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SEXUAL EXPLORATION IN THE 'DIGITAL AGE': HOW THE INTERNET INFORMS
THE SEXUALITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

Elena Ivanova Golemeeva

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Copyright Statement

Abstract

Nowadays sex has become increasingly public, with not only the visibility of different sexualities, but with the salience of sexual themes in popular culture. Arguably, the Internet has brought the biggest shift in how young people think and learn about sex and sexuality. This has brought new anxieties and concerns accompanied by a political call for parents and educators to police young people's technology-mediated sexual behaviors. The focus on overemphasising the negative consequences of the Internet, however, is inevitably shutting down important conversations and positive outcomes associated with it. This investigation seeks to contribute to the debate by turning directly to young people to explore technology-mediated sexual behaviors through their own experience and understanding. The research followed a qualitative approach for the purpose. The first phase, focus groups, were concerned with the overall role the Internet play in the personal and social lives of young people including for sexual purposes. The results from four focus group discussions revealed that on a daily basis young people use multiple online platforms to maintain supportive relationships, for self-expression, to stay informed on important contemporary topics (including sexuality), and for recreation (e.g. gaming). This led the study to the second phase, individual interviews, in order to explore how the Internet informs participants' sexuality among other sources. Findings indicated that young people use multiple sources to make sense of their emerging sexuality, but conversations with peers/romantic partners and engagements with the Internet were ranked as the most meaningful. In addition, interviews indicated that young people are not passive consumers of online practices and they have the ability to critically evaluate the impact of online engagement such as viewing porn or sexting. Overall, what became evident through young people's stories is that, although amplifying experiences, the Internet and technology-mediated practices are just another context for societal and cultural habits to be displayed and there is an urgent need for more overreaching sexual education.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Understanding human sexuality is important beyond academic value as it is fundamental for the wellbeing and adjustment of every human being. Yet, in Western cultures, sex has always been a subject of much controversy, tightly related to strict moral and social norms. Among the adult population sex has always been viewed as a private matter, which has imposed normative pressure on the sexual knowledge and experience of young people as well. This pressure is mostly associated with fear-laden doctrines of when and how it is appropriate to educate young people about sex and sexuality, with great emphasis on the delay and/or promotion of safe sexual practices. Provision of information and guidance have largely evolved around the idea that too much and untimely information might provoke risky sexual behavior among young people, yet evidence suggests otherwise (e.g. Miller, 2002; Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004; Adamczyk, 2014; Cocker, Hafford-Letchfield, Ryan & Barran, 2018, Rutgers Annual Report, 2017). Traditionally, young people's sexual education has been a school domain and responsibility of parents, but today there is a growing recognition of the Internet and its affordances in providing sexual knowledge (e.g. Peter & Valkenburg, 2009; 2011; 2014; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Attwood, 2017). Particularly in the UK, the advancement of technologies and technology-mediated practices among the younger demographic has brought new concerns compelling professionals to reexamine sexual learning and young people's rights (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzik, Ólafsson, 2011).

The sexual education of young people has become and still is a burning topic of debate in the UK. Despite the fact that risky sexual behaviours has more often been associated with the lack of knowledge on sexuality-related topics, parents and professionals still find it hard to fully acknowledge, address and deliver sufficient sexual education. In the meantime, while

social forces are trying to make sense and reach a consensus as to what is best for young people, the Internet has provided an overwhelming amount of sexual information and practices that is not only freely available and accessible, but also tempting and engaging for younger individuals. As a result, this asymmetry has widened the gap between those who are responsible for the sexual education of young people, and the new behaviors and norms emerging from digital technologies and the Web (Attwood, & Smith, 2011). In order to make sense of the changing context of young people's sexual learning through technologies, the present project sought to enhance current understanding by contextualising and exploring young people's engagements with the Internet for sexual purposes.

To contribute to the the debate, it was decided to turn directly to young people and understand through their own words and experiences how they use and make sense of their sexuality through technologies. It is not a straightforward inquiry over discussions of sexual politics (although it touches upon these issues), but an open investigation into young people's authentic experiences and interpretations of the virtual world as an arena for sexual exploration. The aim was not to take a moral stance on their healthy and/or risky online engagements, but to uncover how online practices and affordances are implemented in their general construction of sexuality. Further, without drawing a line between online and offline experiences, the present research considers young people as living in an augmented reality (Jurgenson, 2012); where the analogue world interplays with their virtual engagements and vice versa. Therefore, to get the bigger picture, a series of focus group discussions were conducted to locate the use of the Internet in young people's social and personal lives. As an additional and central step, through individual interviewing sexual engagements with the internet were explored in consideration to other influential sources of such knowledge (i.e. family, peers, romantic partners, school). Individual interviews were also used to uncover the

meaning and impact of online sexual practices in the sexual culture of young people in contemporary Britain.

The underlying conceptual framework informing the study is social constructionism, viewing knowledge as socially formed within a particular time and place (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). According to the paradigm, our 'objective' reality is not something that already exists out there awaiting to be discovered. Instead, it is constructed by human consciousness and interaction. In order to place human sexuality in cultural and historical context, the present study began with early investigations, tracing knowledge back to the beginning of 19th century and the works of Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1906), Henry Ellis (1930) and Sigmund Freud (1925). At that historical point sexuality was viewed as a domain of biology, studied through narrowed developmental norms. Later on, Kinsey (1948, 1953) implemented a more scientific approach, weakening sexual categories and opposing the strict heterosexual models. Yet, few ideas and observations made at that point have gone unchallenged. Till the mid-nineteen century, although the focus on human sexuality was growing, classic inquiries regarded sexuality as a pre-social phenomenon, placing greater importance on the biological and psychological aspects of it. Perhaps, the biggest shift in the field comes with the work of John Gagnon and William Simon (1973), suggesting that sexual manifestations are no different than other behaviors, and individuals organise their sexual drive into a coherent narrative taking into account the wider context. Similarly, Paul-Michel Foucault (1978) directed his efforts into exploring how sexuality functions in society, rather than focusing on the essence of human sexuality. Reiss (1986) who described the formation of human erotic as process shaped by individual urges and sexual script further developed this notion. During the second half of the 19th century discussions surrounding the social aspects of sexuality open space for alternative discourses. It was at that time that Dworkin (1987) gained notoriety by analyzing how misogyny functioned in western societies and how

sexuality was involved in all aspects of power. In her book "Intercourse", she demonstrated the ways in which women are routinely objectified by matrimonial laws, popular culture, entertainment and religious practices. Dworkin (1981) also became a prominent member of the anti-porn movement describing it as the sexually explicit subordination of women.

Italian feminist De Lauretis (1991) further rebelled towards the Western model of heterosexuality, gender binary, and monogamy, proposing that sexuality and gender emerge from social habits corresponding to the widely accepted social norms. Supporting the idea that sexual expressions are largely based on current cultural norms (which might vary greatly across different societies), De Lauretis (1991) argued that sexuality should be viewed as a fluid and dynamic collection that might take different shapes in time. Perhaps, Feminist and Gender Studies are among the most significant intellectual work on the subject in our modern history (Yep, Lovaas, Elia & Doyle, 2014). Insipiring debates such as queer theory, disability, body representation and intersex bodies, gender identity, AIDS crisis, the emerging homophobia and etc. (e.g. Sedgwick, 1991; Butler, 1990; Muñoz, 1999). Today, human sexuality is no longer considered as something natural and authentic that just came to exists. The ongoing collective efforts of scholars (gender and feminist scholars, sociologists and psychologists), sexual subcultures, LGBT+ and movements of people of colour, and AIDS campaigns managed to change the sexual landscape through research, activism and politics (Johansson, 2016). What is more, the Internet and digital technologies have further "complicated" the conversation by changing the context of sexuality and sexual learning.

The present research started with exploring the historical background of theorizing sexuality (Chapter 2, Part I of the literature review), which provided a much clearer context for the present inquiry. Next, the Internet was examined as a space for authentic experiences, considering the establishment of digital intimacies and the ways in which central aspects of contemporary life are being revolutionised (Chapter 2, Part II of the literature review). The

third part of the literature review (Chapter 2, Part III of literature review) dealt with young people's sexuality and the Internet to provide insight as to what the current state of knowledge on the matter is. By choosing the social constructionist stance to sexuality and sexual learning, the present research expanded on theoretical and empirical support mainly from disciplines such as psychology and sociology. Since a key assumption of the paradigm is that sexuality should not be understood or explained through biological principles (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998), the initial context for the research was sat through notions arising from philosophy, politics, psychology but later embraced a sociological view.

The methodology chapter (Chapter 3) offered a rationale of the steps undertaken in addressing the present inquiry, including justifications about the chosen theoretical foundation, research design, sample selection, procedures and data analyses involved. The chapter also discussed ethical considerations and practical issues encountered in the process of data gathering. Subsequently, Chapter 4 included analyses and discussion of the focus groups in order to identify the influence of the Web as a setting for sexual exploration. Chapter 5 explored central (online and offline) sources of sexual knowledge for young people to understand the significance of the Web in informing their sexuality. Chapter 6 involved analyses and discussions aiming to uncover how knowledge obtained through online sources and practices is translated into contemporary youth culture. The last conclusion chapter (Chapter 7) addressed the research questions in the light of the present analyses; discussing the significance, contribution and limitations of the findings, with a layout for further research.

Possibly, one of the most significant contributions of the present research is documenting the sophisticated attitudes participants demonstrate towards evaluating risks and opportunities resulting from their engagements with the Internet for sexual purposes. The conversations with young people indicated that they are not passive consumers of potentially

harming contents. Instead, results showed that they are mindful, considerate and selective in their approach. The present inquiry identified the use of the Web for sexual knowledge/ experiences as an additional space for learning/experimenting that can offer freedom and variety, although hiding particular risks.

Findings were able to uncover motivations, experiences and outcomes associated with online practices as well as follow up on the ways they updated participant's understanding. In turn, this has offered new insights on the different reasons for young people's engagements with porn, sexting, sex positive advocates and sexual influencers. The changing attitudes towards sex became visible through participant's stories who openly and willingly shared intimate thoughts and experiences about comparing genitals to porn actors, getting a "coming out" tip from a YouTuber and/or sending a nude to a stranger. What has also become apparent is that young people can no longer separate the analogue from the online space as they are organised into a new intensified whole. Saying that, finding from the present research are not claimed to be universally true, but they add a perspective to the broader discussion about online affordances and sexual learning among young people in contemporary western cultures. To avoid prejudices, the researcher decided not to employ a moral stand or consider online engagements in terms of risk and opportunities. Instead, in order to explore the phenomenon in a more overreaching manner, the dynamic and complex nature of the subject was approached as such. The researcher was constantly reflecting on own beliefs and assumptions and sensitive to the ways in which the study outcomes were in turn affecting them.

Research Aim and Questions

The aim of the present research is to understand how the virtual world is used as an arena for sexual exploration, and in what ways it informs the sexuality of young people in

contemporary Britain. The following research questions were set out to assist the aim of the study:

1. How young people engage with the Internet? What role it plays in their social and personal lives?

2. What are the sources and methods use by young people in making sense of their emerging sexuality? How they evaluate these sources in terms of reliability and effectiveness?

3. If, how and why technologies are changing the sexual learning context for young people (information, experiences, and implications)? What factors might navigate their experiences?

4. How technology-mediated practices might relate to other aspects of their lives, including sexual activity?

5. How the analogue social context and peer sexual culture might shape the online experience of young people?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Part I

Sexuality and the Period of Adolescence

The literature included in the review was selected through a systematic and rigorous search of different types of sources (books, peer reviewed articles, reports and etc.) related to the topic. Prior to beginning of the search, research questions were clarified in order to brainstorm/ identify main concepts and keywords. Subject language, terminology, and synonyms (identified through thesaurus) were carefully considered in order to select the most effective words/phrases for the search. Once keywords were set apart from the rest of the area terminology, the most relevant databases and search engines were identified. Several databases were used to search for relevant sources, as limiting search to only one or two might lead to overlooking key publications on the topic.

Main search engines/databases used for present research were: University of Huddersfield Library Services (scans through multiple databases and the library's catalog at once), British Library of Economic and Political Science, COPAC (providing unified access to the online catalogues of some of the largest university research libraries), ESRC Society Today (open access website offering access to high quality social and economic research), HESA (statistics agency providing news, statistics, data collection, links and contact information), SAGE Publications and JSTOR (maintaining an archive of important scholarly journals). Other sources for searching used in the present research were through abstract and citation database, published reports, conference proceedings, other documents that contain legislation or call for action on the subject, dissertation or thesis culminating in master's degree or a PhD, and searches through Google scholar (offering items not available on other virtual libraries).

Since each database works differently, it was necessary to develop a different strategy for each one of them. Also, search results were refined with caution to avoid losing key articles inadvertently. To prevent overlooking important publication, filters were narrowed to criteria such as year of publication or date range, document or source type, subject or author, and academic discipline. There were additional search tactics performed such as basic boolean operators (using AND, OR, and NOT to broaden or narrow search results); proximity searching (to specify where search terms will appear in relation to each other), truncation searching (using the symbol * to search for different word endings), phrase searching, wildcards, etc.

The process was further optimized by keeping track of searches, storing references, setting up notifications for new research relevant to the topic (where possible), scanning results for alternative words and phrases, and avoiding concepts with vague or broad meaning. Also, on number of occasions it proved important to be mindful of UK and US spelling variations, especially knowing that large proportion of academic work is published in English. Concerning the overall quality of the relevant results, publications were evaluated based on few principles. One of the main questions to be considered was the purpose of the published work, whether it is an independent piece of research, or there is a non-academic agenda (e.g. for charity). The information was considered in terms of date of publishing and impact of the outcomes (i.e. currency) in relation to the present work. The accuracy was analysed in terms of how reliable is the information, citation consistency, and spelling/grammar errors. In addition, information was evaluated based on its relevance or significance to the current research topic. Finally, the credentials of the author were also taken into account and whether the information published is peer-reviewed. Critical authors included in the study were Feona Attwood, Jessica Ringrose, Nathan Jurgenson, Sonia Livingstone, Jochen Peter and Patti Valkenburg, Michael Ross.

The History of Theorising Sexuality

Nowadays sex has become increasingly public, with not only its constant presence in popular culture, but also with the display of different sexualities. Undoubtedly, the sexual world today is very different from the one of the past generations. For instance, the advancement of technologies of sex, from virtual communication and connectedness to sexual health, reproduction, prevention and performance. In retrospect, the idea of providing more scientific account of this domain of human behavior (and its many forms) seem to be more recent. Although people have always been fascinated with sex, it is a modern initiative to analyse, catalogue and even politicise the variety of sexual behaviors and expressions. In doing so, Western societies have also influenced people to tie themselves to "a particular sexuality" (which in itself is forming it), and proved that the phenomenon is a product of not only genetics and psychological drives, but largely a product of culture.

The history of theorising sexuality can be traced back to the beginning of 19th century, and although far from current knowledge and understanding, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Henry Ellis, and most notably Sigmund Freud are considered the pioneers of the study of sexuality (Kimmel & Plante, 2004). While Krafft-Ebing's (1906) work was focused at sexual pathologies (i.e. sadism, necrophilia, and masochism) and Ellis (1946) studied the more unconventional sexualities at the time (i.e. homosexuality), Freud's (1925) efforts were directed towards the normal psychosexual development of the individual. And even though Freud was not the first to put forward such questions, his work proved to be the most influential starting point for future investigations. What is particularly relevant, even to this day is the idea that children are sexual beings, going through different stages of psychosexual development (Kimmel & Plante, 2004). Rather than treating sexuality as something that suddenly emerges during puberty, Freud proposed that sexual development begins from childbirth, and each stage has its milestones. He was also resistant to the general

understanding that homosexuality is a mental illness by appealing for its decriminalisation; and admitted that although disadvantageous at the time, it cannot be classified as a disorder. Yet, few ideas and observations made by Freud have gone unchallenged (Chodorow, 1994). First, his analysis lacked adequate interpretations of female sexuality, describing women as sexually passive, dominated mainly by their reproductive purpose. Second, in his analysis he continuously underestimated the impact of the social construct of sexuality, by placing too much emphasise on the sexual drives and urges (i.e. libido). Third, Freud argued that sexual orientation was not part of the biological domain, but also a matter of socialization (i.e. which parent the child identify with) (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). Fourth, he believed that gender was the main determinant of one's sexuality, claiming that man and women express and experience themselves sexually in a different way.

