one less-than-a-minute-long awareness video on 'sexting' generated. At first sight, the debate about the digital practices of sexual exchanges seemed to be just a continuation of a long-time discussion about the regulation and supervision of youth sexuality (Spišák, 2021; Smith et al., 2019; Hasinoff, 2015; Albury and Crawford, 2012), situated in the contemporary context where the increasing mediation of social life has given fresh urgency to the topic. However, in this debate, more than just the traditional and protectionist voices gained visibility. Especially on TikTok and other social media platforms, the voices of young Finns that challenged the educational premises of the awareness-raising video were highly present and demanded to be taken seriously. I wanted to dig deeper into this case that felt so rich with content and meaning, aiming to discover why young Finns seemed so invested in criticising the *Rewind...* video.

## Study design and methodology

I have explored Finnish regulatory authorities' attempts to mitigate young people's mediated sexual exchanges elsewhere (Spišák, 2021). In this article, I concentrate on the research discussions I conducted after being immersed in the 'no-sexting' TikTok video case described in the previous section. I wanted to understand this affective debate more profoundly from young people's point of view. I contacted ten young Finnish social media influencers and equality activists via my organisational email who had already taken a firm stand against the educational premises of the *Rewind...* video on their own public social media platforms. Some had even been interviewed by national news media outlets regarding this case. Six of them, aged 20 to 26, agreed to do an in-depth, semi-structured research discussion with me on Zoom, a cloud-based video communications app. Our recorded one-to-one talks were transcribed and anonymised. These discussion sessions lasting 330 minutes altogether, generated 90 pages of text.

Regarding 'the tricks of the trade' when doing research discussions about sexuality, I went through some research articles that examine sexuality in interview settings (see, for example, Thorpe et al., 2018; Schlagdenhauffen, 2014; Walby, 2010). Furthermore, I consulted my colleague, who has long-term practical experience in clinical sexology. They hold the authorised status of the Nordic Association for Clinical Sexology (NACS), which validates their qualifications and higher professional

standards within the field of sexology. Together we went through the draft of my research discussion outline and examined ‘the register of vocabulary’ (Schlagdenhauffen, 2014) that contributes to the forms of communication in research situations. We also considered minimising the distance between the researcher and the research participants. We reflected on how my own age, (sexual) identity, experiences and assumptions about ‘the other’ may reflect in the research context.

Furthermore, my colleague gave me hands-on guidance on forming an affirmative allyship before the discussion session. They also guided me in facilitating reflection on the discussion session and reorientation after the session. I also had the opportunity to offer the research participants the possibility to anonymously contact a sexual health expert in case they wanted to discuss further the issues covered in the research discussions. The University of Turku research ethics board approved the study’s design and the use of all research materials.

I discussed with the research participants why this particular awareness-raising video gained so much negative feedback from its young audiences on TikTok and other social media platforms. The basic answer to this question was that ‘the world has changed’, and the notions of ‘real life’, sexuality, gender and dating practices are different from before, making this an upsetting, unsettling and uncomfortable issue *for older generations*.

I used the reflexive thematic analysis formulated by Braun and Victoria Clarke (2022) to categorise and systematically organise the research discussions to identify, analyse and interpret recurring patterns and themes. Since the idea of a generational sexual digital divide was constantly reiterated throughout the research discussions, this article aims to think of and analyse the discussions through the concept of ‘generational sexualities’ (Plummer, 2010). Generation is not just an entity constructed based on birth years but, more broadly, as a group of people bound together by essential social experiences (Plummer, 2010: 172–176). As Plummer (2010: 187) formulates, the idea of generational sexualities focuses on ‘how history lives complexly and pluralistically in the present, how it continually fashions and shapes our everyday lives’, sexual practices included. I have found this framework enormously inspiring when dissecting the complexities, tensions and temporal emphases in the research discussions on the descriptions of changing contextual settings surrounding age, sexuality, digital sexual practices and sexual rights.

Another analytical concept I use is the idea of *the embodied social imaginings of generational differences* to more clearly elaborate on how the research participants imagine and narrate their and their peers’ sexual existence with other generations. Social imaginaries (Taylor, 2002: 91) refer not merely to ‘a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society’. In this study, the idea of social imaginaries sheds light on the deeper normative notions and narratives that draw on shared notions, understandings, values and experiences of everyday life. Following Lupton (2021), I see the embodied social imaginings of generational differences as ‘powerful cultural resources for making sense of and enacting new technologies that contribute to shaping public responses and are materialised in practices’.

