Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning

'Pervy role-play and such': girls' experiences of sexual messaging online

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'Pervy role-play and such': girls' experiences of sexual messaging online

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Sexting is one of the recurring causes of concern in public discussion of young people and network media. This paper builds on findings from a survey with 1269 Finnish female respondents aged 11–18 conducted using a popular online community for girls on their experiences of and views on online messages concerning sex and sexuality. Sixty-five per cent of respondents had received messages related to sex from either adults or minors while 20% had also sent such messages themselves. The paper asks how girls experience and make sense of sexual messaging and what motivates them to engage in such interactions. Specific attention is paid to the distinction between unwanted and wanted messages. While messages from unknown people identified as adult were often discussed as unpleasant or 'creepy', sexual messaging, role-play, cybersex experiments and discussions related to sex among peers were defined as fun and pleasurable. Girls display notable resilience and describe coping strategies connected to unwanted messaging but equally frame sexual messaging and role-play as issues of choice motivated by curiosity and pleasure. The paper addresses sexual messaging as a form of sexual play and learning, and argues for the importance of contextual analysis in understanding its forms and potentialities.

Keywords: girls; sexual messaging; role-playing games; internet; Finland

Public discussion of children, sexuality and the Internet has largely focused on notions of risk and harm. In Finland, sexual messaging among minors has been associated with grooming and potential abuse, and has been compared to bullying in terms of its harmful effects (Laiho et al. 2011; Saarikoski 2013, 56–57). While parents in the Nordic countries generally wish to grant their children independence in Internet use, they do not wish them to encounter inappropriate content, let alone engage in sexual exchange (cf. Ólafsson, Livingstone, and Haddon 2013). Such practices are however not altogether rare. A recent study found that 18% of Finnish children between the ages of 11 and 16 have received messages related to sex and 3% have sent such messages themselves: these figures are higher than within the European Union on average (Kupiainen et al. 2012, 21–22). According to the same study, children do not necessarily experience sexual messages as upsetting, distressing or harmful (Kupiainen 2013, 7). The question nevertheless remains as to what these messages – received by almost one in five Finnish teenagers – entail. Do they involve adults contacting children, adverts for pornographic sites or messages sent by peers? Furthermore, how do teenagers experience and make sense of such communication?

In what follows, we examine the experiences of sending and receiving sexual messages among Finnish teenage girls with a special emphasis on their motivations and agency. Through an analysis of 1269 responses to a survey conducted on a popular,

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free Finnish-language online community for girls, this paper investigates how sexual messaging feels and how girls make sense of these interactions with friends and strangers alike. In order to make respondents' own voices heard, we make extensive use of excerpts from the survey material.

By way of context, Finland is a fairly wired country with 99% online connectivity among young people aged 16–24 years (Statistics Finland 2014). Smartphone use among teenagers is exceedingly common and ubiquitous connectivity is mundane already for kids in their early teens. In addition to making use of globally popular social media services (i.e. WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube), young people spend time online gaming and chatting. Online platforms facilitate interaction among both friends and new acquaintances, and access to entertainment and information alike. Young people recurrently report engaging with sex information online: in addition to information targeted specifically at adolescents, they explore sexually explicit materials and display skill in evaluating these sources (Simon and Daneback 2013). In this sense, online resources function as a casual form and extension of sexual education.

In Finland, some elements of sex education are provided as early as kindergarten. Sex and relationship education was first officially included in the school curriculum in 1970, and is regulated by the National Board of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Nowadays, sex and relationship education is integrated into health education, which is mandatory under the Basic Education Act, as well as into some other curricula – biology in particular. The most important educational objectives of sex education in the 2000s involve teaching responsible sexual action and factual information (Kontula 2010, 380; Kontula and Meriläinen 2007). In contrast to the USA or southern Europe where comprehensive sex education generally has a more limited scope and abstinence is promoted as a positive choice, Finnish education frames sexual health as an issue of physical, mental and social wellbeing. However, although the right to sexual pleasure has been acknowledged internationally as essential to sexual health (Lottes and Kontula 2000), Finnish sex education teachers have reported the understanding of sex as pleasant and stimulating as their third lowest ranked learning objective, placed just above sexual abstinence and the problems associated with casual sex (Kontula 2010, 380). Contemporary Finnish sex education addresses dating, adult sexuality, sexual harassment, sex in the media, sexual and gender minorities, sources of sexual knowledge, sexual rights and sexual legislation. Despite this diversity of foci, sexual pleasure is not a core issue. In other words, variations on 'the missing discourse of desire', which Michelle Fine (1988) identified in US sex education some decades ago, remain evident.