The control over sexual inquiries during the World War II, particularly in Germany, caused scientific investigations into human sexuality to shift from Europe to the United States. There, Alfred Kinsey made his own contribution to the field, and published the book "Sexual Behavior in the Human male" (1948), followed by the "Sexual Behavior in the Human female" (1953) five years later. In his books, the author performed a series of interviews with more than 18,000 American citizens. Besides the fact that his work was more scientific compared to prior examinations, Kinsey was able to break many taboos surrounding human sexuality. One of the most salient points in his research was that homosexuality is more common than expected, and many man who identify as heterosexual also had homosexual experiences (Drucker, 2012). In addition, he discovered that intercourse prior to marriage, infidelity, and male masturbation were widespread occurrences. His dry scientific books became bestsellers in America, and turned Kinsey into a sensation. Yet, even though his work gained such popularity, it was also the subject of much controversy (Kimmel & Plante, 2004). In particular, a number of scholars have challenged the nature of Kinsley's

sample as he often drew from populations of prisoners, sex workers, soldiers and university students (Catania, Gibson, Chitwood, and Coates, 1990). These populations were neither random nor representative for the general population, and consequently could not provide a clear account of sexual behaviors. In fact, a later more comprehensive investigation with the American population produced very different data compare to Kinsey report (Gagnon & Simon, 1974). Gagnon and Simon (1974) found that people were having far less sexual intercourse as stated previously, and statistics on homosexual experiences were much lower. Nevertheless, whatever the shortcomings of Kinsley's report were, he managed to change attitudes towards many sexual practices, and paved the way for the study of sexology in modern days.

A New Perspective

For the most part classical inquiries treated sexuality as a pre-social fact, placing greater emphasis on the biological and psychological aspects of it. This is possibly why the work of John Gagnon and William Simon is considered the most significant breakthrough in the study of sexuality (Jackson & Scott, 2010). Gagnon and Simon (1973) theorised that sexual manifestations are no different than other behaviors, and claimed that the wider context helps people organise their sexual urges into coherent narrative. They challenged Freudian views in many ways. First, the authors of "Sexual conduct" disagreed with the popular notion that infancy and childhood are crucial moments in the formation of sexuality (Kimmel & Plante, 2004). Second, they opposed the idea of biological determinism, claiming that sexual behavior is a product of the social surrounding rather than inborn drives and urges (Markle, 2008). Third, Gagnon and Simon made a reasonable distinction between gender and sexuality, suggesting that sexual desires do not influence the formation of the gender, but instead one's sexuality is developed based on an already established gender. Another central aspect of their work was the idea of the 'sexual scripts' that aimed to explain how people learn their sexual

behavior through the social environment. According to Gagnon and Simon scripts can be developed on the basis of three factors: cultural/ historical, social/ interactive and personal/ intrapsychic. The core idea is that sexual feelings do not purely arise within the individual, but they need a meaning attached to them. Therefore, the different scripts or scenarios can be composed based on social and historical changes, interactions with other people, or the individual cultivation of desires. In a way, the scripts act as guidelines for our sexual behaviour and expression. As opposed to Freud's vision, the sexual scripts theory postulates that sexual urges are not a driving force on its own, but their significance is defined by the wider context, or by individual's own experiences. However, a key limitation of the theory is its inability to offer a testable hypothesis or explain causal relationship between elements (DeLamater & Plante, 2015). As Jackson and Scott (2010) suggested sexual scripts are 'fluid improvisations involving ongoing processes of interpretation and negotiation', and therefore, very complex and hard to comprehend.

Borrowing from the script theory, Reiss (1986) made another sociological proposition, in order to explain the formation of sexuality (i.e. linkage theory). He defined the process as an individual erotic (and genitals) response to a sexual script shaped on a few sub-cultural levels: the power structure, the ideology of society, and the kinship system (PIK). As the author pointed out, a sociological theory should be able to explain both, cross-cultural variations and universals in sexuality. For instance, one universal principle about human sexuality is its significance in every society, even the sexually repressive ones that exercise control over it. Besides, the general understanding that sexuality is tightly connected to reproduction, the author suggested that the significance of sex across different societies also emerges from the powerful feelings associated with it, ranging from physical pleasure, love, intimacy, self-disclosure and adventure, to aggression and predatoriness. Reiss also proposed that sexuality is always linked to the power structure of a society, and privileged people use

sexuality to control the less privileged. For instance, across many societies, men are given more power compared to women, and it is evident that they use it to control women's sexuality. In support of this notion, a cross-cultural investigation indicated that women display greater sexual freedom when they are closer in authority to men (Hyde, 1994). Nevertheless, according to Reiss, the most fundamental aspect that influences sexuality is the ideology of the culture. In his view, sexual expressions are largely based on current cultural norms, although the meanings that different societies attach to them may vary greatly. For instance, in some societies, polygamy is accepted and commonly practiced (e.g. Qatar and some states of Nigeria), while in others it is immoral or even criminal act (e.g.Belgium, Bulgaria). However, although Reiss performed a series of investigation to support his theory, similarly to the original idea of Gagnon and Simon, the formation of individual variations was hard to evaluate. The bond between sexuality and the power structure of a society was also demonstrated by the work and writings of Andrea Dworkin. Suffering first-hand the viciousness of male domination, Dworkin (1987) radically opposed the patriarchal model of western societies. Through her powerful analyses she placed sex and female sexuality at the epicenter of power disproportion and fought for the rights of sex workers who are working on the streets and as part of the pornography industry.

Gagnon and Simon placed on the map the idea that sexuality is socially formed, but social learning theorists were able to provide an account of how individual differences can occur. Although Dollard and Miller (1950) set the foundations of the socio-cognitive approach, Bandura (1977) is the most widely recognised social learning theorist. The social cognitive theory or social learning theory has been commonly used to explain the formation of sexuality and gender identity within the individual. The concept was built upon the theories of classical (Pavlov, 1902) and operant conditioning (Skinner, 1938), suggesting that although stimuli exist, they are mediated by social responses and individuals learn behaviors through

observation, imitation and identification. For example, a little girl may acquire most characteristics of the female role as she identifies with her mother, and observes her behavior. In addition, Bandura also considered the unique way in which individuals form and sustain particular behavior, while taking into account the social context in which it is displayed. Yet, a limitation of the social learning theory occurs from the general commitment to the context as the main influence on behavior, which means that changes in the environment automatically lead to changes in the person. In addition, the interaction between person, behavior, and environment is not fully explored, and consequently there is no information whether any of these factors is more influential. Finally, although the theory refers to the past experiences of the individual, the impact of motivations and emotions is not considered.

Queer Studies

Throughout time, a number of social forces have influenced the existence and free expression of sexual variations, and therefore obstructed their settling within the social and cultural norms. Specifically, in the West, the model that has dominated for the most part adhered to the idea of heterosexuality, gender binary, and monogamy, leaving little, or no room for other variations. Yet, the existence of all these aspects of sexuality (e.g. homosexuality, gender fluidity, polygamy) is well documented throughout history, dating back to ancient civilisations (e.g. Egypt, Greece, Rome). In response, contemporary theories took on more radical approach on exploring the landscape, originally focusing on the discrepancies between sex, gender and desire (Jagose, 1996). The so-called Queer Theories build upon the socially constructed ideas of normative and deviant sexualities, challenging the notion that gender is part of the essential self (e.g. De Lauretis, 1988; Bersani, 1996; 1995; Halberstam, 2005; Berlant, 2008; Butler, 2007; 2011). The origin of queer theory is hard to define, as it emerges from multiple critical and cultural contexts, including feminist studies, radical movements of people of color, LGBT+ movements, sexual subcultures, AIDS

activism, and politics. The rapidly expanding body of literature addresses a number of notions related to what is normal, how normal comes to exist, and how certain individuals are excluded from that norm. In her work, the Italian feminist De Lauretis (1991) stood against the idea that sexual experiences and expressions fall into neat sections. Instead, De Lauretis suggested that sexuality should be viewed as a fluid and dynamic collection that might take different shapes in time, while gender can expand beyond the limits of a particular dichotomy. One of the key concepts of queer theory is challenging the idea of assumed heterosexuality, arguing that the idea of heteronormativity is reinforced in society through institutions of marriage, employment, and adoption rights, among many others.

Michel Foucault was among the first theorists that contributed to the field of queer studies. Through his work, he was able to destabilise past notions of human sexuality by analysing the interrelationship between knowledge, power and sexuality (Foucault, 1978). He did not rule out the contribution of biological factors to the formation of sexuality, but rather prioritised the crucial role of institutions and politics in the formation of sex, gender and desire (Spargo, 1999). Therefore, instead of trying to explore the essence of human sexuality, his efforts were directed towards exploring how sexuality functions in society. Particularly, Foucault focused on how some discourses have shaped and established meaningful schemes that have received the status of "norms", and how these norms affects the organisation of both, individuals and societies. Influences by his work, Butler made her contribution to the field of critical theory by challenging the popular perceptions of gender. She made a case that gender identity is a social construct, emerging from repetitive performances of behaviors corresponding to the widely accepted gender roles. In the first chapter of her book "Gender Troubles", the author united gender and performativity, arguing that gender identity is not an internal reality, but instead, the central self is mapped through a display of behaviors defined by social conventions and society's acceptance (Butler, 1990). Therefore, Butler claims that

not the individual produces the performance, but the performance itself shapes the individual. Generally, Butler argues that sexuality in itself is a norm, and normative/deviant categories are not biologically, but socially determined. Same as Foucault, she is not denying the existence of biological differences between sexes, but focuses on the social conditions under which certain characteristics of sex become salient (Nagoshi, Brzuzy, & Nagoshi, 2013; 2014).

Further contribution to the field was provided by Eva Kosofsky Sedgwick, arguing that the standard binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality paints rather simplistic picture of human desire and consequently limits our understanding of sexuality (among many other concepts) (Yep, Lovaas, Elia, & Doyle, 2014). She further suggests that upon close examination of the sexual binary, heterosexuality relies on homosexuality to create and preserve its master status in society (Sedgwick, 1991). The author draws on feminist scholarship and the work of Foucault to reject the 'minoritizing' views on sexual identity in favour of the 'universalising', making her one of the originators of queer theory. In particular, Sedgwick argues that the homo/heterosexual definition is an issue of great importance for individuals across the whole spectrum of sexualities, rather than being central only for a relatively fixed sexual minority. Therefore, heterosexuality is not a stable category, and requires constant affirmation and protection.

Building on the work of previous authors, Muñoz (1999) develops the idea of 'disidentification' and set out to explain how queers of colour negotiate their identities in a world where the norm is represented by the heterosexual, cisgender, white, middle class male. In discussing how queer people of colour have been placed outside the dominant sexual and racial ideology, Muñoz argues that such individuals do not align themselves with or against the mainstream culture. Instead, they adopt a third approach and transform dominant culture for their own purposes through simultaneous works on, with, and against it (Perez, 2003;

2004). Therefore, queer of colour create counterpublics which are communities that challenge the dominant public sphere and disrupt normative scripts. The author recognises that disidentification and consequently forming counterpublics is not only a strategy for identification, but also works as a coping mechanism (Muñoz, 2009). Similarly, Halberstam (2005) discussed the role of Drag King culture as such queer counterpublic that not only forms public spheres for such individuals, but in doing so challenges white heteronormativity. In addition to queer of colour, the work of Muñoz has also inspired topics such as queer and disability, mainly concerned with the representation of bodies, queer identities and pleasure across multiple disciplines (i.e. crip theory) (McRuer, 2006). Other queer theorists discuss issues related to intersex bodies and the dominant medical standpoint that regard it as a disorder (e.g. Holmes, 2011; Davis, 2015; Charlebois, 2017), as well as the AIDS crisis and the emerging homophobia as a public response to it.

As noted above, queer studies rebel against the kinds of essentialist views related to sexual categories, based on which we analyze and identify people, create relationships, and develop meanings on various biological and social occurrences. According to Yep, Lovaas, Elia and Doyle (2014) the field is among the most significant intellectual work of the past two decades, providing new ways of viewing and understanding human sexuality. Through challenging past notions related to the different categories of identity, queer theory impacted both, the academy and cultural politics. However, there is also a reasonable body of criticism towards the theorising queering. Initial critique was focused on the ambiguity of the subjects falling under the queer umbrella and their lack of specific status or gender choice. While some believe that the desexualised identity in such theorising means that heterosexual individuals can also be queer, others believe that this robs the LGBT+ community from their distinctiveness and unique challenges in society (Valocchi, 2005). Gamson (2015) further suggests that since all sexual categories are denaturalised, queer theory should focus on

discourses rather than analysing selves and subjectivities. Also, more recent debates, disapprove of the significantly less attention paid by scholars on the institutional conditions within which LGBT+ individuals live (Laurie, 2014).

In line with some of the theory emerging from queer studies, scientific classifications from the past has turned into truths and consequently contributed tremendously to the formation of ideas surrounding power, physicality and sexuality (Weeks, 1998). Similarly, media in the shape of talk shows, movies, documentaries and advertisement has communicated various personal, institutional and political sexual agendas to the mass. As a result, for a long time sexuality was viewed from a much-narrowed perspective that in turn led to strong opposition to sexual variations and lack of more authentic account regarding human sexuality. Today, viewing the subject of human desire as something natural and authentic that just came to exists is utterly unfounded. In reality, it was the ongoing collective efforts of scholars (gender and feminist scholars, sociologists and psychologists), sexual subcultures, LGBT+ and movements of people of colour, and AIDS campaigns that managed to change the sexual landscape through research, activism and politics (Johansson, 2016). The entire contemporary discussion of sexuality, especially around young people, has integrated various discourses of how we should view sexuality and physicality, creating new challenges and paths for self-discovery. We are witnessing a new and greater awareness of the meaning of gender and sexual identity in various economic, cultural and social contexts that strive for equality and free expression. Yet, even though there are ongoing conversations about equality, and certain changes are taking place, it is still easy to recognise many inequalities.

Young People and Sexuality

From a developmental perspective, sexuality is a complex and highly individual process that transforms and evolves throughout one's lifespan but never reaches a final state (Sharpe, 2003). Rather, each stage of its development brings its own goals and challenges and

the way in which they are met and resolved can largely affect individual's wellbeing. Sexual questions, conflicts, and crisis can occur prior to adolescence, and they can very well continue after that. Yet, across the academic literature, there is a general consensus that the period of adolescence is the most significant stage in the development of sexuality marked by the onset of biological, emotional and cognitive changes. Prior to discussing young people's sexuality, it is important to acknowledge the impact of the biological changes that occur in the body. It is a well-known fact that adolescence years are associated with intense preoccupation with the physical self as the body suffers from major alternations, varying from sudden changes in weight, height, skin appearance, body/facial hair growth, and sweat production (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). In turn, these changes trigger complex emotional and behavioral responses that may disrupt the process of adaptation.

In recent years, the topic of body dissatisfaction is gaining significant attention from scholars and health workers, due to the fact that: a) it is a prevalent problem; b) has serious implications for the well-being and mental health of young people (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). Prior research shows that boys and girls are mostly concerned about their weight; and while girls want to be thinner, boys wish to be more athletic (e.g. Cohane & Pope, 2001; Davison & McCabe, 2006; Kenny, O'Malley-Keighran, Molcho, & Kelly, 2017). However, it seems that body dissatisfaction is much more common among girls, and is the main reason for eating disorders. Carey et al. (2011) found that there is a strong association between peer and personal body image dissatisfaction, especially among girls. It was also observed that girls view dieting as a group activity, where the entire group engages in the same behavior. Another biological factor that can play a significant role in young people's adjustment is the timing of puberty. According to Moore and Rosenthal (2006) early maturing boys have more advantages then the ones' whose onset is delayed. Because the former group have a manlier appearance, they are often popular around peers, and adults tend to perceive

them as more reliable and mentally mature. In contrast, late-maturing boys have less success in domains that are highly valued in teenage years, such as sports and dating. An early investigation by Brook-Gunn and Reiter (1990) indicated that matured boys might be the disadvantageous ones later in life, as they have not developed additional adaptive skills that were necessary for their late-maturing peers. Therefore, the authors suggested that the latter group will have better relationships in adulthood as they have developed sensitivity and better interpersonal skills. However, investigations that are more recent were unable to provide support for the findings (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). With respect to girls, research has been consistent with the findings that early puberty is more often than not unfavourable and has higher potential to result in an eating disorder (Brook-Gunn & Reiter, 1990; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). Late maturation among girls is experienced more favourably (especially compared to boys), but if the process is too delayed it can also cause serious distress.