## The results of the study

In a nutshell, all my research participants were highly critical of the Tiktok video by the National Board of Investigation on the risks and dangers of sending nudes online. They consider this kind of awareness-raising of sexual matters to be outdated and to represent a risk-based approach to sexual education rather than one based on sexual rights and a consent-based approach. All of them consider digital platforms a significant aspect of the everyday sexual lives of their age group. They see platformed dimensions of sexual lives clearly as a generational experience which also impacts how sexual safety is conceptualised and understood. They also offer the idea of sexual rights as a generational narrative that serves, in their opinion, the young much better than shame-inducing authority warnings that reiterate traditional discourses on the inherent risks and harm associated with sexual behaviour in digital environments (Spišák et al., 2021).

### *Platformed dimensions of sexual lives as a generational experience*

According to my research participants, social media platforms and interactive technologies form a significant everyday environment for the members of their generation, overlapping and intertwining with the mundane routines of everyday life. My research participants repeatedly underline that if the contexts of younger generations' social lives have become more platformed, the same goes for intimate relations, their sexual lives included:

Researcher: Could you reflect on the role of screens and devices as part of young people's relationships these days?

Research participant: Nearly all my peers I know, singles I mean, have profiles on Tinder and the likes, and they look for partners online. It's more of a norm than an exception that we seek partners via screens. And especially now, during the pandemic, when we haven't been able to see other people face-to-face and go on a date, dating via Zoom or FaceTime has become even more common. — It's pretty interesting how fast these things have changed. (Interview 106611/6)

Researcher: You already mentioned that we should talk about it [sending sexual images] more. Have you already noticed public discussion about this issue, for example, on social media?

Research participant: You mean regarding sending nudes?

R: Yes.

RP: We talk quite a lot about how much people send these kinds of images, although it's somehow stigmatised. It would be best if you didn't admit that. Well, perhaps it's not such a bad thing among us young. But if we think of adults who are older than me and how they perceive these things, I think they don't understand. — Because I think it's totally natural since social media and the Internet ARE part of young people's lives. It's as real space as

some shopping mall's seating areas where people used to hang out. Of course, sexuality is visible in social media because it's our immediate environment. And I think it's naive to think that nobody would take such photos or send them. (Interview 106611/1)

In the research discussions, time and the notions of mediated and digital forms of sexuality are markedly present. The moment these young individuals are living their young adulthood is described to be 'mediated', 'platformed', 'digitalised' and 'on screens'. For them, digital platforms, devices with cameras and the Web are intrinsically intertwined with how they and their peers generate sexual connections. The research participants speak for the habitualisation of the mediated sexual exchanges as part of young people's and young adults' sexual lives. These exchanges are diverse in nature and context. That is to say, meeting people, flirting, dating, having sexual attachments and interaction and breaking up online is as 'normal' as it would be offline.

These mediated sexual experiences are described as crucial aspects that separate older teenagers and young adults from older generations. I read the descriptions of such social experiences as critical generational life events that link these young individuals together (Plummer, 2010) as a distinct group in their social imaginaries. My research participants constantly reiterate that the older generations have difficulty grasping such collective consciousness over digital sexual experiences since the social contexts of their sexual lives may differ entirely from those of the younger generations. As formulated in the research conversations with two of the research participants:

Researcher: Could you reflect on the public debate on digital media, dating and forming or maintaining relationships? Are we talking about these issues enough these days? And are we talking about these issues justly from the young people's perspective?

Research participant: We talk about these issues a lot and cover many good perspectives, like what one should consider when meeting an online acquaintance for the first time. — We also talk about the possible risks of sending images. — Nowadays, online dating is entirely normal, but still, I feel that some people just don't get it and consider it weird. I have noticed that some people are ashamed to admit that they have met their partner online, on Tinder, for example. Shame may prevent some people from trying [online dating]. — So I think that positive aspects and possibilities should be emphasised more.

R: You mentioned shame. Why do you think we are still ashamed [of admitting that we have met a partner online]? Although we have had these devices and screens as part of our everyday lives, what, some 20 years already, why are we still persistently ashamed?