While Finland represents an advanced model of public sex education, one in four young people report having received insufficient sex education and looking for information elsewhere (Kontula 2010, 373, 2009, 84). As we will illustrate, online platforms facilitate sexual exploration, play and learning among teenagers. Building on, and contributing to, studies on sexuality and children's uses of social media, and drawing on original research, this paper offers new insights into how teenage girls make sense of sexual messaging and participate in it (e.g. Bond 2011; Temple et al. 2012; Hasinoff 2014; Kerstens and Stol 2014, 2).

There is notably little research to date on children as senders of sex messages and as participants in online sexual play (for an exception, see Kerstens and Stol 2014). The EU Kids Online project, which interviewed some 10,000 European children on the risks of Internet use, addressed the sexual messages received by children. Online risks identified included pornographic content, self-harm, violence or racism, bullying, violations of

privacy as well as messages connected to grooming or sexual harassment (Staksrud and Livingstone 2009, 367). At the same time, it is important to recognise that these risks do not automatically materialise as harm, given that only 12% of the informants reported having been disturbed or upset by potential risks during the past year (Livingstone et al. 2013, 2). Risk is an issue of potential danger while harm signifies something experienced as disturbing (cf. Livingstone et al. 2011, 14–15). In the free comments section of the survey among Finnish girls whose findings are discussed in this paper, some respondents in fact strongly disassociated sex from harm (also Ringrose et al. 2013).

> Usually messages related to sex are nothing but harmless humour or flirt. Not everything is about harassment or fishing for sex online. You need to be alert and tell real harassment apart from humour. (Maria, 15)[1]

> I don't consider sex or sexuality as something bad to be hidden. I can't understand sexual harassment and don't tolerate it, and under no conditions do I want to upset anyone or cause anything unpleasant with my own messages on the topic. Playing role-games where sex scenes have occurred have been voluntary and the players have known each other fairly well. I think it's harmless exploration of sexuality and release in writing, and I haven't heard anyone being upset about the games. (Emilia, 18)

Our study suggests that a range of factors must be taken into account when thinking about the potential harmfulness of sexual messaging online – including, but not limited to age, social ties and the uses of humour. Practices identified as risky may result in harm, but equally in enjoyable experimentation and play. It is therefore important to examine how risks are encountered and lived with, and how sexual messaging connects to all this. Focusing especially on the relatively little studied positive experiences of sexual messaging among Finnish teenage girls, we examine how they describe their practices and motivations, how they perceive risk and harm, and what role social media plays in learning about sex and sexuality.

Research design and key findings

While this paper closely connects to other research on teenage girls and sexting (e.g. Albury and Crawford 2013; Ringrose et al. 2013; Hasinoff 2014), it addresses predominantly textual, rather than visual practices, defined in the survey questionnaire as 'messages talking about sex'. Consequently, the respondents described a range of such 'talk', from discussions on contraception to proposals of meeting up for sex, sending naked photos, sexual role-playing games and jokes with sexual innuendo. The survey addressed girls' experiences of online sexual messaging in general – on web platforms, in mobile applications and in a range of services targeted at young people and grown-ups alike – through both multiple-choice questions and free-form replies. The services addressed, including the platform where the survey itself was conducted, have been rendered anonymous for the purposes of not singling out any of them specifically as sites of sexual exchange. Most participants discussed the Internet and social media in general without identifying any services by name.