Sexual Socialisation during Adolescence

The Family

The period of adolescence is a time of increased sophistication in various mental and emotional capabilities. Initially, sexuality is less about immediate encounters, and more about understanding it. It is impossible to pinpoint the link between puberty and sexual initiation, but scholars believe that although hormones are involved, social factors play a significant role (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). The social order of each society can be found in the family structure, and it is the first instance of knowledge for the child. There is no question that young people consider the attitudes and values of their parents regarding sexuality. Therefore, the quality of the family and marital relation, conversations about sexuality, and maintaining open dialog with the child can influence the formation of their sexual/love map (Miller, 2002). For example, Fitzharris and Werner-Wilson (2004) made a review of prior research and were able to identify three themes of sexual communication between parents and their

children. Under the theme "The Big Talk" were classified conversations dealing with the biological/physiological aspects of sexuality, such as body function and reproduction. Discussions around contraception, STI and abortion were labeled as "Tea Talks". Finally, "The Open Talk" involved dialogue with reference to homosexuality, infidelity and sexual violence. All three levels of sexual discussion are equally crucial, but unfortunately not all parents go to this extent with their children. A survey by the Kaiser Foundation (1996) found that teen commonly perceived conversations with parents about sexuality as biased and inadequate. What is more, in some households early on young people receive the message that sexual topics should not be discussed (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). The complete omission of sexual education within the family structure can often be caused by parents' conservative views or feeling of discomfort to bring up such topics. Either way, scholars and health workers have long documented the ineffectiveness of the model, as children brought up in similar households have to rely exclusively on external influences (e.g. Fitzharris and Werner¬Wilson, 2004). As previously mentioned, the relations between parents can also affect sexual attitudes of teenagers. For example, Young, Jensen, Olsen, and Cundick, (1991) found that traditional families (with two biological parents living together) provide greater guidance and supervision, and therefore children's attitudes towards sexuality are more modest. The opposite association was found by Miller (2002), who concluded that teenagers from disrupted families, have more permissive attitudes towards sex, and are more likely to engage in sexual activities. Thorton (1991) further clarified the latter point by suggesting that: a) separation reduces the number of adults in the household; b) the custodial parent might have to work longer hours, which with will naturally decrease interaction with children (which is seen as powerful influence on parental control and parental values) c) separated parents might lose the ability to reinforce authority.

Peers

All group memberships (e.g. family, classmates, peers, and religious congregation) have the potential to shape individual's perceptions, opinions and behaviors, however, peer group affiliations are particularly influencing during the adolescent years (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008). Peers are very useful in sourcing information on a range of issues, and they are considered as a unique context for cognitive, social, and emotional development. What is more, friends' groups are especially valuable source of sexual information that can be outside individual's viewpoint. During puberty, individuals strive for autonomy and independence, so naturally there is a shift from predominantly family interactions to peer socialisation (L'Engle & Jackson, 2008). The lack of supervision allows young people to discuss sexual topics without censure and in greater details (Steinberg, 2010). This in turn, creates an intimate bond among friends, and further encourages them to share experiences and exchange ideas. In fact, since teenagers experiment with new identities, they often see peers as more approving and supportive of their new choices, than family members (Cillessen, Schwartz, & Mayeux, 2011). The drive for affiliation and acceptance can also stimulate individuals to engage in sexual exploration as it can increase their popularity within the established clique (Cillessen, Schwartz, & Mayeux, 2011). A large body of prior research has found strong associations between individual sexual activity and peer group sexual activity, as well as many scholars have discussed the phenomenon of peer pressure (e.g. Dishion, Eddy, Haas, Li, & Spracklen, 1997; Dishion & Owen, 2002; Prinstein, Meade, & Cohen, 2003). However, more recent investigations have raised the issue of such finding being important, and yet deceptively simple in the measures and tool use for examination (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Costello & Zozula, 2018;). According to Brechwald and Prinstein (2011) while group norms are important for the acceptance of members, not all young people are equally susceptible to peer

influence. The results vary greatly across individuals, and while some young people remain resilient to peer pressure, others are more vulnerable to conformity demands.

The Wider Social Arena

The wider social arena is also a powerful influence in shaping young people's opinion, and the area of sexuality makes no exception. The factors in play range from the overwhelming world of youth culture, to the less obvious effect of institutions such as school, religion and judiciary. Television programs, films, music, magazines, and favourite celebrities, all reinforce existing norms and new trends of sexuality. In present times, most of these factors have moved and extended online, allowing young people to communicate freely through the medium. As a result, the World Wide Web has become among the most influential sources of sexual information among young people. The boom of social networking and other youth oriented platforms have been a subject of much controversy. Initially, research was concerned with the prevalence of sexual themes in youth oriented platform, and how such exposures might influence the formation of sexual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors among young people (Gruber, & Grube, 2000). However, initial investigations provided limited understanding about the phenomenon and its impact on young people's sexual activity (Kimmel & Plante, 2004). Today, there are different challenges for young people related to the virtual world. For example, social networking paved the way of online blogging with great focus on celebrity lifestyle, fashion brands, and fitness models that promote unrealistic and objectified representations of one's body (Peter and Valkenburg, 2009). Additionally, research on pornography hardly reflects on the benefits from such activity. The extensive literature on sexually explicit materials suggests that habitual consumption may lead to negative consequences among which addiction, use of illegal materials as well as unrealistic expectation (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007; Owens, Behun, Manning & Reid, 2012; Willoughby, Young-Petersen, & Leonhardt, 2018). On a more

positive note, the internet also provides a wide variety of interactive practices that enable young people to engage in great sexual exploration. Activities with shared quality (e.g. sexting, cybersex), allow teenagers to go further (without a censure) in their self-exploration, avoiding some of the risks associated with face-to face interactions (Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson, Svedin, 2016). The internet can be particularly helpful for individuals that are unable to act on important aspects of their sexuality in the physical world. For example, some online practices can be very appealing to a young people suffering from various mental, emotional, or physical disabilities (Ross, 2005) as well as children growing up in a strict and conservative family environment (Kalaitzaki, Birtchnell & Hammond, 2016). In the case of LGBT+ youth, the virtual world can provide valuable social support, health education and open dialog on sensitive topics (Grov, Breslow, Newcomb, Rosenberger & Bauermeister, 2014).

The School

The school plays an important role in providing adequate sex education for young people, with most parents being unable to address various issues, and youth media sending mixed messages to young people. However, the current guidelines in school across the United Kingdom have made little progress compared to the needs of contemporary young people. Possibly the delay in the establishment of a far-reaching and impactful curriculum of school sex education arises from the public (and consequently political) pressure on what should and should not be included (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). Parents and conservative communities have raised most of these concerns, believing that sex education will inevitably lead to greater sexual activity. Across Europe, the Netherlands is possibly the most advanced country in terms of sex education for young people (Adamczyk, 2014). Since 1980, the Dutch curriculum has focused on topics such as physiology, masturbation, homosexuality, values, attitudes, and communication/negotiation skills. Not only is there daytime TV programs for sexual education (with very little censure), but also parents are encouraged to openly discuss

sexual topics with their children. Early on Ketting (1995) analysed key sexual attitudes in the Netherlands and concluded that sexual behavior is treated as an individual choice, uncommitted to the norms of the family and/or the religion. In turn, to support the individual ethics and ensure healthy decision-making, the government has directed efforts towards the adequate sexual education of young people. According to the Rutgers Annual Report (2017) teen pregnancy has the lowest rate in the Netherlands (compared to other European countries), 70 per cent of young people use protection during intercourse, and sexual coercion and homophobia are steadily declining each year.

In the UK the new Relationships and Sex Education (SRE) curriculum is becoming compulsory from September 2020, although delays till 2021 are expected as some establishments might not meet the statutory requirements (Department of Education, 2019). While the context of school-based sex education is slowly changing, it seems that traditional attitudes are still domineering as the emphasis remains on risk prevention and safeguarding. In addition, with the pervasiveness of sexual themes online and the spread of new sexual practices, educators and practitioners are far from being the ultimate carriers of knowledge. This will inevitably be problematic for the successful delivery of information to young people, since unfamiliarity and hesitancy to deliver relationships and sex education has been shown to impact the outcomes considerably (Herbert & Lohrmann, 2011). The mode of teaching and particularly the educator's ability to address sexual topics openly and freely is a critical point (Hirst, 2013). For the purpose, however, robust research in the area followed by training of educators is required in order to meets the need of young people. As argued by Wood, Hirst, Wilson & Burns-O'Connell (2018; 2019;) the context of school sex education is still opposing the holistic and comprehensive approach to teaching students about sex and sexuality. Instead of offering vague and fear-laden knowledge overlooking other critical topics, Wood et al. (2018, 2019) asserts the need for more integrated approach that would

promote the positive aspects of sexual interaction, including pleasure. Besides of the obvious benefits, today with the presence of easily accessible mainstream pornography, situating pleasure as a fundamental part of the sexual experience will give young people (boys and girls) another critical point for evaluation of such scripts.

Gender

A large body of empirical evidence is suggesting that the formation of young people's sexual maturation can be seriously interrupted according to gender and/or sexual orientation. In Brown and Gilligan's (1992) view, the period of adolescence was the most significant moment in the "disempowerment" of girls, as they need to abandon the ability to speak up and conform to the role of a nice girl/ decent woman. An extensive review of the past literature showed that gender inequality was present throughout time, and while sexual assertiveness was priced among boys, it was damaging for girls (Crawford & Popp, 2003). What is more, the derogatory terms used to describe free expression of girl's sexuality has become more universal. Interesting arguments come from Coffey (2017) who referred to the common exchange of the word "bitch" between women (e.g. "Let's party bitches!", "She's my main bitch.", "You, lucky bitch."). The speaker challenged women's perceptions based on the seemingly innocent exchange by discussing the reasons why there is no equivalent of the word for men. Similarly, White (2004) investigated the origins and meaning of the "slut" label by asking women to recall their school years. Opposite to the common understanding that women gain the label from men (due to promiscuous behavior), the term was typically used from one girl to another when referencing appearance or behavior that was deviating the norms. Further, Kreager and Staff (2009) suggested that reputation for girls is of central importance, so sexual desires should take place in the context of a steady romantic relationship. Moving onto more recent publications, there is evidence that girl's sexuality is still viewed with much of the traditional constrains; and although expected to get involved in

premarital sex, girls have to approach with caution, while boys benefit from the playboy status (Kreager, Staff, Gauthier, Lefkowitz, & Feinberg, 2016). According to Moore and Rosenthal (2006) girls develop the ability to romanticise sexual encounters in order to interpret them as an expression of deep affection and love, rather than sexual desire. In fact, examinations of the motives for sexual initiation among young individuals determined that while boys attached great importance to pleasure and tension relief, girls' motivation was associated with intimacy and closeness (Ott, Millstein, Ofner, & Halpern-Felsher, 2006; Meston, Hamilton, & Harte, 2009; Ott, Ghani, McKenzie, Rosenberger, & Bell, 2012). Yet another investigation further suggests that the role of gender in forming one's sexuality might have a more interactive nature, observing variation (presence/absence) of the double standard across different schools (Soller & Haynie, 2017). The study showed that sexual intercourse among girls was not always negatively evaluated, but limits such as "too many" and "too young" were still in place. On the other hand, boys also face challenges along the way as they are expected to initiate sexual intercourse and perform well (Ott, Ghani, McKenzie, Rosenberger, & Bell, 2012). For them the sexual intercourse itself is mostly related to pleasure, but also to social status (particularly relevant for inexperienced individuals). There is evidence that the initiation of sexual activity goes through three phases: a) pre-planning and mentoring from older man; b) looking for cues of sexual interest and consent from partner; c) returning to prior activities with the sense of accomplishment. The authors found that it is common for boys to experience a great deal of uncertainty and nervousness in the process, as well as feelings of disappointment after the fact.

LGBT+ Young people

As discussed earlier, challenges in the formation of sexuality can also arise among individuals that 'failed' to adhere to the gender binary, or those unable to identify as strictly heterosexual. Unlike other minority groups (e.g. ethnic, racial, religious minorities), most

LGBT+ individuals are not raised among similar other, and they have to negotiate identity and find support elsewhere. For most of them accepting own sexuality is associated with three main challenges: a) acknowledging the general message that own desires as unnatural or deviant; b) finding name for the sexual feelings; c) learning that there are other people facing the same challenges (Kimmel & Plante, 2004). Therefore, coming out is not an act or sudden epiphany, but a gradual process of acknowledging one's gender identity or non-heteronormative sexual orientation. Most LGBT+ people share that the process for them started in childhood, but it is in their teenage years that they had to resolve own feelings with uncertainty and social stigma, and attain self-acceptance (Riley, 2010). Many studies have shown that disclosing sexuality to significant others (such as family and friends) can free people for many of the negative feelings associated with one's sexuality and further influence the positive self-evaluation (e.g. Riley, 2010; Harrison, 2003; Baiocco, Laghi, Di Pomponio, & Nigito, 2011; 2012). Yet, within the family structure, initial disclosure is often met with disapproval (as we live in society that assumes heterosexuality from birth) and in the case of non-supportive families, it can turn into a long-term distress (Zhao et al., 2016; Riley, 2010). In other cases, LGBT+ individuals overwhelmed with anxiety about the outcome might attempt to conceal their sexual identity, or even engage in heterosexual activity to repress homosexuality. The behavior is commonly referred to as "closeting" and can result in isolation, depression, low self-worth, and in more extreme cases to run away, mental health implications or suicide (Cocker, Hafford-Letchfield, Ryan, & Barran, 2018). Therefore, the divergence from the dominant sexual culture creates additional developmental challenges among young people from sexual minorities. Gender is considered among the most significant factors structuring young people's experience (Ringrose, 2013; Kromidas, 2015; Bhana, 2016) in terms of both, rules of relationships (Yahyaoui, El Methni, Gaultier, & Lakhdar-Yahyaoui, 2013), and experiences with sexual orientation (Morrison, Morrison, & Franklin,

2009). A lot of this research also demonstrates how young people actively construct their gender and sexual identity led by the still dominating heteronormative logic. The diversity of gender identities has been recorded across different cultures and societies for centuries, such as the Bugis culture of Indonesia (having three sexes- male, female and intersex as well as five genders with distinct social roles), or the Hijras (officially recognised as the third gender) across the Indian subcontinent. Yet, the West has offered fairly recently more visibility to gender and sexual diversity through research, media, celebrity and popular culture as well as expanding the vocabulary on gender identity and sexual variations (Bragg, Renold, Ringrose, & Jackson, 2018). Also, particularly in the UK, the Equality and Human Rights Commission has taken upon numerous trajectories to supports gender diversity and transgender equality by criminalising discrimination and fighting the double standard. In addition, educational institutions (i.e. schools and colleges) across the country are taking drastic measures, drawing alongside the new laws and guidelines by introducing gender-neutral uniforms, prevent bullying, encourage equal rights and inclusion through internal activism and open discussions. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, I will explore young people's response to the changing gender landscape and the outcomes associated with it.

Young people's experiences with their gender are diverse and current findings among millennials shows that they vary across peer group, age, location and educational institution. A picture that emerged in recent studies is that young people are becoming increasingly accepting of gender diversity. In Bragg, Renold, Ringrose, and Jackson (2018) most participants were highly critical towards gender inequalities, and believed that accepting gender differences is a modern initiative that corresponds to their general morality. Attitudes such as female inferiority and homophobia were often considered as close-minded and ignorant. In fact, young people saw old beliefs as being caused by absence or misinterpretation of information, such as treating particular gender and sexual identities as

disorders or reinforcing gender stereotypes. Other motives for accepting gender diversity were linked to participants' own experiences with discrimination, such as racism or religious bigotry. A third perspective expressed by respondents was related to general tolerance about allowing people to make their own life choices without being judged. However, a small proportion of young people included in the study expressed conflicting feelings towards the transforming gender scene. Besides the attitudes expressed towards gender diversity, participants included in the study used 23 different terms to describe how they experience their own gender. Similarly, in another investigation among Australian transgender, gender diverse and intersex youth, people used various terms to position their gender identity on the spectrum, with some describing absence of gender or a feeling beyond gender position (Jones et al., 2016). The study also provided evidence that identifying and understanding one's gender identity is an ongoing process that does not necessarily reach a final state. Also, research with Israeli young people assessed the perception of gender identity in 'normative' individuals and found that views of gender identity as binary do not reflect the experience of many young people, and called for a new conceptualisation of gender, which relates to the diversity in gender experiences (Joel, Tarrasch, Berman, Mukamel, & Ziv, 2014)

Although young people in the previously discussed studies hold certain ideals about gender, it is also true that daily experiences are still regulated by gender norms. According to Jones et al. (2016) supportive classmates were found to be an important determinant of positive experiences, but only 30% of the transgender and gender diverse people included in the study said that they have that support. Therefore, 25% of those surveyed reported avoiding school because they cannot conform to the dominating gender stereotypes in the context, and 27% of the ones lacking classmate support thought of changing school. Calder-Dawe and Gavey (2016) found a difference between participants' general definition of sexism and their actual experiences with it. In contrast to feminist views of sexism that emphasise irregularity

in power between men and women, participants provided a gender-neutral definition of the term. However, when discussing their own accounts, male students described situations in which they observed sexism, while girls provided details on occasions where they were the target. In particular, only girls reported being sexually harassed or underestimated based on their gender in school settings and beyond as well as from peers online. Both male and female interviewees, however, experienced gender stereotyping with boys being expected to perform well in sports and maintain high status among peers, and girls expected to maintain certain appearance, and be "nice". Renold, Bragg, Jackson, and Ringrose (2017) also found that gender norms and expectations continue to regulate young people's experiences. In their research, girls shared being often judged based on their body and attractiveness, and individuals whose gender identification goes beyond the male/female binary reported experiencing sexual or gender based harassment. According to Szirom (2017) despite the so-called sexual revolution and current knowledge and visibility of gender diversity, attitudes are still the result of a continuous reinforcement of old ideas from power institutions. In addition, a review of the literature by Richards, Bouman, and Barker (2017) argues that although acceptance of gender diversity is increasingly evident, individuals with nonconforming identity remain under risk of victimisation or discrimination. Therefore, current debates show that accepting gender diversity is a work in progress as some inconsistency between young people's ideals in theory and in practice are present.