RP: I think we take these cues from our families. Today's teenagers' parents are the generation who didn't meet any romantic partners online. If parents are sceptical of online relationships, one may then think that it's somehow embarrassing. And maybe that also has the effect that one may never be sure who the online acquaintance truly is... I believe that somehow manifests as shame.

R: I think it's interesting that you talk about different generations. Am I interpreting you correctly? Is there a generation gap regarding dating and sexuality, for example?

RP: Yes, you are, and yes, there is a generation gap. If I think my mother, or my aunts, sexuality wasn't considered through a positive frame. Attitudes towards sexuality were awfully negative in general, and people kept silent about these things. Comparing current young generations, we are pretty open about these things. I guess this causes confusion and conflicting feelings. (Interview 106611/3)

Research participant: I think adults don't understand that the way they have had sex isn't necessarily the only way to have sex. For quite many young people, sexting via messages or video chats is much more interesting than the physical way of having sex. Quite many feel that it's, first of all, a safe way to have sex, and it's also quite intimate.

Researcher: I understand. And during these pandemic times, it has proven to be quite a safe way to connect sexually when we have had to limit our social contacts.

RP: Yes, exactly. But somehow, I feel that older generations don't get this. (Interview 106611/5)

The assumed sexual digital divide between generations is reiterated repeatedly throughout the research discussions. The research participants also note another topic where the concept of a generation plays an integral role: understanding of sexual safety.

### *Generational understandings of sexual safety*

Considering sexualities from an age perspective, we quickly stumble upon various age standpoints defining and providing guidelines on what is 'normal', 'proper' and 'appropriate' sexual behaviour in a specific age range. As for adolescents, these guidelines are often crafted to regulate and mitigate young people's sexual practices from a protective stance (Spišák, 2019; Tsaliki, 2016; Jones, 2011).

Regarding legal competence to consent to sexual acts, the age of consent in Finland is 16. Consensual 'sexting' among teenagers is not a criminal offence compared to parts of Australia, England and Wales, for example. It is not considered child sexual exploitation and, thereof, is not prohibited by law.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is essential to note that potential digital risks of nonconsensual image sharing do not result in criminal sanctions at the moment but are viewed more as reputation damage for the person portrayed in leaked images.

In Finland, along with other Western societies, the notions of risk and harm have become integral to their argumentation in shaping understandings and discussions of the impact of mediated sexual exchanges, especially for adolescent sexuality (Scott et al., 2020; Setty, 2020; Spišák, 2021; Tsaliki, 2016). These standpoints lay the basis of their argumentation on developmental understandings of adolescents' 'cognitive and moral immaturity' (Robinson, 2012: 266) and assumed vulnerability (for discussion, see Tsaliki, 2016). In contrast, scholars across the disciplines conducting empirical research on young people's use of sexual media and practices of sexual exchange online have challenged this view (see, for example, Buckingham and Bragg, 2004 on children and sexual media;

Hasinoff, 2015; Krieger, 2017; Setty, 2020; Naezer and Van Oosterhout, 2021 on sexting, Spišák, 2019 on young people and pornography, boyd, 2014; Ringrose and Harvey, 2015; Naezer, 2018 on teens, sexuality and social media; Nielsen, Paasonen and Spišák, 2015 on sexual messaging online; Scott et al., 2020 on digital intimacies). Nevertheless, a persistent reiteration of risk and harm discourse challenges any departure to move beyond the concept of the sexual child at risk. This, in turn, has a tangible impact on the ways how, for example, sexual safety in digital environments is promoted (Albury, 2017; Spišák, 2021).

The research participants challenge Finnish regulatory authorities' views on 'sexting' and underline that this particular educational message may evoke toxic shame, which can carry negative consequences:

Researcher: In your opinion, what exactly was that element [in the video] that made you think: "Hey, that's not cool!"?