The call for participation was shared in the news section of a popular online community service targeted at girls. The invitation included a brief description on the aims and purpose of the study and emphasised the anonymity of participation. The invitation was made visible only to those users who had marked their age as 13 or more. This was considered appropriate because compulsory sex education in Finnish schools starts in the fifth grade when the majority of the children are aged 11–12 years. If a younger user had put in a false birth year, it was possible for them to see the survey because the service has

no age verification system (children's online services do not require age verification or parental consent within the EU).

No personal data were collected from the participants, no rewards were offered in return for participating and the survey was conducted with the permission of and help from the service in question. No parental research permits were acquired as parents knowing that their child wished to contribute to a study on sexual messaging could have harmed the participants by compromising the privacy of their Internet use. The decision to not collect documentation of informed consent was further motivated by the aim of conducting an anonymous survey with no personal data archived. The survey was open from 30 November 2013 until 22 January 2014, and it elicited 1423 contributions. The participants with no experiences on sexual messaging only saw the first questions as the overall principle was not to introduce them to anything they were not previously familiar with. Participants could quit the survey at any point they desired but submissions were not saved unless they filled in the whole questionnaire. The number of questions shown depended on the answers given, with the maximum number of questions being 16. It was also possible to ask questions via email, but none of the respondents did so. While participants could give voluntary feedback, the vast majority chose not to. The survey was conducted by Silja Nielsen as part of postgraduate research. The use of the data in this paper has been approved by the University of Turku ethics board.

Out of the 1423 respondents, 1372 identified as female, 21 as male and 30 chose the option 'neither'. Given the small number of male and ambiguously gendered respondents, only the replies from participants identifying as female were analysed. Despite the survey being visible to users 13 years or older, two replies were from children aged 6 or younger, 7 or 8 (one reply each), 9 (10 replies) and 10 (13 replies). These replies were excluded from analysis, as were the replies by legal adults older than 18 years ($n = 44$). Since many replies came from 11- and 12-year-olds (61 and 91, respectively), these were included to bring in a younger point of view. This resulted in an overall sample of 1296 replies from girls aged 11–18. Multiple-choice questions provided general contextual insight on specific age groups whereas free-form replies afforded a more detailed picture of how respondents experience sexual messaging and the people they interact with.

In total, 711 girls answered the question asking them to freely describe how it felt to receive sexual messages. These responses can be broadly divided into the categories, 'it didn't feel like much' (31%), 'it was unpleasant or distressing' (30%), 'it felt like a joke/I knew it was a joke/it made me laugh' (14%), 'it was confusing' (13%), 'it was nice' (10%), 'it annoyed me' (4%) and 'can't say' (4%). Three participants responded with 'can't remember' and 6% of the replies were left unclear. Indifference was as common a reaction as perceptions of sexual messages as harmful, unpleasant or annoying (see also Rinkinen et al. 2012). Perceptions of sex-related messages as humorous, fun and pleasant were also common (measuring almost 25%). In addition, 20% of the respondents reported having sent sexual messages themselves. As we discuss in more detail below, it is noteworthy that reactions to sexual messaging varied clearly in tone, content and people messaged with: a message from a familiar peer may be pleasurable while one from an unknown older person may be upsetting and unpleasant. Such crucial contextual distinctions nevertheless disappear in general classifications, such as the one presented just above.

These findings are very similar to those in Kerstens and Stol's (2014) study of Dutch teenagers aged 11–18, in which 10% of girls experienced sexual messages as positive, 45% as disturbing and 45% expressed no particular emotion – indeed, the age ranges of the respondents in these studies are identical. The older the respondent, the more likely she was to address the practice in positive terms: while only 11% of girls under 12 described

liking sexual messages, one-third of teenagers aged over 17 did. And while younger girls routinely experienced sexually suggestive messages as distressing and disturbing, older teenagers were more familiar with sexual content online (see Livingstone et al. 2013). Respondents to our survey similarly mentioned the role of age when asked to describe how they have felt about sexual messages:

> I felt a bit baffled sometimes when I was younger but these days, as I've been around a bit more, they don't really bother me, they mainly just make me laugh. (Sofia, 15)

> It didn't really move me, I replied that I don't want these kinds of messages and reported them. But when I think about it a bit more, they can also send these kinds of messages to much, much smaller kids, and smaller kids may be scared. (Katariina, 15)

> I don't think messages about sex are harmful at all. Of course some little kids thinking about boy-bug-bacteria may find them really gross. But I get on a really good mood from messages that turn me on. (Johanna, 13)

These quotations are telling of the reflexive foregrounding of personal agency characteristic of the responses in general. Contrary to perceptions of children and youth as lacking agency in matters sexual (see Carlson 2012; Simpson 2011), girls exhibited and highlighted their skill in navigating online communication, accounted for their experiences of sexual messaging as context-specific, and outlined their personal likes, dislikes and routines.

Peer play

Positive accounts of sexual messaging ranged from feeling accepted and desired to pleasurable experiences of sexual arousal. Such experiences were generally connected to interaction with people of one's own age. Positive experiences of peer messaging ranged from experiments with cybersex to role-playing games, banter and sex talk. Role-playing games were the most frequently mentioned (and defended) form of exchange:

> Role-playing games are between fictitious characters. I started playing them when I was 14. Mostly these games include gay relationships, and sex is described in detail. (Although that's not the main point.) When it comes to sex, the topics range from hardcore submission to oral sex, rape, etc. There are no real limits. (Julia, 18)

> Role-playing game including basic smut but sex wasn't the main point. (Aada, 13)

> My boyfriend and I sometimes write sex role-play because of the long distance, in English. (Eveliina, 15)

> Messages in role-playing games have been very detailed and realistic but not disturbing. Some might consider the messages too crude or lewd but I think it's a matter of attitude. (Anna, 17)

Survey participants mentioned picking characters for role-play from among members of popular bands and characters in films or books: in these games, a framework is agreed on, after which the players – two or more – develop the plot in tandem. Role-playing can include external narrators and dialogue. While sex was the main theme in some games, it was more of a sideline in others. Similarly to narrative porn films, games focusing on sex included a story in order to motivate sexual action. On the online community site where the survey was conducted, users often referred to this as 'pervy role play'. Other, 'non-pervy' role-playing games can be compared to regular narrative films that include one or two sex scenes without these being the main focus.

Forty-three per cent of the respondents had engaged in sexual role-playing games, and their motivations varied from dating to sexual exploration through fantasy. Role-playing facilitates a distanced examination of sexuality through fictitious characters and settings:

one can play a character much older and more experienced than oneself; a vampire or a rock star; a character of a different gender or sexual orientation; and move from one script to another at will. Such distancing in terms of the personal and the intimate may generate a sense of comfort. Like fan-generated slash-fiction focusing on queer sexual encounters among film and television characters, sexual role-playing games allow for experimentation outside normative boundaries of sexuality through the recombination and reimagining of familiar characters, scenes and settings (see Tosenberger 2008; McLelland 2001; also Brown 2012). Among older teenagers, role-playing games may also grow increasingly reflective of their personal likes, dislikes and fantasies.

Not all respondents wanted to engage in sexual play in the guise of fictitious characters. Ten per cent of those who had sent sexual messages had engaged in cybersex – textual descriptions of acts and sensations possibly accompanied by masturbation – outside a role-playing setting (although it should be mentioned that many of the sites that the teens frequent feature avatars and their users are therefore to a degree already engaged in a role-playing scenario). According to danah boyd's (2014) recent study, American teenagers identify social media platforms as spaces of privacy and interaction that are otherwise unavailable in their mundane physical environments defined by the lack of autonomous space free from parental control. Some of the survey respondents here similarly identified sexual messaging with the freedom of exploration:

> It was basically a big turn-on and since in my age I'm not allowed to talk about sex online, it was kind of nice. A bit like masturbation via the internet. (Johanna, 13)