The past few decades have marked significant progress for the LGBT+ community across Western countries, with improvements in both legal rights and cultural acceptance (Morgan, 2013). Nowadays, research signifies that young people are increasingly accepting of sexual diversity, making old sexual identity categories and coming-out models less relevant. Indeed, recent statistics with USA sample suggests that 20% of millennials do not identify as straight, nor do they identify as gay or lesbian. Rather, participants placed themselves

somewhere on the spectrum describing their sexual identity as fluid, queer, and bisexual, to name a few (The Harris Pole, 2018). Similarly, a UK survey found that at present young people see their sexuality as less fixed, and 43% of the participants placed themselves in the non-binary area (Dahlgreen & Shakespeare, 2015). Responding to the changes, Katz-Wise (2015) proposed that old sexual categories were overly fixed, and therefore undervalued other salient facets of sexuality. The author further suggested that today's perceptions of young people are slowly minimising the strictly homosexual/heterosexual labels offering further understanding of the formation of sexual identity.

Analysing evidence from the past decade, Kaufman, Powell, and Balcerski (2014) found that young women, more often than young man, feel comfortable with variations in their sexual desires and behaviors. Consequently, non-heterosexual women more often refer to their sexuality as fluid and flexible. In her longitudinal study among 71 young women, Diamond (2007; 2012) found that over a period of ten years, approximately 47 of the participants changed (often multiple times) their sexual identity description. What is particularly visible from the findings is that self-identification as lesbian and bisexual over time transformed into heterosexual and unlabeled, but attraction to same-sex individuals remained. Therefore, the results suggest that while there were no significant changes in the sexual orientations, some of the women included in the study changed the identity label assigned to their sexuality.

According to Kaufman, Powell, and Balcerski (2014) contemporary youth (thought to be heterosexual in the past) avoid using the strict label. Instead, they modify their "straightness" to include a degree of flexibility. For instance, Savin-Williams (2018) was able to identify a large group of "mostly straight" youth whose sexual self-identification resides between heterosexual and bisexual standards. This does not necessarily mean that such young people are open or purposefully searching for same-sex experiences, but that by their own

interpretations, they experience some sexual fluidity. For instance, one of the participants included in the study described herself as straight, borderline bisexual, experiencing romantic attraction only to the opposite-sex, but finds women more aesthetic and fun to interact with. Similarly, some male participants described themselves as straight for the present moment, but did not exclude the possibility of experiencing same-sex attraction in future. Therefore, mostly straight boys and girls recognise that there are multiple elements of one's sexuality, and remain open to the potential of experiencing some of them. Other investigations among sexual minorities also signify that young people avoid traditional labels (Bosse & Chiodo, 2016). Even though they might still use some of the terms to refer to their sexual orientation or political affiliation, LGBT+ youth nowadays refuse to reduce themselves to a particular category. Rather, they employ more complex descriptions often involving their gender and sexual identity such as pansexual or pomosexual.

There is evidence that sexual stigma among LGBT+ youth is still present (Stonewall, 2012; Petty & Trussell, 2018). Across a sample of same-sex attraction athletes, it was determined that even though sexual stigma rarely results in bullying or harassment, often people can experience discrimination (Petty & Trussell, 2018). Other scholars, however, suggest that although still present, homophobia is declining (e.g. Anderson & Bullingham, 2015; Dahlgreen & Shakespeare, 2015; The Harris Pole, 2018). According to Savin-Williams (2018) contemporary sexual minority and sexual majority youth, avoid identifying with strict labels. In part, the reason could be the new policies, guidelines and educational programs that tackle the issue of static sexuality, and offers new understanding on the matter. Another reason could be the freedom given to younger generations to experience their sexuality in a more fluid way without the stigma existing in the past. Possibly all of it has contributed to the changing environment, but arguably the Internet has brought the biggest shift in how children

and young people are thinking and learning about gender and sexuality (Ringrose, Harvey,

Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Bragg, Renold, Ringrose, & Jackson, 2018).

Part II

Digital Intimacies

For a long time, the digital world was perceived as a less suitable place for personal and intimate interactions. Early analyses depicted the limitations of the online environment to transmit multiple cues, and claimed that the Internet is unable to replace the intensity of face-to-face interactions (e.g. Daft & Lengel, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Kraut et al., 1998; Pemberton, Pemberton, & Shurville, 2000). Yet, 20 years later, news, ideas, locations, photos, identities, politics, and almost everything else have made its way to the Internet. Along with breakthrough technologies, AI-powered platforms, and crypto currencies, today the digital and the analogue worlds have merged (Waugh, 2017). At all times, we are equally present online and offline, with multiple applications and social media profiles competing for our attention. It is often assumed that being online means putting authentic experiences on hold and there is a general encouragement to log off and reconnect offline (e.g. Huisman, Catapano, and Edwards, 2012; Mesch, 2003; 2006; Twenge and Campbell, 2018). Instead, digital experiences should be perceived as part of our organic lives as they have the potential to be equally (if not more) powerful, intimate and transformative. According to Jurgenson (2012), due to the central use of technologies in our everyday life we find greater profundity in face-to-face interaction and developed almost an obsession with the analog and traditional aspects of our life. The author opposed the idea of the digital dualism, arguing that the material and the virtual simultaneously create our now "augmented" reality.

Interpersonal intimacy is perceived as one of the most enjoyable social exchanges, often related to the concepts of love, attachments, closeness and sexuality. Over the course of modernity, various discourses of intimacy have been recognised in attempts to designate the types of relationship individuals establish with one another, but at its core intimacy is always related to the most personal and private exchanges (Attwood, Hakim, & Winch, 2017).

However, the advancement of technologies has led to a major shift in the way individuals engage socially. New discourses of intimacy are emerging as the Internet has turned into a powerful social intermediary. Whilst many analyse online intimacy in the domain of human interactions (regardless of them being pre-existing relationships or between strangers), there is evidence that close bonds can also be established with devices, apps and platforms (Attwood, Hakim, & Winch, 2017). Digital closeness can be found in various forms on the Web; be it the personal contact between individuals or groups over a distance, or social media activity, where photographs act as a 'visual gossip' and self-disclosure comes under the form of creative self-representation (Attwood, 2017). Businesses and brands are also reaching through the Internet to promote, involve and consequently form closer bond with customers (Weinman, 2015). In addition, a range of sexual practices, from pornography, sexting and cybersex, to web cam robots and sex work, are tempting individuals to develop sexual connections online (Gregg, 2011; Speno, & Aubrey, 2018). With this said, it should be noted that the subject of digital intimacy is still somewhat recent. While some authors (e.g. Ross, 2005; Ellison et al., 2007; Attwood, 2009; Hsu et al., 2011; Tamme & Siibak, 2012; Guitton, 2015) see great opportunities arising from it, debates regarding the authenticity of such experiences are also present (e.g. Eastin & LaRose, 2005, Genuis & Genuis, 2005; Whitty, 2008; Turkle, 2007; 2012). Therefore, in order to understand the intensity of digital bonds, it is crucial to review the different platforms and activates independently, as each context offers unique features, audience, and modality of interaction (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016).

Augmented Reality

The Internet and Preexisting Relationships

     Family. Today, much of our social interactions with family and friends are mediated by technology (Broadbent, 2012; Valkenburg and Peter, 2011; McDaniel and Drouin, 2015; Lomanowsk & Guitton, 2016). Technologies provide better access due to the differences in

the daily schedule among friends and family members. As face-to-face meetings and phone conversations require a degree of organisation and availability, the use of text/audio/video messaging is widely spread. Of course, each platform has different properties that can either limit (e.g. i-message) or encourage (e.g. Snapchat) intimate exchanges (Tamme & Siibak, 2012). Digital networks are particularly useful in facilitating long-distance relationships, fostering a sense of belonging and proximity. The opportunity to stay connected and engages in small talk regularly, brings a sense of attentiveness and care when absent physically. Early findings suggested that mobile devices have a negative impact on the quality of the relationship between parents and children (Mesch, 2003). Some publications concluded that individual's use of technologies displace time spent with family members. (Huisman, Catapano, & Edwards, 2012; Mesch, 2006). On the contrary, other examinations found that the use of mobile devices improves family relations as it increases members' connectedness (e.g., Devitt & Roker, 2009; Lanigan, 2009). For instance, Williams and Merten (2011) found that by providing additional communication between family members, technologies further encouraged closeness. Similarly, Padilla-Walker, Coyne, and Fraser (2012) suggested that electronic communications facilitate the exchange of support and care. Electronically mediated interactions were associated positively with quality of communication (Carvalho, Francisco, & Relvas, 2015; Tamme & Siibak, 2012), and affection expression (Wei & Lo, 2006). In addition, Tamme and Siibak (2012) found that families using same the social media platforms share similar values and attitudes. Hence, those who communicate frequently with the help of technologies might interpret time spent in messaging and online interactions as time spent together. Further, the literature on transnational families indicates that remote care can be provided using technologies, unless people need practical care, as could be the case with sick or elderly people (Miller and Slater, 2000). For those who are physically absent,

besides the use of video calls and text messages, there are many different ways in engaging intimately with close contacts.

Friends. Research on the effects of online communication on the quality of young peoples' existing friendships has revolved around two hypotheses (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). The displacement hypothesis states that online communication has a negative effect on young people's existing friendships, stealing time from quality face-to-face interactions. This hypothesis is developed on the assumption that Internet-based exchanges are superficial and lack the necessary emotional charge for meaningful interaction. On the contrary, the stimulation hypothesis suggests that additional online communication can encourage closeness, and has the potential to transmit emotional charge between the interlocutors. Overall, the latter standpoint has received more support from scholars (e.g. Chan & Cheng, 2004; Jamieson, 2013; Attwood, Hakim, & Winch, 2017; Waugh, 2017). Research suggests that at present close relationships are defined specifically by both face-to-face and mediated interaction (Cui, 2016), and the frequency of online communication increases relationship closeness (Ledbetter et al., 2011). Social networking sites are continually evolving, through changing features (e.g. stories, streaks, filers) and competing with each other (e.g., the current status of Instagram versus Snapchat). As a result, young people reported that they are constantly updating each other, sharing intimate details from their routines, exchanging options and information, discussing new topics and trends, leading to a greater self-disclosure and increase of closeness (Bazarova, 2012). In addition, social media is also used to facilitate the maintenance of weak ties between acquaintances, although research suggests that in these cases it rarely stimulates closeness (Ellison et al., 2007; Hsu et al., 2011).

Romantic partners. The constant connectedness through mobile devices can create a new set of expectations. There is a new demand for closeness that urges people to get in touch with pre-existing contacts in order to reaffirm the status of the relationship. Particularly

common among teenagers, research suggests that the demand to be present online is higher (Livingstone, 2008). Not only young people have to maintain communication with the peer network, but also they should update social accounts in order to provide visibility of their ongoing relations and consequently remain relevant. What is more, the presence of different contacts on social media, from family and relatives to friends and acquaintances, creates additional emotional load (Miller, 2011). Further, in the case of pre-established romantic relationships, couples implementing technology mediated and face-to-face interactions are believed to develop stronger bonds, compared to the ones that rely exclusively on face-to-face meetings (Boyle & O'Sullivan, 2016). On the one hand, the web allows people to establish contact regardless of time and context, and on the other provides additional opportunity for self-disclosure (especially in newly formed relationships). Although, this applies to long-distance romantic relationship, literature suggests that the quality of their interaction might become increasingly superficial over time (Ramirez & Broneck, 2009).

Among couples, self-disclosure is a meaningful way of establishing and maintaining closeness, but can be insufficient for those apart for long periods of time (Jamieson, 2013). Instead, aspects of everyday life such as providing care through practical acts, engaging in social interactions with others, and demonstrating physical affection are central components of intimacy. The importance of co-presence can also be observed through instances in which long term partners express deep affection for each other, although they have little need to talk or engage in self-disclosure. In these circumstances, individuals maintain closeness through co-presence, relying on empathy and knowledge of each other's body language. The depth of affection and mutual understanding that certain couples achieve can hardly be transmitted through the internet. According to Choi and Aizawa (2018), it is possible that some people are very skillful in using the appropriate technological tools to create a deeply emotional and expressive message, but it is unlikely that ultimately online exchanges can be sufficient. On a

more general note, Turkle (2012) points out the critical need for multitasking in the age of digital socialisation, and questions the potential for intimacy when users are not fully engaged with their exchange. Moreover, even though, initially online communication was seen as useful and convenient, with time it might have become the exchange of choice. The author admits that texts and emails help individuals feel generally less isolated, but also points to the possibility of people abstaining from calls and face-to-face meetings followed by the habit of using the medium. On the contrary, Jamieson (2013) argues that everyday face-to-face relationships are not replaced by electronically mediated and virtual relationships. Jamieson suggest that recent investigations are more concerned with the positive and negative effects of digital exchanges as they are part of our daily mundane practices (e.g. Livingstone, 2008; Mesch & Talmud, 2010).

The Internet and Strangers

Online Dating. Many Internet and mobile applications facilitate social contacts with new people. In fact, platforms meant to establish contact between strangers vary greatly (unlike networks used to facilitate prior relationships) in their purpose. Particular types of platforms, such as dating sites encourage users to meet new people for the purpose of establishing intimate relationship (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). For instance, Match.com is designed for a broader audience interested in finding a permanent life partner (still individual use varies greatly), whereas SeekingArrangements.com aims to connect individuals that seek mutually beneficial relationship, also known as sugar dating (although some people use it to find like-minded people for their fetish fantasies) (Bowden, 2018). Other networks are more specific, such as Jdate.com the biggest Jewish dating site, LoveArt.com aiming to connect singles that love art, and Grindr world's biggest dating platform for LGBT+ individuals. Besides the ones mentioned above, networks like game chats, fan pages, and support groups are designed to connect people not for the sole purpose

of meeting/dating, but to exchange information based on their common interests. Such digital platforms are found to foster intimacy by allowing users to engage in greater self-disclosure (Goodman-Deane, Mieczakowski, Johnson, Goldhaber, & Clarkson, 2016; Lomanowsk & Guitton, 2016).

In some cases, social platforms can be a particularly useful tool for meeting and maintaining relationships. Chambers (2016) suggests that online socialisation can assist individuals to overcome certain 'gating' features of their personality or appearance, related to sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, or any form of real or assumed stigma. For example, previous inquiries have directed a lot of efforts in researching the desires for intimacy among individuals that have fallen outside heteronormativity (McGlotten, 2013). Networked technologies have been recognized as a major tool for queer intimacies, charged with the capacity to create a feeling of belonging, support and establish connections that are otherwise impossible (García-Santesmases Fernández, Vergés Bosch & Almeda Samaranch, 2017). Further, besides platforms created purely for communication, there are web activities that can bond users through mutual experiences. In particular, virtual reality servers (e.g. Second Life) allow multiple players from all over the world to join and interact with each other through avatars. Naturally, most people will create a character based on salient features of their appearance such as skin color and gender, although it is possible for some players to try out different appearances (Fong & Mar, 2015). What is more important, however, is that impressive platforms can enable experiences that are otherwise out of reach (Ross, 2005; Guitton, 2015). For instance, a transgender person (specifically the ones that have not transitioned yet or are in the process) can fully embrace their gender identity; individuals with muscular dystrophy can invite a partner for a dance, and a person with autism can practice social skills in a fun and non-threatening environment. Considered together with the anonymity of the internet, virtual reality can be one of the biggest accelerators of intimacy

online (Lomanowsk & Guitton, 2016). Although the interaction takes place in virtual setting, both online dating and VR interactions can lead to subsequent offline meeting (Finkel, Eastwick., Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012; Guitton, 2015).