Research participant: Well, the video blamed the victim, and it gave the impression that it would be wrong to take such images [nudes]. Of course, I understand that it's good to warn about possible risks, and we are not talking about anything like "blaa blaa just send those nudes to anybody, who cares". Because it's not about that, but if these kinds of videos are being created, the main point can't simply be that "you shouldn't have taken those pictures in the first place". — When these kinds of videos are spreading online, especially by the police, young people won't seek help, especially from the police. I think this is not a small mistake because these things DO matter. If I had seen such videos when I was younger, I certainly wouldn't have wanted to ask for any help for my own situation. (Interview 106611/2)

Researcher: In your opinion, what was the most challenging element in the TikTok video?

Research participant: In my opinion, the biggest problem of the video was that it blamed the victim for what had happened.

R: Do you have any tips on how we could do this kind of educational work better?

RP: As I said already, we shouldn't start the discussion by blaming the victim. Nor should we ban it [sending sexual images]. I would take a more positive route and start a conversation about how to sext as safely as possible. I would give guidance through discussion. Also, I don't think that the police should be the ones to do this kind of work.

R: You mean education?

RP: Yes. I don't see the police as the best possible educational source. More like youth workers, social workers or teachers, for example.

R: You mentioned that we don't have balanced guidance on this issue ['sexting']. Why do you think it is like this?

RP: Yea. Perhaps the world is not ready for the idea that your kid may send nudes. Maybe some moms or dads think this is too rough an idea. They don't even want to think about it, which, of course, doesn't make things safer. (Interview 106611/6)

My research participants view this educational message as ‘victim-blaming’ (Naezer and Van Oosterhout, 2021; Dobson and Ringrose, 2016). They see that the police re-enforce unnecessary shame for the victims of sexual coercion and exploitation without signalling clearly unethical, nonconsensual and possibly criminal activity in their educational resources. As Naezer and Van Oosterhout (2021), for example, point out, this approach is problematic since it limits young people’s sexual rights (IPPF & WAS, 2016), invigorates victim-blaming in case of incidents, and makes perpetrators invisible. The latter reason was the most pressing issue why the young considered the video damaging.

My research participants hope that educational efforts would shift the focus to perpetrators, making visible the clearly unethical and possibly criminal nature of distributing other people’s sexual images without their consent. As one of my research participants stated, if we continue promoting shame-inducing educational activities and keep rendering perpetrators invisible, we are participating in normalising sexual harassment and nonconsensual sexual behaviour in digital environments.

### *Sexual rights: finding a balance between potential risks and positive possibilities*

Suppose we acknowledge that perspectives on sexual life are always grounded in the social experience of a specific age/place/time standpoint. In that case, it becomes easier to dissect vital formative differences and tensions regarding (mediated) sexuality and assumed differing generational standpoints as stated in the research discussions. As the research discussions illustrate, one of those critical tensions concerns notions of sexual safety, resulting in intergenerational conflict.

The research participants point out that the sexual world of younger generations has seen profound changes via interactive technologies. These technological developments have transformed their sexual possibilities. However, with the new and positive opportunities for sexual communication and attachments, there are also potential risks due to, for example, technical vulnerabilities and nonconsensual or predatory behaviour. For the research participants, it is not that much a question of choosing *either* risks *or* safety but finding a balance between potential risks and positive possibilities (see also Adams-Santos, 2020: 7–8):

Researcher: Do you have any tips on promoting more inclusive discussion about online dating, for example? How could we improve educational discussion about technologies, devices, platforms and intimate relationships?

Research participant: That’s a tricky question because awfully often people think that if interaction happens via devices, it’s somehow less intensive, more distant in a way. And yea, you will miss some elements. But this year with Corona has made us maintain social distance and forced us to develop and maintain our relationships online, which may make people see online communication more positively. — Nevertheless, I think that attitudes toward online sexual exchanges are negative. And I understand this, too, because there’s always a risk that something may go wrong: images, videos or discussions may leak. So I understand the negative approaches too. (Interview 106611/4)

Researcher: Could you think of better ways to discuss these issues [sending nudes]?