Role-playing online can be seen as a continuation and extension of childhood sexual play more generally. Research indicates that physical exploration and sexual play during childhood are exceedingly common (e.g. Friedrich et al. 1998). In a large-scale Finnish study (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila 1995), one in two respondents reported having played sex games as a child. Through play scenarios such as 'house' or 'doctor', children explore adult interaction, normative social roles, the bodies of others, as well as emotions connected to sexuality (Kontula 2009, 81). Survey respondents wrote about experimenting with sexual scenes in online role-play: expanding sexual games online, they were also able to test their personal boundaries and preferences. These findings are in line with studies conceptualising the web as a private and anonymous space for young people to experiment with sexually explicit material, to try on new identities or practise coming out as gay (Barak and Fisher 2001; Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter 2005; Bond, Hefner, and Drogos 2009).

In public debate, young people's online sexual activities are often perceived as problematic and risky. According to Monique Mulholland, Anglo-European culture frames the relationships between the notions of childhood, sex and risk as both volatile and dangerous: 'Panic and fear serve the purpose of regulating and managing the sexuality of children, hinging on the ways in which childhood was socially constructed in the first instance' (Mulholland 2013, 7). The media, advocacy groups and politicians all participate in the reproduction of a discourse of concern that positions especially teenage girls as exposed to risk from online predators, inappropriate sexual content and conduct (Tolman 2005, 19, 80; Egan 2013; Egan and Hawkes 2010). In contrast, survey respondents in this study recounted online sexual peer play with fondness, generally detached it from notions of harm and described it as fun flirtation and 'harmless exploration of sexuality and release in writing' (Emilia, 18). As Danielle R. Egan (2013) argues, popular discourse on sexualisation is often more telling of adult disquiet than it is about the lives and practices of girls.

Significantly, respondents drew a clear difference between welcome and unwelcome sexual messages:

> It depends on whether it's sent by someone older than me or someone my own age. If they're much older than me, it's a bit distressing. (Karoliina, 15)

> If I got messages from a boy of the same age . . . it was nice. If the message came . . . from an unknown man 20 years older than me, it felt oppressive. (Elina, 16)

> If the sender of the message is a handsome man or boy, it's easy to go along. But if it's clearly some old and disgusting perv, I tend to block the sender if possible. (Iida, 16)

In contrast to definitions of peer sexual messaging as welcome, pleasurable and fun, initiatives from anonymous users seen as older men were identified as 'disturbing', 'scary', 'annoying' and 'troubling'. This points to the importance of analysing the contextual specificities of sexual messaging in order to make better sense of the experiences of young people. Such contextualisation also helps in analysing existing data on young people and sexting. The numbers and correlations found in empirical research to date help in perceiving general trends, yet they are less helpful in tackling underlying motivations, individual choices and sensations connected to sexual messaging. Drawing distinctions between desirable and unwanted messaging facilitates novel perspectives to debates on youth and sexting, which – despite research-based recommendations (e.g. Albury et al. 2013; Wolak and Finkelhor 2011) – generally fail to acknowledge contextual differences in messaging. It also allows for the development of policies respectful of the rights of children and adolescents.

Quotidian messaging

When asked about their motives for sending sexual messages, almost one in four named sexual arousal as their key motivation. Ten per cent had wanted to have cybersex and 7% had wanted to meet someone to have sex with offline. Respondents could choose several options and hence identify a range of motivations: 44% had wanted to reply to a message, 37% had wanted to see what would happen, 20% had had a crush on the messaging partner and 15% had considered them attractive. They also provided a range of examples on messaging styles and themes:

> We've talked about what turns us on, about my curves and what we'll do when the parents aren't home ;) (Aino, 14)

> Can I push my plug into your socket? (Amanda, 15)

> How long is yours? "Are you a virgin" etc. (Laura, 13)

> If I met you IRL, you could do anything to me ;) (Anni, 13)

> I wanted a relationship. (Jenna, 14)

> I sent a message to my girlfriend and reminded her what a lovely night we'd had when she visited me. (Kristiina, 18)