According to some scholars, however, online contacts are unable to reach the same depth of intimacy as in pre-existing relationships (Turkle, 2007; 2012; Kaliarnta, 2016). Even though technology mediated exchanges with strangers can sometimes be frequent and intense, Kaliarnta (2016) argues that information can easily be misinterpreted (especially in text based chats), and consequently create a distorted/ unrealistic image of the interlocutor. The authors believe that many important clues pointing to one's true persona are easily filtered online, as well as the limited number of the activities that can be shared between strangers on the Internet. Yet, Chan and Cheng (2004) examined the qualities of online versus offline bonds at the different stages of relationship development. The authors concluded that closeness in both types of relationships increase over time and there are no significant differences in terms of the bond experiences with either category of friends. Other shortcomings associated with communication with strangers online highlighted in the academic literature, are related to the excessive self-disclosure, sexual disinhibition, and idealisation of the online persona and/or relationship (Genuis & Genuis, 2005; Whitty, 2008). The risk of encountering dishonesty and individuals with malicious intentions is well documented by now, and new terms such as cyber-harassment, cyber-stalking, revenge porn, and sextortion, address some of the negative outcomes of online disinhibition (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009; Citron & Franks, 2014).

Online Communities. The concept of online groups and communities has also received academic attention (Eastin & LaRose, 2005; Stewart, 2010; Woo, 2017). Online social gatherings can occur among preexisting contacts (e.g. group chat among classmates/ peers), but can also be established between strangers such as online support groups for individuals coping with various health and emotional issues (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler,

2008). In fact, online social support has grown into a mass social phenomenon, establishing numerous groups worldwide dealing with various issues. Distressful events, from teen pregnancy and gender dysphoria, to substance dependence and life-threatening health conditions, have made their way to the internet. Since the group is established to function as a source of information, exchange of emotional support, and general socialization among individuals experiencing similar challenge, it also promotes great intimacy between members (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008). Barak, Boniel-Nissim, and Suler (2008) suggest that one of the central reasons for the establishment of a close bond within a support forum is precisely the fact that they take place online. Individuals feel more uninhibited and relaxed to express themselves through the medium then in person. Invisibility is also an encouraging factor in these settings as it neutralises status and prevents members from assuming or stereotyping (Turkle, 2007). In such online contexts, people are unable to consider visual cues related to one's social rank, wealth, physical excellence, etc.

The delay in the online response is yet another contributor to the overall harmony in the group. Eastin and LaRose (2005) noted that immediate responses can affect the amount of information someone is willing to disclose; while delayed feedback allows the individual to progress steadily in the storytelling. In addition, reading someone else's thoughts in your own mind could be experienced as a "voice within", and a reader might even go as far as to assign certain features/qualities to the individual, solely on the basis of the text (Turkle, 2007). All these aspects (that might lead to online disinhibition) together with the emotional charge of the problem itself have the potential to create strong bonds between members. However, in other cases the establishment of a close bond in online support groups can shift from intimacy to compulsion. Eastin and LaRose (2005) suggest that if individuals do not have a good self-regulation, they are likely to develop emotional dependence towards the group, and distance from other significant people and exchanges offline. On the other hand, some members might

need more time to adjust to the group's dynamic, and feel that self-disclosure and intimacy are growing too fast (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016).

The New Phenomenon

  Influencers. Another practice that expanded tremendously among internet users is maintaining a web blog (Lange, 2007; Bane, Cornish, Erspamer & Kampman, 2010; Raun, 2018). Online platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are commonly used for creative self-expression and social influence. In our celebrity culture, what makes bloggers particularly relevant is their mediating role between "ordinary" people and popular figures. In a way, they are 'micro-celebrities' (Senft, 2010) whose fluid nature springs between the concepts of public/private, amateur/expert, non-for-profit/commercial, and intimacy/distance. Bloggers regularly express opinions on various matters (e.g. reviews of make-up lines, promoting healthy lifestyle, record a travel journey, make a video game walkthrough), but besides their main area of expertise they routinely share aspects of their private life (Bane, Cornish, Erspamer & Kampman, 2010). For instance, Victoria Magrath better known as "InTheFrow" is a popular English blogger that posts weekly updates on fashion, beauty and travel. Side-to-side with her beauty routine videos, she also released a confession of being sexually assaulted (Magrath, 2017). The influencer describes the event in a 15-minute video that reached 432 thousand views. Similarly, Julie Van Vu' vlog (i.e. PRINCESSJOULES) that evolve around make-up tutorial and travelling, is also seen as a form of activism and advocacy for genderqueers, as along with beauty tips, the author is sharing experiences related to being transgender (e.g. medical transitioning, coping with social stigma) (Van Vu, 2015). In fact, bloggers that touch upon issues related to sexual minorities could be particularly useful. For instance, Farber (2017) discusses the importance of online fitness communities on queergender's experience with sex, gender and the body. Since such individuals may have no or little access to adequate health care and are often excluded from scientific research, the

relevant online blogs/pages/communities might be their only source of knowledge on how to achieve their fitness goals.

It is fair to say that although bloggers are in the spotlight, the nature of the relationship with viewers is rather interactive. Bloggers naturally talk to the camera as if they are talking to a group of friends. They constantly engage with the audience by replying to their comments and taking into consideration their suggestions and requests for future updates. Consequently, viewers/ readers, although lurking, can experience great closeness to the author of the web diary due to the perceived interactivity (Lange, 2007). What is more, an investigation among online bloggers revealed that they also gain personal satisfaction and emotional support from followers; and the ones involved in greater self-disclosure tend to enjoy better online bonds with viewers compared to the ones that share less (Bane, Cornish, Erspamer, & Kampman, 2010). Therefore, fulfilling audience's need for identification and affiliation, as well as maintaining accessible and authentic persona reinforces intimacy on both sides (Jerslev, 2016). In addition to micro-celebrity/celebrity online presence, high in the hierarchy of online blogs are the so-called fandoms or fan pages (Boon & Lomore, 2001). Almost everyone (everything) in show business and sports has a group of fans, assigned with a specific label for recognition; for example, Batman's 'Batmaniacs', Manchester United's 'Red Devils', and Michael Jacksons' 'Moonwalkers' (Richards, 2012). Devoted admirers normally create such networks to provide support and update followers on news related to the famous person or organisation. Similar to the previously discussed support groups, members of fan blogs can experience a strong bond with the other followers, based on the common interest they hold for the public figure. According to Greene and Adams-Price (1990), the habitual interaction between members (that fuels the fantasized relationship) can often encourage them to share other feelings and occurrences in their lives that are not associated with the purpose of the fan page.

Celebrity Lifestyle. Since intimacy is a powerful instrument on social media, real celebrities also reach out to their fans through the platforms for the purposes of monetary gains, feedback, social recognition/remain relevant, and/or advocacy. In fact, Kylie Jenner (the youngest sister of the Kardashian clan) was able to build her cosmetics brand through social media, generating a net worth of $900 million over a three years' period, making her the world's youngest self-made billionaire (Forbes, 2018). Not surprisingly, Jenner is in the top five celebrities with the most followers on Instagram. In this regard, research in human communication found that 90% of young adults experienced at some point in their life a strong attraction to a celebrity, while 75% reported feeling strong attachments to more than one famous icon (Boon & Lomore, 2001). Much of the surveyed admitted that receiving news about their favorite celebrity brings out a response similar to receiving news for a friend. This is more evidence for the blurred boundaries and emotional proximity on the side of the fans. The shrunk distance between micro-celebrities /celebrities and their followers can also take on a more negative course. In particular, social media platforms can create the so-called 'parasocial interaction' (Horton & Wohl, 1956) effect, where followers invest tremendous emotional energy, interest and time, to stay updated and admire a particular figure (e.g. actor/actress) or organization (e.g. football team) (Cole & Leets, 1999). Although such one-sided relationships are voluntary, they can sometimes grow into an obsession, and followers might develop a degree of dependency toward the use of digital technologies, experience intense emotions related to the idealised figure, become a zealous advocate and get in conflict with other people, and/or try to mimic aspects of a blogger's lifestyle at a high cost. According to Serafinelli (2018), many are experiencing such parasocial interaction nowadays, and there is a general trend for people to 'broadcast themselves' on social media and create an idealistic representation of oneself with the sole purpose of becoming popular and influential in this setting (which consequently brings popularity offline).

Sexting. The Internet society has become very used to the virtual forms of sexuality. Through the Web, people are able to access unlimited sources of X-rated materials, sexual health information, like-minded romantic and sexual partners, as well as purchase sexual merchandise. Except for the accessibility, affordability and anonymity of the Net, the fact that some aspects of the medium are poorly affected by social and culture norms makes it particularly appealing for sexual purposes (Wise & Balon, 2011). Thus, digital technologies have made it easier to express and explore one's sexual desires minimising the risks of negative social repercussions. As a result, the term cybersex has emerged describing sexual and erotic interactions that take place online, involving real time exchanges that vary from stimulating sex talk (text base and audio) to visual exchange (images and videos). Cybersex can take place among pre-existing contacts or between strangers. One widely recognised form of online sexual exchange between intimate partners is sexting. Sexting is the exchange of sexually explicit videos and images that in recent times draw public attention due to its common use among teenagers (Walsh, 2008). Although this particular form of mediated exchange has sparked a lot of debates about legality and authorship (Anglim, Nobahar, & Kirtley, 2016), it has been also recognised as a powerful practice among the field of digital intimacies (Attwood, 2011). Precisely, sexting can open up a much-needed discussion between partners about private fantasies and sexual experimentation. It can also create an erotic story for those who are separated geographically and are unable to engage in physical affection (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012).

Unlike sexting within an established relationship, however, the exchange been strangers has been associated primarily with physical gratification. Like pornography, cybersex is primarily motivated by the physical aspect of intimacy. A qualitative investigation by Attwood (2009) indicated that anonymity was equally a safety measure and part of the excitement, allowing the involved to disinhibit sexually and experience greater excitement.

However, all participants acknowledge that sexual intimacy was limited in visual cybersex, as it usually involves display of the body rather than the face. With respect to text-based cybersex, most participants admitted that they view the activity similar to pornography and role-play gaming, then an interaction with an actual person. During the interviews Attwood (2009) also found that even though many were considering learning something new about the partner's need and applying it in an analogue context, others described the activity as acting out on fantasies that will remain separate from their offline self. The latter group further justified their engaging in such practices, as being therapeutic and allowing them to release a buildup tension. Individuals that use pornography and escort services (Jamieson, 2013) offer similar rationales for their engagement.

  Pornography. Attwood, Smith, and Barker (2018) managed to abstain themselves from the current state of X-rated materials available online and proposed that the use of porn is not as simple as previously claimed (i.e. used to stimulate arousal). Instead, the authors suggest that such engagements might be a means for understanding one's feelings, sexual identity, practices and bodies. Among teenagers, especially such engagements can provide a point for discussion and bonding among peers and sexual communities. In other cases, it might be to broaden knowledge on what is extreme and perverted, or even, explore arising fantasies for oneself or as part of a relationship. In fact, sexual fantasies often differ from the way we like to be perceived by others, and the way we think of ourselves (Ahrold, Farmer, Trapnell & Meston, 2011). Since social norms of sexuality as persistently strict, any thoughts outside the accepted categories can be labeled as deviant or inappropriate. Yet variations of X-rated materials signify for the diverse nature of sexual fantasies, and the internet has made them much more visible today (Hald & Štulhofer, 2016). For instance, one of the largest platforms for sexually explicit materials PornHub revealed that the number one search for 2017 was "porn for women", followed by "Rick and Morty" (cartoon), and "fidget spinner"

(fetish) at number three (Rense, 2018). There are many other categories available online, from the more conventional categories such as gonzo porn (no storyline) and GIFs (short HD animated image) to the more alternative such as drawn porn (hentai and cartoons) and BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism). Besides, the solitary X-rated activities, the web increasingly offers more interactive pornographies such as web cam models, allowing real time interaction. Therefore, in order to understand X-rated engagements, it is important to consider the particular subgenre the behavior occurs in (Williams & Fitzgerald, 1999). This will further shed light on why people choose particular mediums (photographs, text, video, animation), as well as make sense of why certain pornographies attract wider audience (Hald & Štulhofer, 2016). Attwood, Smith, and Barker (2018) concluded that if future research put aside the exposure-effect model, then pornography can be placed in the broader context of mediated intimacies, analysed through its potential to shape identities, communities, and other relationships. Thus, X-rated activities can be considered as a space for intimacies that are closely related to the body, but also to the domain of imagination.

The online environment has expanded greatly pre-existing commercialised sexual practices such as the consumption of sexually explicit materials (most of them still designed for the white heterosexual male) and sex work (performed predominantly by women). However, some evidence, although limited, suggests that digital sexuality and digital socialization can affect traditional understanding of sexuality and gender. According to Castells (2002) mediated behaviors often fail to obey traditional hierarchies (such as gender inequality). In addition, results from a study comparing offline and online relationships indicates that the Internet might be challenging the normative constraints established by society (Chan & Cheng, 2004). The authors found that cross-sex online relationships are much more prevalent then the offline, justifying the phenomenon by the structural and normative factors present in offline settings. For example, in a work environment, friendship

between man and woman usually raise doubts as to the status of the affiliation. A related view suggests that male students who establish friendship with a girl risk being confronted/laughed at or even excluded from the male peer group. Further, investigation among LGBT+ participants, points to the possibility of the Internet to establish new directions for queer intimacies towards inclusion and equality (Mamo & Alston-Stepnitz, 2015). As previously mentioned, people from the LGBT+ community have adopted various approaches in transcending stigma with their online presence. They are gaining popularity and recognition in mainstream networks (from the heteronormative audience as well), and intentionally or not advocate for gay rights. Particularly, advocacy communities challenge two traditional social norms related to boundaries and structure (Friedman, 2005). Questions around boundaries are concerned with inclusion and self-government, while structure involves the way advocacy is organised and performed. However, feminist theorizing argues that although the virtual platforms have the potential to transform traditional levels of power, there is an increasing growth of channels reinforcing male-female stereotypes and female subordination (Jamieson, 2013). In the same regard, Bumber (2003) suggests that besides sexual and gender equality advocates online, there are also a number of political forces using the medium to promote traditional "values". Therefore, there are still barriers in achieving the Web's promise of inclusion and equality.

Part III

Young People's Sexuality and the Web

As discussed above the Internet has changed the contexts of intimacy and sexual behavior, challenging the fundamentals of the self and sexual learning. While older generations, commonly referred to as Digital Immigrants in the context of technology use, got their sexual knowledge through what was available prior to the invention of the Internet, the Digital Natives use technologies as extensions of their bodies and minds, fluidly integrating them into their everyday lives. Young people's use of the Web is changing fast, in response to considerable societal, market and technological innovation. Like all natives, they adapt quickly to these changes and actively participate in the development of new tools for information, experimentation, self-expression and socialization. In a sense, the Internet acts as a 'superpeer' involved in the formation of norms and belief systems among young people (Enson, 2018).

Mainly, the anonymity and affordability of the Web allows people to find information on various issues that can often be too private or distressful to talk about in person. Sexual information online can be found in various forms, and while some might choose to read a general overview of a condition on a medical website, others might find it more useful to participate in an online discussion or read/ watch a blog entry on the topic. A prior investigation found that young people are more open to the idea of receiving sexual health education from online sources (such as blogs, online videos, or podcasts) than face-to-face, as long as they can receive comprehensive and accurate information (Nicholas, Bailey, Stevenson, & Murray, 2013). Not surprisingly, young people are also found to be the most frequent consumers of sexual health information online among other age groups (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015). Therefore, it is important to recognise that the Internet is becoming an

influential setting for young people as well as understand in what ways it might assist their sexual development.

Online Sex and Relationship Education

Sexual Health Information

While the internet is a useful and easily accessible library of health-related topics, there is a high potential for coming across inaccurate and potentially damaging sources due to the lack of quality criteria and regulation (Ruan, Raeside, Singleton, Redfern, & Partridge, 2020). As argued by Selkie, Benson and Moreno (2013; 2011;), even though young people have the technical skills to seek information online, many of the reliable sources are difficult to understand so they turn to sources that are easier to use such as Q&A platforms (e.g. Quora, Yahoo answers) and/or social media (e.g. YouTube, Snapchat). Platforms that offer sexual health information through peer communication styles were found to be the most ideal according to young people, as they are perceived to offer non-judgmental, confidential and competent advice. The most common topics young people seek online information for are pregnancy prevention, sexually transmitted infection and relationships advice (Mitchell, Ybarra Korchmaros & Kosciw, 2013; 2014;). According to Selkie, Benson and Moreno (2013; 2011) this happens through general Google search, but sources are further selected based on the subject of interest. For example, when in need of guidance on relationships matters, young people are most likely to rely on feedback provided from peers online, while information on prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections is sought from professional through medical sites.