Research participant: I think we shouldn't go for banning because that very easily translates to victim-blaming: "Why did you do that!?". And because we live in an atmosphere where victims of sexual crimes are always blamed, we shouldn't contribute to such ideas. And I think sending sexts and nudes can enrich one's life too! During Corona, this has been one of the only ways to communicate sexually semi-safely. And I say semi-safely because there are always risks in digital communication. — I have seen some good advice on balancing these risks, like crop your face out of the picture, show your body neck down and so on. — Nobody can link this photo to you if it doesn't have your face. (Interview 106611/3)

Questions about sexual safety are essential for the research participants. However, they do not see risk-premised, and 'no-sexting' discourses as fruitful since such activities do not solve the root causes of, for example, online sexual abuse and exploitative exposure leaks. Furthermore, they see that such educational efforts are working against young people's full sexual rights. When we discussed finding a balance between online opportunities and possible risks, the research participants underlined respecting other people's sexual rights and sexual integrity:

Research participant: Another thing is that every person has a right to express their sexuality as long as they respect other people's sexual rights. So don't do any sexual acts without consent. I talk a lot about the importance of constant communication, and bloody hell, we should get this as an integral part of sex education. Not just for certain groups of people but for everybody. (Interview 106611/3)

The research participants are a part of those young generations who follow global socio-cultural movements such as #MeToo and the like. They also actively participate in discussions that challenge dominant understandings of sex, gender and identity and make visible and challenge unwanted, pressured, nonconsensual and coercive sexual behaviour. The research participants believe social change is possible by breaking the silence surrounding sexual harassment, exploitative exposure and abuse, not through tighter restrictions. They think social change is possible when victims are not blamed or ashamed for unwanted and nonconsensual sexual behaviour and relationships are founded on respecting sexual rights and negotiating consent. For them, sexual rights are not just about protection from harm but also rights-based freedom to exist as sexual beings. These issues form the foundation of their generational narrative of social change regarding gender equality. Following [Plummer's \(2010: 165\)](#) thinking, these young Finns are innovating forms of social justice through resistance and negotiation of sexual norms.

## Discussion

In the research material, younger generations' take up on mediated forms of sexual connections become contrasted with older generations' assumed notions of what is 'normal sexuality', as if older people would not have any experience with, for example,

dating apps or engagement in sexually charged discussions online. I view these contrasting sexuality discourses concerning mediated sexual exchanges as contested symbolic struggles, or as Plummer (2010: 187) formulates, 'how history lives complexly and pluralistically in the present'. These varied understandings of 'normal sexuality', 'simultaneous, synchronic workings of generations at the same moments of time' (ibid.: 187–188), are grounded in generational social worlds with constitutive power effects shaping everyday lives and understandings of sexuality.

### *Generational sexualities as an element of social imaginaries*

All six research participants highlighted the idea of a generation throughout our discussions in their responses to my inquiries. I argue that the ideas of *generational differences* in understanding what 'normal' sexual expression and behaviour generate specific sexual knowledge from an age/place/time standpoint (Plummer, 2010: 171). In this case, younger generations seem to think that the way the older generations view sexuality itself is outdated.

Following Plummer's (2010: 188) notions of generational sexualities, there is no 'one clear sexual reality out there'. The notion of generational sexualities emphasises how perspectives on social-sexual life are always grounded in social experience. For the research participants, the Web, interactive technologies, digital platforms and the transformations of sexual relations and practices these technological innovations have brought about are important generational markers, marking off some groups of Finnish people from others within their social imaginings of generations. The research participants see that digital environments have the potential to create concrete and material opportunities for pleasurable sexual experiences and practices, expanding their sexual prospects. They seem to think that older generations do not use digital technologies and platforms for sexual purposes because 'they just don't get this', as one of the research participants formulated the situation. When claiming that older generations 'just don't get this', the generational digital sexual divide materialises. Therefore, I argue that this socially imagined notion of a generational sexual digital divide contributes to and materialises in vastly differing generational standpoints that have a disconnective effect between the generations in sexual matters.

The socially imagined notion of a generational sexual digital divide is profoundly embedded in, shaped by and organised through a specific age/place/time standpoint. Thus, I argue that the research discussions' descriptions of the assumed generational divide regarding the digital modes of sexuality are generationally inflected knowledge of sexuality, one of the 'hierarchies of age-sexual orders' (Plummer, 2010: 163) generating concrete and material effects shaping the everyday lived experiences. The embodied social imaginings of generational differences 'do not just cause practice; they are practice' (Dawney 2011: 539, as cited in Lupton 2021). Therefore, it is possible to think about the research material's notions of generation and the related sexual digital divide outside the positivist frame. Instead of understanding differing generational standpoints merely as a fact, the social imaginings of a generation or sexual digital divide, too, organise the idea of

vastly differing generational standpoints generating multiple sexualities, generational ones.