According to a 2011 study, more than one third of Finnish teenagers had met a dating partner online. Relationships formed online were considered deeper and more real, and many felt themselves to be more interesting and bolder online (Pelastakaa Lapset 2011, 7–8). Our survey similarly points to the centrality of online messaging in establishing and maintaining intimate relationships and casual anonymous connections. According to the 2011 study, teenagers' sex messages address personal experiences, sexual orientation, gender roles, fantasies, masturbation, the actual size of genitalia, oral

sex, casual sex, pornography, contraception and different ways of having sex (Pelastakaa lapset 2011, 9). While our survey was less detailed as to the topics discussed, similar themes emerged:

> We talked about the appropriate age for having sex and how it's not all that awful to be a 20-year old virgin. And I've also replied to messages in a polite bye-bye tone (I didn't feel like talking about sex or arousing the partner). (Roosa, 18)

> Playful things about masturbation, for example, or, linked to stronger feelings, shy-ish revelations about longing for closeness. (Emilia, 18)

> We've talked about sex in general and about our own experiences and fantasies. And then there's been pervy role-play and such. (Aurora, 17)

In contrast to perceptions of anonymous sexual messaging as risky (i.e. as variations of 'stranger danger'), girls described it as a conscious choice. In describing their messaging habits, participants distanced themselves from moralising perspectives and forms of sexuality deemed acceptable for young people. Such vocabularies of choice (Mulholland 2013) can be seen as expressions of agency in relation to that which public debates deem as harmful and dangerous:

> I wanted to talk ... about the topic and opinions without any feelings connected to the other person. (Jasmin, 15)

> These days 'good sex' is too neutralised in society. It's better to learn the meaning when you're young so you can critically relate to those who try to harass you for real. (Matilda, 17)

> Different things, e.g., in connection to school's health education lessons on the topic. (Sara, 14)

Sexual messaging facilitates imaginative play, the comparison of personal experiences and preferences with those of others and – as the excerpts above illustrate – offers reflection on sex education lessons outside the tensions and hierarchies of the classroom. It therefore follows that sexual messaging can be a reflexive site of learning, facilitated by the safety of anonymity and the lack of physical contact. Online talk expands discussions of sexual health carried out at school while also offering alternative pathways for making sense of sexuality:

> Depending on the site it can be just fun ... and you just usually play along and it's not anything serious. Usually I take such messages with humour. (Sara, 17)

> Most of them I've taken as a joke ... since I know they're either jokes or little kids' blabber and they don't even know what they're talking about. (Ida, 17)

These excerpts present clearly different styles of and motivations for sexual messaging in comparison to those sexual initiatives that were experienced as unwanted and disturbing. Out of these, one in four had involved an invitation to meet up for sex:

> Want to screw me? I've got a little bit of everything here and you can tie me down and spank me for starters. I can lick your ... So that you can't walk anymore and I can grab your tits so you'll no longer feel them. Come here and I can do you for free. You can suck my ... And in return I'll suck your ... and squeeze ... (Veera, 13)

> Basic stuff like asking if I want to suck their cock etc. (Anniina, 14)

> "Did you screw anyone today?" "Do you have a deep cunt?" "Have you been to bed with someone?" "Have you tried fingering?" (Laura, 13)

> The not so nice messages have been direct suggestions – the senders only want to get into bed with me. One sender even threatened to kill me if I wouldn't agree to meet up and have sex with him. (Elina, 16)

These citations point to the routine-like nature of sexual messaging in the lives of teenage girls, ranging from casual flirtation to verbal aggression and attempted grooming. The girls also describe a range of strategies and approaches that they adopt and develop for coping with such messaging.