Across literature it appears that the privacy offered by the Internet in seeking sexual information is a central reason for young people to engage with the medium. There is a general consensus that young individuals with non-heterosexual orientation and those who are questioning use the Internet for such purposes more frequently (Mitchell, Ybarra Korchmaros

& Kosciw, 2013;2014;). This does not come as a surprise as LGBT+ young people are generally seen to face more challenges in developing a successful and positive outlook on their sexuality, as traditional sources are still somehow deficient for the purpose. As a result, the Internet has turned into a major lifeline for such individuals, allowing them to make their first steps in a safer environment through "coming out" online, establishing contact with other LGBT+ peers and exploring aspects of same-sex attraction (Magee, Bigelow, DeHaan & Mustanski, 2012). Saying that, it is not to suggest that such young people cannot encounter stigma and/or inaccurate sexual health information, rather that the positive outcomes are overweighting the negative. Specifically, social media has turned into a critical tool for young LGBT+ people to engage with sexual health information. Not only have such networks allowed them to receive factual information, but also to exchange experience with peers in a virtual society of similar ones (Bennett & Glasgow, 2009). However, social media holds a central place in the lives of contemporary young people regardless of their sexuality.

The Powerful Lessons of Social Media

Perhaps, one of the most dominant features of the Internet in general, but especially among young people is the ability to express and socialise via Social Media platforms. Sites such as YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter (referred to as immersive or interactive media) present a number of challenges and opportunities for young people (Moreno, Standiford & Cody, 2018). Prior theories suggest that young people are particularly susceptible to social media experiences not only because they are early adopters and nearly ubiquitous, but also because such platforms bring together two traditional areas of influence for young people: peer and media influence (Lenhart, 2015). Scholars have recognized social media as a major contributor for the development of personal identity. On one hand, young people constantly compare themselves to peers (and others) online, and on the other, such platforms generate a rich and interactive flow of information that goes through users' daily

feed (Moreno, Kota, Schoohs, & Whitehill, 2013). Besides the information created by the users, such platforms also employ various practices to channel social traffic. Dijck, and Poell (2013) refer to this phenomenon as the 'social media logic', which can be a powerful analytical approach in uncovering how social platforms contribute to the shaping and ordering of intimacies and sexualities in the everyday lives of young people (De Ridder, 2017). As a result, past publications have taken upon two very visible trajectories in analysing the impact of Social Media on youth's psychosexual development. While some have focused on exploring sexual ideologies through popular practices such as sexual self-broadcasting (e.g. posting sexual photos of oneself), a considerable body of research has focused on sexual interactions (e.g. sexting) (Stevens et al, 2017).

The period of adolescence is associated with tremendous physical changes as the body transitions from that of a child to an adult's. During that time most teenagers experience great uncertainty of how these changes will affect their social lives and how they will be perceived by others, which in turn plays a critical part in their development of sexual identity and self-esteem. Nowadays, social media offers new ways for sexual self-presentation and peer influence, forming unprecedented challenges for young people (Meier&Gray, 2014). In the age of digital technologies and social networking, selfies and groupies have turned into the outright way of self-presentation. Although, traditionally photos acted as a reminder of a particular moment and a dear memory, today they are means for non-verbal communication (Boursier & Manna, 2018). Turning into a dominant theme of the shared content online, sexual self-presentation has received a considerable attention from scholars, feeding the debate over the implications associated with it.

Although the posting of sexual selfies/groupies enables young people to express their identity and social belonging, more often the literature has demonstrated that other psychological factors are in place. According to Brown et al. (2012) by presenting themselves

sexually online, young people might try to conform to prevailing standards of sexual attractiveness and receive valuable feedback on the development of their body. Scholars have found that such feedback can ease inherent uncertainties regarding the changing body throughout adolescence, but can also deepen those issues (Ruckel & Hill, 2017). In addition, since physical attractiveness is generally considered as an important attribute among all individuals and especially among young people, the display of an attractive self could also be a way to comply with peer norms and gain popularity. In fact, an investigation among young people in Singapore revealed that most young people are aware which types of photos are valued the most and they purposely select more explicit contents (Chua & Chang, 2016).

Hall, West, and McIntyre (2012) followed up on the different ways girl objectify themselves on social media sites and were able to identify three categories of sexualised photos that are shared most commonly: a) ritualisation of subordination, b) objectification, and c) body display. The ritualisation of subordination includes all images that display the person in a submissive, accepting, or interactive way, such as lying/ sitting on the ground/bed or any other camera angles designed to lower the female to a subordinate level, positions that resembles acts related to a form of sexual activity, sending air kisses or touching intimate body parts. The next theme of photographs is self-objectification, which comprise of any images that partially or fully conceal an individual's face or a close-up of a particular body attribute such as buttocks/legs, breasts and backside of the body. The third common sexual self-presentation is associated with body display such as wearing revealing clothes (e.g. swimwear, bath towel, lingerie, 'see-through' clothes, bare shoulders and big cleavage) or posting nude or nearly nude photos. Interestingly, van Oosten, Peter, and Boot (2015) found that more frequent sexy self-presentation online as well as being exposed to the same content by peers can reinforce narrow beauty standards, stereotypical belief and self-objectification. Research in the field has consistently shown that girls tend to have more social media contacts

than boys, posted sexual photos of themselves more often, spend greater time in posing and editing, as well as displayed themselves in sexually suggestive ways more often (e.g. McAndrew and Jeong, 2012; Kapidzic & Martins, 2015; Sarabia & Estévez, 2016). Yet, an older investigation discovered trends that contradict the former argument (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011). The authors not only identified that boys post more sexually suggestive photos of themselves, but also they were more likely to express concerns about negative feedback.

Receiving feedback on a sexual self-presentation online is not the only reason social media influences youths' sexual knowledge. According to van Oosten, Peter, and Boot (2015) exposure to sexual presentation of peers may also lead to changes in own sexual identity and behavior. This is not surprising as young people's behaviour is highly influenced by peer norms, and the behavior of their friend group often acts as a guideline. Investigations on the impact of peers in the online environment have consistently showed that young people whose peers engage in greater sexual self-presentation on social media are more likely to keep up and share more content of their own (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011; Huang el al., 2014; Ruckel & Hill, 2017). Similarly, young people are more likely to share photo with revealing clothes or pose in a sexually suggestive manner if their friends engage in the same behaviors. Yet, nudity and frequent sexual self-presentation, although aiming to advance youths' social status, not always increases popularity and validation among peers. For instance, female peers often evaluate negatively girls who portray themselves in a sexual way online (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011). Likewise, a qualitative study by Ringrose (2011) found that girls make a meaningful distinction between the sexually suggestive photos posted by their female peers. In the same study, less revealing and explicit photos were evaluated as desirable while more revealing or sexually suggestive were considered "slutty". Regarding boys, Baumgartner, Valkenburg, and Peter, (2011) found that the ones posting

sexually suggestive photos are seen as more desirable and popular among girls, than boys whose photos did not present them in a sexual way. Therefore, in line with the traditional double standard, it appears that sexual-presentation online performed by girls is highly regulated, and while girls' frequent and less censured photos were deemed inappropriate, through the same behavior boys were able to further enhance their reputation and value among peers.

The "Crime" of Sexting

Since young people's sexual development has always been viewed as something inherently dangerous, research into young people and social media has also prioritize topics based on their potential for harm. As a result, although the topic of sexual self-presentation online has generated many debates in the past, in recent years the focus has been shifted towards the more hazardous practice of teen sexting. The act of sexting is often displaced in the academic literature, but for the most part it can be defined as the exchange of sexually explicit contents communicated through digital devices, text messages or social networking platforms. Unlike the posting of sexually suggestive images on social media that carries certain health and social consequences, sexting is also associated with legal implications (Holoyda, Landess, Sorrentino, & Friedman, 2018). Particularly in the UK anyone who distributes, possesses or shows any indecent images of anyone aged under 18 (even if the person appearing on the materials consented), risks being held responsible, as the offense falls under the child pornography law.

Studies on the prevalence of teen sexting vary in their findings. However, despite the popular opinion that young people are engaging in the practice, one of the most comprehensive summaries of the literature made so far indicated that most young people have not sexted (Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014). In Europe, the EU Kids Online II project found that 5% of children between the ages of 11-16 had received sexual messages (including

images and videos), and only 3% admitted sending them (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzik, Ólafsson, 2011). Later, within the frame of the same project, results for girls were updated to 1-4% ever sending a nude photo (Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, Valkenburg, & Livingstone, 2014). Yet, an investigation that is more recent discovered that in England, 38% of the young people have send a nude photo to a partner or an ex-partner (Wood, Barter, Stanley, Aghtaie, & Larkins, 2015).

Past literature on young people's sexting can broadly be divided into two categories; some scholars view the practice as inherent to young peoples' sexual maturation, whereas others see it as a discourse of deviance (Döring, 2014). However, the author acknowledges a gradual shift away from the primarily concerns, and noted that unlike US-based investigations, EU research has sustained the outlook that sexting might be part of the normal sexual development of young people (Nielsen, Paasonen, & Spisak, 2015; Wood, Barter, Stanley, Aghtaie, & Larkins, 2015; Stanley et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the literature that views sexting as a discourse of deviance focuses on few major factors with respect to young people's wellbeing. Studies investigating the link between sexting and young people's health behavior have focused on sexual behavior, mental health implication and alcohol/drug use. For instance, scholars have found that sexting is related to sexual intercourse and oral sex (Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014; Smith et al., 2016), delinquency (Lee, Moak, & Walker, 2016), and misuse of alcohol and drugs (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). In addition, sexting has been linked to depressive symptoms such as being sad or afraid, feeling hopeless (van Ouytsel, van Gool, Ponnet & Walrave, 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014) and experiencing temporary suicidal thoughts (Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012). In addition to health implications, teen sexting has been linked to a number of negative social outcomes. For example, in a study conducted by Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, and Livingstone (2013) some of the female participants admitted being pressured to participate in

sexting either by peers or by an intimate partner. Also, a primal concern for young people is the fact that after an exchange of sexual messages, images or videos of themselves the materials might get passed on to other people (Englander & McCoy, 2017), while the most common reason for it being as a form of revenge, to enhance status among peers, or as a form of entertainment (Englander, 2016).

Research on teen sexting has also investigated possible gender differences. Even though it is not clear whether girls or boys engage with the practice more often (Dake et al., 2012; Gámez-Guadix, de Santisteban, & Resett, 2017), it is evident that the 'double standard' persists. On the one hand, girls are pressured to engage in sexting, and on the other they are being shamed for doing so. In contrast, boys rarely face negative social consequences because of such exchanges (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). What is more, some boys use the opportunity to gain popularity among both male and female peers. Unlike the exchange of commercially produced sexually explicit materials, self-produced materials have greater personal value and peer value, and are perceived as an indication of boy's capability to obtain an intimate picture of a girl. The study also indicated that boys keep sexual materials exchanged with other girls on their mobile devices as a trophy.

Although the literature related to teen motives for sexting is rather limited, present research is able to provide some insight. Primarily, young people look on sexting as an entertaining activity that is not always for sexual gratification (Anastassiou, 2017). Sometimes it can also be out of curiosity and as a context to explore the sexual self. Previous research has indicated that young people most commonly exchange sexual materials within the context of a romantic relationship (Ringrose et al., 2013). Thus, sexting could also be seen as a means to flirt and bond with a partner, express feeling of sexual desire if unsure how to do it in person, or simply use it as a foundation before initial sexual intercourse. Sexting can also be a means for a long-distance relationship to sustain intimacy between partners (Walker, Sanci, &

Temple-Smith, 2013). In addition, in the cases where religion prohibits certain individuals from prior sexual contacts, sexting can offer an alternative for sexual engagement (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). On a side from the more pleasurable reasons to exchange sexual messages, as mentioned above, some young people might feel that they have to engage in sexting due to peer pressure and being under the impression that it is a normative behavior (Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013). Similarly, other studies have found that in some cases the pressure might be coming from an intimate partner (in most cases the boyfriend) (Ringrose et al., 2013). Finally, some scholars have hypothesised that motivation for young people's sexting might be resulting from the 'generally sexualised culture' young people grow up in, as associations between sexting and the viewing of sexually explicit materials have been demonstrated in few studies (van Oosten, Peter, & Boot, 2015; Lippman & Campbell, 2014).

Even though there is growing academic literature on young people sexting across different disciplines, most of the investigations rely on empirical data that largely neglect to explore the role of gender and the nature of the content exchanged. In addition, such methodological designs classify findings in very broad, unclear categories lacking additional clarification (e.g. sexually suggestive, nearly nude) that results in contradictory or wide-ranging findings from one research study to another (Ringrose et al., 2013). With respect to qualitative designs, research has provided a rather vague definition of sexting, with some describing the act as the exchange of sexual messages including commercially produced materials, while others describe it as the exchange of self-produced content (Beckmeyer et al., 2019). Finally, yet importantly, future research should pay particular attention to the experiences of non-heterosexual young people.

The New Biology Classes (Pornography)

In recent times, discussions around the possible effects of online pornography on children and young people, and the messages pornography generates about gender, equality and sexuality are becoming increasingly salient. Yet, pornography is not a new occurrence, and specifically in the UK, French photographs, erotic prints and printed literature have been present for centuries. However, although the viewing of sexually explicit materials is a well-established phenomenon that can be consumed without any legal repercussions (except in the cases of child pornography), what makes it an area of concern is how easily accessible it is today. Pre-internet generations of young people had to actively search for sexually explicit materials, whether it was sneaking into a porn theatre and getting hold of a "top shelf" magazine or in the least exciting cases, lingerie and clothing catalogues. Either way, porn was hard to find and less explicit compared to what is available at present. Fast-forward to today, sexual images are merely everywhere and pornography has increasingly been viewed as a means for young people to develop sexual knowledge and form mature sexual identities (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Rothman, Kaczmarsky, Burke, Jansen, & Baughman, 2015; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Focusing largely on the potential negative outcomes, social scientists have been exploring young people's interpretations and formations of beliefs and attitudes towards sex, as well as the cognitive, emotional, and social implications resulting from porn viewing (Koletić, 2017). For instance, scholars have been assessing the link between exposure to sexually explicit materials and sexual aggression (Tomaszewska & Krahé, 2016; Ybarra & Thompson, 2018), sexual uncertainty (van Oosten, 2016), risky sexual behavior (Doornwaard et al, 2015; Lim, Agius, Carrotte, Vella, & Hellard, 2017), and the objectification of women (Vandenbosch & van Oosten, 2017). In response to the increasing body of research on young people's exposure to porn, several researchers have also reviewed the field (Springate & Omar, 2013; Bloom & Hagedorn, 2015), with Peter and Valkenburg

(2016) producing the most comprehensive summary on the topic, covering two decades of research.

The literature exploring the effect of pornography on young people's beliefs and attitudes towards sex has focused primarily on two potential outcomes: permissive sexual attitudes (i.e. positive attitudes towards sex outside a committed relationship) and gender-stereotypical sexual beliefs (stereotypical views of male and female roles) (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Finding across different investigations consistently show that young people who watch porn are more likely to hold permissive attitudes towards sex (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010b; To, Ngai & Iu Kan, 2012; To, Iu Kan & Ngai, 2015), as many perceive porn scripts to be close representation of real life sexual encounters (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010b). Although past research cannot reach consensus on whether biological factors such as sex play a moderating role, few studies have found that permissive attitudes following pornography consumption are more common when young people discuss sexual topics with their parents or experience peer pressure (To, Iu Kan & Ngai, 2015). In addition, most publications signify that young people's pornography use reinforced stereotypical beliefs about male and female roles (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009a; To, Iu Kan & Ngai, 2015; Koletić, 2017). A large proportion of adult movies promote hypermasculinity, where the male role is presented as dominant and more aggressive, while the female role is objectified by being submissive and physically attractive. In fact, Koletić (2017) found that although young people generally avoid sexually explicit materials that contain violence, the majority deliberately chose to watch traditional dominance-themed pornography (dominant male-submissive woman) (Koletić, 2017). This might seem odd with other findings claiming that both boys and girls are critical of the unequal representation of men and women in pornography (Lofgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010).