### *Sexual rights under consideration*

For my research participants, the digital aspects of their social and sexual lives are essential in exercising their fundamental sexual rights. They all stress that in the 21st century, everyday intimacies do not necessarily occur behind closed doors, out of the public eye. For them, everyday intimacies and sexual attachments are being developed, cultivated and maintained within networked environments using devices, apps and digital platforms. While this may possess ‘the worrisome prevailing trends’ (Reid Boyd et al., 2019), such as online sexual harassment and violence, bullying, revenge porn and abusive relationships, mediated intimacies may also bring positive interpersonal dynamics within the intimate space of relationships.

The analysis of my research materials reveals that young people’s ‘full sexual rights’ operate as a specific generational narrative that organises and structures my research participants’ perspectives of what is inclusive and socially just sexual education. As the research discussions illustrate, young people require educational efforts *beyond risk and harm*. They state that ‘no-sexting’ educational materials may contribute to sexual discrimination and marginalisation, increase social inequality and negatively impact young people’s sexual wellbeing. They urge educators to make visible and challenge unwanted, pressured, nonconsensual and coercive sexual behaviour. Furthermore, they point out that the sexual rights of adolescents are not just about protection but also about supporting the rights to sexual expression, exploration and pleasure. They rightly ask how effective those educational efforts can be if they continually fail to acknowledge the digital aspects of young people’s sexual lives, do not capture their generational experiences and fail to recognise their full sexual rights.

## **Conclusion**

The changing contexts of sexual behaviour, including digital platforms as new arenas for sexual experience, experimentation and exploration of human sexuality, fundamentally set in motion the traditional understandings of sexual interaction and sexual safety. According to the research discussions, mediated sexual exchanges test the traditional and temporal boundaries of sexual expression. On the one hand, digital platforms have brought forth unprecedented legal and ethical challenges concerning the safety and protection of individuals (especially those considered ‘the most vulnerable’) in digital environments. On the other hand, digital environments provide the possibility of an additional, extended or compensatory sexual space, meaningful for people’s everyday sexual experiences. Thus, the concept of generational sexualities may elaborate on those complex, contested and often contradictory ethical systems, which, in Plummer’s (2010: 164) words, ‘try to tell us just how we should experience our sex’.

The public debate caused by the *Rewind...* TikTok video reveals distinct developments of sexual transformations that unfold in people’s lives via networked environments and

their social imaginaries of generational sexual experiences. Profound changes in our social environments, the Internet and mobile technologies included have transformed not just the sexual possibilities but also the legal and ethical challenges concerning, for example, the sharing of sexual images via mobile phones or other electronic devices. Research has demonstrated that mediated sexual exchanges can positively contribute to different dimensions of young people's sexual development and exercise their sexual rights (e.g. [Setty, 2019](#); [Burkett, 2015](#)). However, we also have to acknowledge 'the dark side of sexting' ([Clancy et al., 2019](#); [Krieger, 2017](#)), including the potential risk of image-based sexual violence, abuse or harassment ([Ringrose et al., 2021](#); [Dobson, 2019](#)).

The results of my study speak not only of a generational sexual divide, but that generational divide is distinguished by these differing approaches to sexual safety. I wonder if there is a productive way to translate the complexities of mediated sexual exchanges into educational purposes respectful of adolescents' full sexual rights? Are we able to consider adolescents' full sexual rights: not just 'the negative freedom *from* (sexual harassment and violence) but equally the positive freedom *to* (sexual expression, exploration and pleasure) so that the quest for one does not trump or exclude the other' ([Spišák et al., 2021](#): 2; see also [Albury et al., 2019](#))? Therefore, I encourage activists, educators and sexuality education scholars to consider further and cultivate more egalitarian and socially just educational practices.

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### **Note**

1. The ongoing general reform of our Criminal Code would extend punishments to non-contact sexual harassment acts. For example, nonconsensual dissemination of a sexual image would be punishable as a sexual offence, and penalties for sexual offences would be more severe for crimes against both adults and children. With the general reform of the Criminal Code, the Finnish government will further modernise the legislation regarding criminal offences in digital environments, including image-based sexual abuse.

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