Risk and agency

Survey findings make evident that Finnish teenage girls are aware of both the risks and possibilities related to sexual messaging, and that they define themselves as sexual subjects who knowingly explore their agency. Their messaging practices offer tangible challenges to fear-based sex education discourses that frame girls solely as victims of grooming and harmful conduct online. Respondents describe themselves as active and reflexive agents when describing how sexual messaging feels and how they make sense of it in relation to their knowledge and understanding of online communication more generally (see also Mulholland 2013, 154–160):

> The messages caused me no trauma or such. Just made me think of what kinds of loonies there really are online or how some like to kid around. (Noora, 15)

> I knew I might come across sex messages or such so I didn't wince. The messages didn't really feel like much. (Petra, 15)

> Online you need to be prepared for all kinds of jerks so you can't get upset about everything. (Nea, 15)

Respondents describe the web as a space in which it is possible to encounter unwanted sexual suggestions, proposals and disturbing conduct. They also argue however that this is common knowledge and should therefore not come as a surprise. This seems to indicate that the promotion of online safety and awareness at schools, which started in Finland in 2005 as part of the Internet Safety for Youth project funded by the EU, has perhaps influenced young people's understanding of the risks involved in online communication. Respondents circulate a discourse of concern, as articulated in the online safety campaigns, while also displaying resilience and describing diverse coping strategies when receiving unwanted messages. As d'Haenens, Vandoninck, and Donoso (2013) argue, risk and resilience go hand in hand since resilience can only develop through exposure to risk. Respondents seemed able to tackle adverse situations in a problem-focused way, and to transfigure negative emotions into neutral or even positive feelings (see also Livingstone et al. 2013):

> Exciting, and we talked dirty for a couple of weeks. In the end I felt anxious and broke contact since they wanted nude pics and I didn't want to send any. (Aleksandra, 15)

> Felt great, someone wanted me. Others didn't feel so very great though, didn't reply to those. (Emma, 17)

> I didn't care but it was a bit amusing. I considered it a joke, or then reported it (if sex talk was forbidden on the site in question) or blocked them and didn't reply. (Hanna, 14)

> It felt as if I wasn't completely crap but that someone was interested in me. Still I was scared that it was some pedo. (Wilma, 14)

> I didn't feel like making a scene about it. Yes, I know that you're not supposed to talk to online pervs but I just forgot about the whole thing and went on with my life. Besides, not all posts with sex acts or pics are always unwanted. (Siiri, 14)

Many of the respondents referred to 'pedos' and 'pervs' when describing unwanted sexual interaction, pointing to the general recognisability of the paedophile as a cultural

figure of harm (cf. Sorainen 2007). Overall, however, respondents experienced some sexual messages as unpleasant, others as fun and yet others failed to evoke much affect at all.

Girls and the pursuit of pleasure

Socially acceptable forms of sexuality are dependent on, and marked out by, public discourses ranging from education to popular culture, law and religion (e.g. Warner 2000). Although sexuality is largely considered intimate and private, regulations and norms concerning it are highly public. In the West, an individual's right to sexual self-determination represents an important standard, so long as it does not conflict with someone else's similar right to sexual self-determination. Exceptions to this principle involve mainly children and attempts to protect them from risk and harm (Kontula 2009, 16). Articulations of concern, risk and danger, in combination with 'the privileged expert voice' (Mulholland 2013, 67) easily efface young people's agency. At the same time, as boyd (2014, 120) argues, young people act and operate within a broad system of networked publics in which they can 'write themselves and their community into being'.

Morality-based sex education discourses position teenage sexuality as a social problem (Carlson 2012; Bay-Cheng 2003, 65) and girls as the gatekeepers of male sexuality – implying that (teenage) boys are driven by sexual impulses beyond their control (Roosmalen 2000; Sparrman 2014; Tolman 2012; Kontula 2009, 122; also Yesilova 2001; Lesko 1996). Our study provides interesting perspectives on the pursuit of pleasure among teenage girls, given how respondents describe sexual messaging as fantastic forms of sexual play and exploration. As David Buckingham and Sara Bragg (2004) argue, young people's sexual lives are ambivalent and contradictory, and their mediated worlds combine realism with fantasy and sentiment with sexuality. Respondents in this study similarly describe actively constructing and working on their sexual identities:

> Messages sent to me personally have all been from people I know (approx. of my own age) and they've been playful or meant as flattery. I haven't come across any harassment. (Emilia, 18)

> If for example someone messages you with "you're hot, shall we fuck! ;)", I consider it play and reply with something like "your place or mine" even if I wasn't going anywhere or inviting anybody over. Once a guy asked, "want to talk dirty?" And we did. (Irene, 15)

Out of those who had sent sex messages, 9% said they wanted to bully others and 8% had wanted to annoy someone. Four per cent of those sending sexual messages had wanted to joke or clown around, and 2% had sent such messages out of boredom. At the same time, half of those who had received sexual messages identified these with banter:

> I wanted to perv out a bit, that's all. + isn't it always nice to fool around a little :D? (Peppi, 12)

> Everything between heaven and earth. Usually I talk about it with friends, basic teenage humour pervy stuff, nothing more serious than that :D (Sanni, 15)

> "Would you rather shag an elephant or a giraffe?" (Minttu, 16)

While jokes connected to sex are common as such, it may be difficult to tell joking and bullying apart, and some messages could qualify as both. Joking and banter were mentioned throughout the survey as key motivations for sexual messaging. These can be seen as connected to a more general framing of sexual talk and play as characteristically non-serious fun, as opposed to discourses connecting such practices with risk, harm and trauma:

> Sarcastic, like for example the teachers that my friends and I most hate would have sex in the cleaning closet :'D (Nelli, 13)

"I need help with my husband Pentti since we don't really get on sexually, what can we do?" but much more poorly written. (Saana, 13)

Some basic youngsters' "ahh ahh" messages, so really nothing serious or anything that'd really be sexual harassment. (Ronja, 15)

Such 'ahh ahh' messages may seem suspicious to adult eyes but are not necessarily connected to, or motivated by, sex as such. Bawdy jokes, pastiches of sexual advice columns, parodies of cybersex and mixed references to popular culture all intermesh in teenage messaging practices and are therefore also issues of social literacy. That which parents may see as attempted adult grooming or harassment may in fact be a form of sexual play among teenagers that follows its own norms, conventions and patterns.

Conclusions: the Internet is a sexual playground

The survey respondents considered peer sexual play in positive terms whereas sexual messages from adults were mainly experienced as disturbing and unwanted. These findings should not be surprising as such, yet they point to the importance of recognising the contextual specificities of sexual messaging. Girls addressed online services as sites for sexual experimentation, play and learning: for exchanging information, building intimate relationships and exploring sexuality through role-play. This framing is in clear contrast to perceptions of online platforms as spaces of sexual danger, risk and harm. Online platforms function as avenues for and extensions of sex education. Teenagers' experiences of and thoughts on sexual messaging are therefore also a resource for sex education. Discussions based on young people's experiences – be these positive, negative or ambiguous – are a potential means of engaging students in the sex education classroom and for counterbalancing discourses of risk and harm connected to sex and online communications (together as well as separately) with those concerning resilience, play and pleasure. Sexual messaging also facilitates discussions on sexuality more generally as an issue of fantasy, play and exploration that is not limited to physical sexual acts and reproduction.

Given the organic intermeshing of the online and the offline in the lives of ubiquitously connected young people, there is increasing need to address the social media as a site of sexual exchange and learning. The recognition of young people's own thoughts, experiences and practices concerning this is key to promoting sex education that is up to date, interesting and respectful of the interests of youth. Developing this line of investigation further will also facilitate consideration of both the diverse safety procedures employed by the services that young people frequent – which may remain invisible to both young users and their concerned parents – and the diverse tactics that young people themselves adopt in online communication. All this would result in a fuller understanding of what interests, entertains and bothers young people – female and male alike – in sexual messaging, as well as the kinds of sexual knowledge they may require and generate online.

Disclosure statement

Note

1. The survey was conducted anonymously. We have, however, added pseudonyms here to more clearly indicate to the reader which responses we are drawing on. This paper altogether cites 42 respondents. The citations were translated from Finnish by the authors with the aim of retaining their style and feel.

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