Sexually explicit materials have been under much scrutiny because they can create a distorted picture of what sexual interactions might look like. According to prior research, behavioral implications resulting from the consumption of sexually explicit materials could be divided into three categories: a) earlier sexual debut, b) experience with different sexual practices and sexual risk behaviour (i.e., sexual behaviour associated with higher risks of STDs and unwanted pregnancy, c) sexual aggression or sexual victimisation (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Indeed, there is some evidence that young people believe sexually explicit materials can serve as a source of knowledge and they learn sexual behaviors from observing the behaviours portrayed in adult movies (Owens, Behun, Manning & Reid, 2012). For instance, Marston and Lewis (2014) found that young people may learn sexual scripts or sexual practices from pornography, with some using pornographic scripts as a frame of reference for sexual performances. In addition, a couple of other qualitative studies discovered that it is not uncommon for teenagers to view sexually explicit materials in order to learn how to behave "appropriately" during sex, gain better understanding of sexual roles, and become skilled at particular sexual techniques (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Rothman, Kaczmarsky, Burke, Jansen, & Baughman, 2015). These findings dovetail with findings from a quantitative research study that indicated young people who view sexually explicit materials are influenced by the perceived realism of such materials, which in turn can explain the more permissive attitudes some young people have.

An early investigation among Swedish high school students was able to link particular behaviors such as casual intercourse with a friend, group sex, oral sex and anal sex to regular porn viewers (Häggström-Nordin, Tydén, Hanson, Larsson, 2009). The same study also indicated that most participants believe sexually explicit materials influences the sexual behaviours of their peers, but less than a third of the sample admit that sexually explicit materials have an impact on their own sexual behaviours. Similarly, Brown and L'Engle

(2009) observed that young people (both male and female) exposed to sexually explicit materials from an earlier age are more likely to engage in oral sex and become sexually active before their peers that abstain from porn. The results of Braun-Courville and Rojas'study (2009) also supported the latter findings by pointing out that the chance for young porn viewers to engage in behaviours such as anal sex, sex with multiple partners, and using substances during sex, are higher.

In line with some of the earlier findings, more recent quantitative studies provided evidence that frequent pornography consumption increases the likelihood of sexual intercourse (Cheng, Ma & Missari, 2014; Bogale & Seme, 2014; Manaf et al, 2014). However, no link has been established between porn consumption and greater engagement with different sexual practices (Luder et al, 2011; Doornwaard et al, 2015; Mattebo et al, 2014). Also, contradictory to prior findings that porn viewing leads to high-risk sexual behavior, Cheng, Ma and Missari (2014) and Manaf et al (2014) indicated that sex with multiple partners and history of unwanted pregnancy are not associated with porn consumption. With respect to age, research found that younger individuals that consume sexually explicit materials are more likely to initiate sex, while the older individuals who watch porn are less likely to do so (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013; Ševčíková & Daneback, 2014), although older individuals are generally consuming sexually explicit materials more frequently (Luder et al., 2011). Lastly, only two studies examined the reciprocal relationship between sexual behavior and pornography consumption, suggesting that young people's sexual behavior affects the choice of sexually explicit materials and frequency of viewing (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013; Doornwaard et al., 2015).

Sexual violence can take many forms, however, two of the more researched types of sexual aggression/ victimisation in relation do young people's pornography consumption are the physical and verbal (Wright, Tokunaga, & Kraus, 2016). Studies generally show that in

the cases of sexual aggression, boys are the primarily perpetrator, while females are the victim. For instance, a study conducted in Ethiopia found that girls who watch pornography regularly are more likely to experience sexual victimization such as becoming the victim of sexual offense, sexual assault, being coerced into sexual acts, and verbal or physical sexual aggression (Bekele et al., 2011). Similarly, another study among Chinese young people was able to link porn consumption to polyvictimisation (i.e. concurrently experiencing multiple acts of sexual aggression), however, a distinction between genders was not evident as both boys and girls reported being sexually abused (Dong, Cao, Cheng, Cui, & Li, 2013). A more recent US-based research, investigated the effect of pornography among young people that are part of a committed relationship and found that porn consumption was associated with dating abuse (ADA) (Rothman & Adhia, 2016). Although, verbal sexual aggression appears to be more common than the physical, participants reported high frequency of occurrence of both types of aggression. Almost half of the sample (ADA victims and non-victims) reported that on occasions they are being asked to perform a sexual act their partner saw in adult movies.

LGBT+ Young People and Pornography. Qualitative research in the area of young people and porn consumption was able to shed light on two important aspects that remain neglected from quantitative research. Specifically, interviews and focus groups conducted with young people provided better understanding on pornography use among LGBT+ youth as well as what effect it might have on consumers' body image. For example, Arrington-Sanders et al. (2015) found that boys interested in same-sex dating might see porn as a major tool to learn and develop sexual knowledge. Since there is a limited school and home-based education to serve as a model for LGBT+ youth, most participants admit watching porn prior to first sexual same-sex contact. As evident among some of their heterosexual peers (Rothman et al., 2015), youth interested in same-sex dating use primarily sexually explicit materials to

learn more about sexual organs, techniques of same-gender sex, and how to behave 'appropriately' during intercourse.

Additional reasons for porn consumption among young LGBT+ people were to establish readiness for sexual encounter, learn sexual roles, and get an idea of how sex should be experienced in term of pleasure and pain (Luder et al., 2011; Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015). In the latter study, young non-heterosexual participants also describe displaying sexual behaviors that were modeled on adult movies. The second aspect highlighted by qualitative research is the impact of sexually explicit material on young peoples' body image (Mattebo et al., 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2014; Doornwaard et al., 2014; Koletić, 2017; Preston & Ehrsson, 2018). For example, a four-wave longitudinal investigation depicted heightened body surveillance among young people resulting from sex-related online behaviour such as porn viewing, social networking and cyber-dating (Doornwaard et al., 2014). Male participants that use sexually explicit materials more often described higher dissatisfaction with both body image and sexual performance. Similarly, among girls, the regular use of sexually explicit materials affected the way in which they view their body and admitted frequent body-checks (Koletić, 2017). In addition, even though girls direct a lot of critique towards the unattainable body types presented in porn (Mattebo et al., 2012), they also admit to being influenced by these standards (Doornwaard et al., 2014), and feeling compelled to cover the criteria (Koletić, 2017).

In conclusion, even though quantitative and qualitative research on young people and porn consumption often differ in their research focus, results from both sets of studies more often than not are consistent in their finding and most notably raise critical question for further research through both its results and shortcoming. Besides methodological issues, the definition of pornography varies greatly across studies. There is a lack of more advanced and overarching theoretical perspective and more contemporary perspectives when discussing the

period of adolescence (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Current research proves to be very biased on the matter and consequently disables the progressive exploration of porn impact on young peoples' sexual maturation. Based on the current review of the literature, there are three major biases among academic publications. As mentioned above, most publications analyse the topic of young people's pornography consumption in terms of risk and opportunities. However, latest analyses suggest that engagement with sexually explicit materials, especially among teenagers might simply be a way to bond and exchange experiences with peers, make sense of their own feelings and concerns, negotiate identity or simply broaden sexual knowledge (Attwood, Smith, & Barker, 2018). In addition, present research suffers from a heteronormativity bias, as not only research rarely makes distinction between the different materials and scripts consumed, but also the focus is primarily on heterosexual pornography (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Finally, many studies fail to take into considerations that the transformation of young people's sexuality is part of a larger social and cultural revolution. Therefore, young people's sexuality might no longer be a product of traditional power forces, but a question of personal choice and pleasure (Attwood & Smith, 2011), and the link between porn and permissive attitudes, casual sexual encounters, sexual uncertainty might be a part of a larger socio-cultural shift (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Contemporary young people know little about the world before the Internet and digital technologies, however, they are still part of a society that is trying to make sense and adjust to the new social reforms resulting from it. The Internet has revolutionised central aspects of life; challenging identities, values, customs, making private and local matters public and global. As a result, collectively or individually, everyone is trying to redefine meanings associated with identity, sexuality, social norms and everything else that is being challenged at present. Naturally, the focus of the investigation is directed towards young people, as they are the first generation to engage with the medium in its state of rich contents and smart technologies as well as they are at an age considered as the most significant stage in the development of sexuality marked by the onset of biological, emotional and cognitive changes. In addition, the UK is among the first countries with public access to the Internet, making its younger demographic perfect fit for studying in relation to it. As a result, the present research seeks to understand how the virtual world is used as an arena for sexual exploration, and consequently how it informs the sexuality of young people in contemporary Britain.

In this chapter I intend to describe the research tradition and methodology with a rationale for their use in addressing the research aim; justify the research context and sample, explain the data collection methods and analysis; and discuss ethical considerations, limitations and issues encountered in the process of data collection.

Theoretical foundation

The theoretical foundation which guided the development of the present research methodology was based on the notion of social constructionism. Social constructionism supports the idea that all meanings are socially formed, but they are so integrated in our daily lives that they feel natural, predisposed and biologically driven (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). In relation to other theoretical views, the social constructionism philosophy opposes the idea of biological determinism or essentialism, which suggests that identity characteristics and behavior are guided exclusively by biological factor. According to social constructionism, there are three points that influence our beliefs (González-Velázquez et al., 2020). First one postulate that knowledge is socially formed and what is perceived as objective reality is, in

fact the result of processes that take place in a historical and cultural context. Also, language is central to the formation of ideas as it is biased and can limit our perception by highlighting and/or neglecting concepts. Finally, yet importantly, knowledge is policy driven. The knowledge accepted by the individuals in a community has a number of social, political and cultural outcomes. Each member is compelled to obey or at least recognize community's values and policy which over time become coded within that same group, creating notions of privilege and disadvantage.

According to social constructionism, identity categories (e.g. gender, race, age, class, sexuality) are not based on strict biological characteristics, but rather on social perceptions and meanings shaped by the society (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Particularly, in the aspect of human sexuality, Foucault (1978) systematically applied the social constructionism paradigm, arguing that sexuality is not a universal phenomenon largely similar among all individuals and historical periods, but a product of cultural. In each society there is a way of viewing and discussing sexual expression, and through conversations and experiences with others, individuals are able to form their own sexuality. Gagnon and Simon (1973) also opposed the essentialist view, arguing that sexuality is not a biological constantan that persists across a continuum, but based on definitions or scripts derived from categorizing groups of people, experience, and reality in cultural contexts. The latter point was further supported by Halperin (1995), who brought awareness to the fact that the social world holds many convictions that do not exist in nature.

A key assumption of the social constructionism view is that sexuality should not be understood or explained through biological principles. Even though, sexual desire is a strong force, it is channeled and constrained by an already established system of social, cultural and interpersonal processes (e.g. customs, values, civil rights, marriage, political views, religion, race, class, etc.) (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Similarly, according to the social constructionism paradigm, although there are biological differences between genders, girls and boys are socialized differently from birth. For example, a study showed that mothers who have daughters commonly underestimate their child's physical abilities as opposed to mothers who have sons, while noticeable differences in the performance of both sexes was not evident (Eliot, 2009). If we approach our understanding about gender differences with more critical lens, we can easily identify how stereotypes are reinforced through clothes, games, and even communication style used with girls and boys. Therefore, if parents have expectation about their child's abilities based solely on gender, this might have real repercussions and intensify

further the biological differences between sexes as well as attribute new meanings to them. Saying that, beside family, children are further socialized based on their gender at school, the playground and through media.

According to the social constructionism philosophy, our 'objective' reality is not given as something that already exists out there waiting to be discovered. Instead, our social world is a space created by human consciousness and interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The laws of that reality are in a constant state of flux, challenged by the environment and the historical stage. Humanity is not moving forward due to internal biological processes, but relies heavily on social forces. Therefore, although individual differences exist and biological factors might take place in the process, society has an undeniable impact on our understanding about gender and sexuality (Subramaniam, 2014). Especially today, it is becoming more and more evident that the display of identity categories is neither instinctive nor static, and the Internet is further challenging these boundaries (Knoblauch & Pfadenhauer, 2018).

In methodological context, Andrews (2012) argued that research adopting social constructionism as a theoretical framework must use qualitative methods for data collection. Since the fundamental assumption behind the paradigm is that social reality is constructed, it is best explored through individual and shared experiences, opinions, judgments, customs, behaviours, and etc (Andrews, 2012; Knoblauch & Pfadenhauer, 2018; Bergman et al., 2012; Bogna, Raineri & Dell, 2020). Beside the fact that the qualitative approach is deeply rooted in the social constructionism model, the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation (young people's sexuality) in relation to the unprecedented nature of the Internet requires knowledge that cannot be scientifically measured by any tool or reduced to numbers. In particular, across the literature there is a general agreement that interviews are the most useful method for data collection when dealing with complex/confusing or sensitive topics and process by which a phenomenon occurs (Oakley, 1998, Young et al., 2018; Jamshed, 2014; Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). What is particularly valuable in qualitative interviewing is the mutual learning process that occurs between the interviewer and the interviewee. Retelling own experiences can create a biographic narrative that allows the reconstruction and reevaluation of knowledge (Shamai, 2003; McCracken, 1988). In that respect, responses are not just recorded, but achieved, challenged and reinforced, providing more comprehensive accounts and filling the gaps (Young et al., 2018).

In general, to explore the evolving social context and how it affects contemporary understanding about sex and sexuality, it is vital to listen to participant's own voices. In-depth

interviews have the potential to uncover major themes in young peoples' engagements with the Internet for sexual purposes (Kvale, 1996), while simultaneously provide details about the context in which particular behaviors and outcomes occur (McNamara,1999). Since a large body of past research took a more fear-leaden approach, the present investigation aims to be an open-ended inquiry navigated only by participants' stories. As argued by O'Reilly and Dogra (2017) and further supported by The United Nations (1989) in their Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is essential that young people share their own perspective on subjects that influence their lives. Also, I decided to turn directly to young people since first hand experiences offer greater insight from a limited number of people and allows one to explore participants' world through their own frame of reference (Neuman 2014; 2013).

Research design

Even though, social constructionists acknowledge the influence of biological factors on one's sexuality, they place much greater significance on the impact of socialization, at both-individual and group level (Galbin, 2004). Departing from that idea, the present investigation decided to explore the subject by conducting a series of group and individual interviews. Since both approaches are shown to have certain strengths and limitations when involving young people (Lewis, 1992), I decided to integrate them in a way that will enhance the reliability of the data. Therefore, the aim of the study can be considered as two-fold: the initial goal is to use focus groups and set a clear context about the role the Internet plays in young people lives. As a logical second step, through individual interviews, the objective is to understand the impact of online experiences in young people's construction of sex and sexuality. Therefore, focus groups and individual interviews were conducted in a predetermined sequence. In addition, it was decided that individuals who take part in the group discussions would not be selected for the individual interviews. The reason for having different participants in each data set was to have a wider range of views expressed by the young people. On the one hand, there is a strong likelihood that if invited for an individual interview, focus group participants might be biased and bring out some of the collective ideas that occurred during their initial participation. On the other, using the same people might limit the scope of the revealed personal accounts. In a sense, this will give the chance for some to express opinion twice, while I was interested in exploring different perspectives.

According to Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2016; 2015) the goal of all research is to reduce ambiguity surrounding important questions through obtaining additional information. Consequently, the more we learn about a particular topic, the less doubts and misconceptions

there are to surround it. Naturally, when approaching a largely unexplored field, with many unknowns, it can be challenging to ask the correct questions (those who can lead to meaningful answers) (Neuman, 2014; 2013). Yet, over the course of the investigation, as knowledge and awareness increase, there is a high likelihood that questions will turn from probing to more narrowed. With regards to the Internet, its dynamic and multifaceted nature has made it difficult to understand and study as a social phenomenon. As a result, the field of Internet studies relies heavily on notions and beliefs adopted from other social occurrences and lacks its own independent theories (Tsatsou, 2014). This is why, as an initial step in addressing the present inquiry, I decided to use focus group discussions. Such an approach has the potential to provide a better grounding for the next step of the research by contextualising the use and meaning of the Internet among young people.

Contextualising the Research

It was anticipated that the role the Internet plays in contemporary youth culture would be best understood through exploring the shared importance and usage of the medium. Past literature identifies two major advantages of group interviews with young people related to the breadth and depth of responses (Lewis, 1992). Due to their class activities, students are used tolerating other's views and cooperating with each other, which in turn can generate a greater range of supporting and/or opposing opinions compared to individual interviewing (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016; 2015). This classroom dynamic will naturally lead to clarification/ extension of the matter under study, as well as providing new ideas and topics for further discussion. The group dynamic can also be worthwhile in identifying experiences that are typical, those who have been stereotyped as well as reveal more unconventional ones. In addition, group interviewing can shed additional light on contemporary youth culture, through revealing peer norms and key points of debate (e.g. Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Rothman et al., 2015). It is believed that such interaction data offers insights that are otherwise less accessible (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

With respect to the size and number of group discussions, a thematic analysis of 40 focus groups discovered that 80% of all themes were identifiable within two to three group discussions, and 90% were identifiable within three to six group discussions (Guest, Namey & McKenna, 2017). Therefore, it was decided that the present research will conduct three to four focus groups if salient and dominant themes across groups are identifiable. Regarding the number of participants per group it is widely accepted that between five and eight individuals

can produce sufficient discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Yet, there is no guarantee that those recruited will be attending or actively participating and small assemblies tend to prompt people to get more involved (Nyumba et al., 2018). Thus, as an initial standard the present investigation decided to include not less than three and up to eight individuals per session, focusing on the quality of the discussion. Finally, in terms of group homogeneity, past literature suggests that online activity can be affected by factors such as age, gender and sexual orientation (Reitz et al., 2015). However, more recent and comprehensive publications suggest that while age and sexual orientation can open different lines of inquiry, and gender can affect the outcomes, boys and girls engage with the internet in a similar way (Peter & Valkenburg 2016; Gámez-Guadix, de Santisteban, & Resett, 2017). Therefore, to facilitate data gathering (make sure each group consist of at least three individuals) and to draw a general picture (how all young people use the internet), groups were only controlled for sexual orientation and age.

In-depth Exploration

For the second step in assisting the present inquiry I decided to use in-depth individual interviews. Since the effect of the Internet on the psychosexual development of young people is more or less at its infancy (Attwood, Smith & Barker, 2018), using interviews had the potential to gather authentic data and enhance knowledge on the complex phenomenon. Among others, individual interviewing is found to generate greater insight through personal accounts of participants' thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge in relation to a given phenomenon (Yin, 2016; Fielding, 1994; Coenen et al., 2012). This method is based on the belief that if questions are formulated correctly, participants' responses will reflect their subjective reality (Sandelowski, 2002). In addition, such an approach provides the opportunity to focus solely on that one person; ask follow-up questions and clarify statements, search for additional information, circle back to key points in the discussion, and therefore generate rich understanding (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016; 2015). Consequently, even though it is anticipated that group discussions can reveal valuable and insightful information, individual interviews will be used for the purpose of data completeness (assuming that each approach focuses on different aspects of the phenomenon- social and personal). In terms of the sample size for the individual interviews, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) argued that within generally homogenous group saturation often occur around 12 participants. However, to ensure that saturation of the obtained data is achieved for the present investigation, it was

made sure that no new major concepts emerged throughout the last few interviews. As a result, it was decided that the 15 participants that took part in Stage 2 of the data collection (individual interviews) produced sufficient understanding on the researched topic.

Vulnerable Population/Sensitive Topic

The assumption that group and individual interviews might provide different data also comes from the fact that the researched demographic is considered vulnerable (i.e. young people), while the subject of discussion (i.e. sexuality) is sensitive. In Western cultures, sexuality is seen as a private matter, and discussions surrounding it are often associated with embarrassment, discrimination, transgression and social censure (Jordan et al., 2007). In turn, young people are defined as "vulnerable population", signifying for the disadvantage and/or inherent risk that have to be considered when involving them in research (Shivayogi, 2013). However, the challenge is even bigger when young people are being asked about sex due to their presumed innocence and lack of sexual agency.

As discussed in the literature review, there is a growing public outcry associated with young people's use of online sources for sexual purposes, their sexual self-broadcasting and communication with strangers (e.g. Livingstone, Haddon, Görzik, Ólafsson, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007; Owens, Behun, Manning & Reid, 2012; Willoughby, Young-Petersen, & Leonhardt, 2018). As a consequence, experiencing the moral panic and prejudice, young people might be reluctant to open up and discuss the topics (Spišák, 2020). Past literature is ambivalent regarding how best to approach sensitive topics (Jordan et al., 2007). Some suggest that individual interviews are the most appropriate way to collect detailed personal accounts (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008; Fielding, 1994), while others recognise the group context as less intimidating for voicing of strong or extreme views (Lewis, 1992). However, even though strong and extreme views are important and welcomed, such dynamic can also silence moderate individual accounts and present a distorted reality that does not reflect the actual situation (Jordan et al., 2007). This is why to maximize the chances of involvement of participants and created an encouraging setting for self-disclosure, I decided to extend data collection by including online interviews as well.

The main reason to include remote interviews was to further enhance knowledge and reduce anxiety (Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr, and Elford, 2010; 2004). It was intended for those young people who might consider it embarrassing or awkward to open up about intimate experiences in a face-to-face conversation. According to Oltmann, (2016) the

perceived anonymity due to increase in social distance can allow participants to open up on sensitive topics. However, the privacy of online interviews does not automatically privilege such method of data collection. Prior to the start of data collection, it was expected that online interviews will provide shorter responses. Above all, in the face-to-face interviews, participants are subjected to a certain social pressure to be available and interact (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2009). In contrast, with the online method of data collection, with a physical and social distance between the interviewer and the respondent, there is less pressure to engage. Therefore, considering the fact that it is an in-depth interview, young people might lose focus after a certain time and skip through the questions without providing much detail and though. As argued by Curasi (2001) technology mediated interviews require more effort to complete as discussing one's feelings orally tend to be easier and faster for most people. In addition, through online interviews it is hard to establish a degree of trust as with face-to-face conversation (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). Nevertheless, although anticipated that remote interviews might provide more concise responses, in particular cases such method can be less intimidating and allow participants to reflect, examine, and reconsider their responses (Kitto & Barnett, 2007).

Other Considerations

Increasingly, combining different qualitative method is used as strategy to enhanced data richness and depth of inquiry (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008; Qvarnström & Oscarsson, 2014). However, the quality of the research is also marked by the formation of appropriate questions. Since both structured and unstructured interviews have considerable disadvantages when exploring personal experiences, in most cases researchers rely on semi-structured approaches (Young et al., 2018). Choosing semi-structured questions is particularly valuable when exploring a new phenomenon. It allows the researcher to navigate a general focus, but also ask additional questions and explore new lines of enquiry (Young et al., 2014; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016; 2015). This middle ground was found to be the most appropriate for the present research. Both, focus group discussions and individual (online/offline) interviews were based on semi-structured guides, aiming to provide personal experiences, opinions and motivations rather than facts or behaviours.

The guide for the focus groups was informed by the literature and past research (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020). Questions were deliberately organised from more general and seemingly trivial, to more narrow and penetrating, introducing gradually matters that can be considered sensitive (Dempsey, Dowling, Larkin, & Murphy, 2016). Furthermore,

the guide was improved and adapted through discussions and meetings with the supervision team. The broad nature of the focus group guide gave participants the opportunity to choose the focus of the discussion. Instead of being asked particular questions, young people could open up about aspect important and worth mentioning in their own views.

With respect to the individual interview script, questions were based primarily on the themes that emerged from the focus groups discussions. There were few reasons that directed the research to build knowledge hierarchically. First, most past publications are focused exploring a particular online activity, and it is difficult to obtain a fuller, overreaching picture (e.g. Magee, Bigelow, DeHaan & Mustanski, 2012; Albury, 2014; Jerslev, 2016; Anastassiou, 2017). Second, large proportions of academic inquiries take a more fear leaden stance (e.g. Peter & Valkenburg, 2009; Owens, Behun, Manning & Reid, 2012; Rothman & Adhia, 2016; Marston, 2018;) or quantify behaviors (e.g. Klettke, Hallford & Mellor, 2014; Luder et al, 2011), failing to recognise the full impact of online engagements. Third, the virtual setting is in a state of constant evolution, offering new and creative opportunities for young people to explore their sexualities (e.g. Perez-Torres, Pastor-Ruiz & Ben-Boubaker, 2018).

While research requires planning ahead, it also demands revisiting and modifying (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). To ensure that the individual interview script does not side-track the research (remain focused on the research question), cover important areas, and pose well formulated question, the method was piloted with three participants from the target population. The pilot interviews were transcribed, revised and further refined.

Sample and recruitment

The research was carried out with a broad range of establishments with students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. A voluntary response non-probability sampling was used, found to be particularly useful for exploratory research (Neuman, 2014; 2013). A total of 38 participants took part in the study (23 females, 15 males) between the ages of 14-19 (Mean=16.5) (See Appendix A for a full list of participants' demographics). Sample members were recruited based on the following criteria: a) between the ages of 14-19; b) use Internet for recreational purposes; c) able to communicate freely in English; d) express personal interest to take part in the study; e) present signed consent as well as parental consent if between the ages of 14-16. No incentives were offered and participation was voluntary.

Recruitment Strategy

The initial step of the recruitment process was to identify youth services in a reasonable geographical range that will allow the research to conduct interviews within time and cost effective frame, but ensuring inclusion and impact of the results. As a consequence, the safeguarding officers/ pastoral care/ leaders of secondary schools, colleges and youth groups (LGBT+) across the North West of England, Yorkshire and the Humber were contacted via email with a brief description of the purpose of the project and a request for a face-to-face meeting or phone conversation.

This strategy of gaining access to subjects was employed due to the ethical considerations associated with conducting a research with vulnerable demographic (young people), discussion of sensitive matter (sexuality) and the presumed right of parents to give consent on children's behalf. Turning directly to youth establishments was seen effective for three reasons. First, the establishment will get a sense of control that the research processes fit in with their tradition, routines and practices (Munford & Sanders, 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2014). Second, it was anticipated that establishments will be further encouraged to support the project and show initiative due to the growing criticism of school-based sexual education. Third, having a well-recognised and trusted establishment behind the study was supposed to ease the processes of attracting volunteers and obtaining parental consent (Munford & Sanders, 2004; Turner & Almack, 2017). Although, access to research participants was not always granted, many gatekeepers and students did not follow through with their initial agreement, and some parents were apprehensive to consent, the strategy produced sufficient results.

Recruitment Process

In the cases when access to learners was granted, a convenient time/ venue was negotiated with the management of the establishments, allowing enough time for the researcher to promote the study among students. Young people were approached in class/ group activities and invited to take part by the researcher or a member of the staff. To broaden the search, flyers, posters and online advertisement of the study were circling around the establishments. To guarantee participant's anonymity, a member of staff within the school was assigned to mediate the communication between the students and the researcher. Individuals who decided to participate in the research were given Information sheet, Assent and Consent form to familiarise with the project and provide signed consent from themselves

and a parent\legal guardian. With respect to the online version of the interview, additional flyers and posters were distributed across youth clubs, schools, residence halls, cafés, social venues, university campus, email lists and online platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to advertise the research and gather participants. The version for the interview was available for young people at the age of 17 and above, since parental consent could not be confirmed.

For focus groups, participants had to indicate their availability based on the pre-arranged dates with the establishment management, as well as the simultaneous availability of between three to eight individuals. The first schools suggested that it will be in students' best interests to take part right after school hours. However, this proved to be very hazardous as many participants did not show up. After further negotiations with the management, it was agreed to carry out focus groups during school hours, which brought sufficient results. I used this experience as justification with other establishments, and as a result everyone agreed to allow their students/members skip class/activity in order to take part in the research. For individual interviews participants were given the chance to choose a date and time that is most suitable for them, including weekends and out-of-school hours. Naturally, online interviewees had the chance to choose the most suitable time for themselves, as the interview was available 24/7 on the Internet.

Participants

This approach resulted in 20 participants who took part in four focus group discussions (between 3 to 8 individuals per group). The first group was a LGBT+ youth group located in a large city in the North West of England with two girls, and one boy between the ages of 16-18. The second group was with students from a mainstream college located in a large northern market town, involving eight girls between the ages of 16-18. The third, was a group of six participants (i.e. four boys, two girls) between the ages 14-16 based in a large northern market town. The fourth focus group involved three boys between the ages of 14-16 based in a midsize northern city. With respect to the second stage of the data collection, 15 young people between the ages 15-19 were interviewed individually in face-to face interviews, and three participants did the online version of the interview. Three of the face-to-face interviews were used to pilot the questions for the interview and consequently their responses were not considered in the data analyses. As a result, a total of 15 individual interviews were included in the study, from which ten interviews with girls and five with boys. In terms of the online interviews, only three people decided to take part remotely (i.e. two males and one female).

Settings

The settings of the focus group and individual interviews were also considered carefully. Group interviews were carried at the school/college/youth group building. Beside the fact that sessions occurred during school hours, it was suggested from the literature that familiar setting will encourage participants to be more relaxed and open in their responses (Katainen & Heikkilä, 2020). However, there were few practical considerations with collecting data on establishments' territory. First, I had to ensure that I will be provided with a quiet and private room, with adequate lighting, heating and/or air-conditioning. It was important that there was enough space to arrange chairs in a circle so there will be a good degree of eye contact, everyone can hear each other, no one is sitting in a position that makes them feel left out and the conversation can be captured by recording devices (Lewis, 1992). Fortunately, establishments were able to offer such space, and group discussions were carried uninterrupted. In addition, due to the sensitive and seemingly private nature of the topic, it was decided that participants will be offered refreshments (i.e. snack and beverage) in order to reduce potential barriers and make the atmosphere more informal. Refreshments were arranged on a small table at least a meter away from the discussion area, so young people will not get distracted during the conversation. Although, a small detail, this has worked very well in all group interviews, as students were able to engage in small talk prior to the start.

With respect to the face-to-face individual interviews, all of them were carried out in the library of the University of Huddersfield. Since the dynamic of individual interviews is easier to control, it was decided that the unfamiliar for the participant setting is not of central importance as long as physical barriers are minimised (Kruger, Rodgers, Long & Lowy, 2019). For the purpose, only rooms at the underground level of the library were booked, to maximise privacy. Room's size and set up was sufficient, facilitating clear verbal and non-verbal communication. As a result, individual face-to-face interviews were conceded without any disturbance and participants were able to engage in an open and detailed discussion.

Online interviews were facilitated through the use of Qualtrics; software designed to conduct research, assessments and other data collection activities. The software is widely adopted by academic and market research because it is easy to use, but provides advanced research tools. Qualtrics has highly customisable appearance, which helped me link posters and other materials used for advertisement to the interview creating clear but sharp looking

interface. In addition, the multiple sharing settings made it effortless to distribute the interview through emails and different social media platforms.

Procedures

From September 2017 I began to contact schools in Yorkshire area, requesting access to research participants (See Appendix H Data Collection Timeline). Initial requests were sent to Headteachers, Deputy Headteachers, and Assistant Headteachers within these establishments. Although, some of them got back to me, or passed on my enquiry to another person within the establishment, results were far from pleasing considering the amount of schools contacted. After reviewing practical guides (e.g. Krueger & Casey, 2014; Turner & Almack, 2017) and discussing the matter with the supervision team it was decided that access will be further sought from individuals whose role require constant engagements with students and the geographical radius of the search will be expanded. Afterwards I started searching through the lists of school staff in institution located in the North West of England, Yorkshire and the Humber, identifying individuals that were responsible for safeguarding or pastoral care, including the heads of year. This proved to be more successful approach, although my request was often rejected. One of the main reasons outline by the schools was that they are overwhelmed with such enquiries. After further considerations, I decided to contact schools/colleges/ youth groups in smaller towns with fewer universities around which brought me better success.

The first college that gave me access to their students was located in a large town in northern England. Although I was planning to make a personal contact with students, and promote the study myself, the school insisted on taking care personally (this was one of their conditions). Two different interview dates were set up for November 2017. Prior to the first date, the school contacted me and said that we have to cancel the group interview as no consent forms were requested yet. After another push from the college coordinator, four people agreed to take part on the second date. At the time of the interview only one participant arrived. Suspecting that a central reason for their absence was the facts that sessions were scheduled for the end of the school day, I asked the school to allow me carry out the data collection during school hours. The college management agreed and new group discussion date was scheduled for March 2018. In the meantime, similar situations occurred in two other establishments. Access to Sea Cadets organisation for young people was granted, but no one expressed interest to take part in the study. In addition, a Non binary and Transgender youth group reconsidered their initial agreement, as they were worried about the

welfare of their members due to age considerations (14-15-year-old) and vulnerability of the group. Other issues that I have faced in the recruitment process were schools that granted access, but postponed the interviews and eventually cancelled it due to their tight schedule (two schools located in midsize northern towns); parents expressing concerns about the nature of the study (LGBT+ youth group located in a large northwestern city); and LGBT+ youth groups deciding to withdraw due to anonymity concerns (located in a northern port city).

Each time I encountered an obstacle, me and my main supervisor were trying to adjust the recruitment strategy and optimise the process. As a result, from February 2018 and afterwards I was able to conduct successfully four focus group discussions. In general, group discussions were approached in a similar way. Once all necessary steps were undertaken such as seeking access from gatekeepers, recruiting participants, negotiating appropriate setting with the establishments, obtaining parental/student consent and arranging the physical space (refreshments, chair position, recording devices), I was able to proceed with the actual interviewing.

Focus Groups

All group interviews were carried out in a private room within the premises of the institutions that has granted access. On each occasion participants were given start time, 15 minutes prior to the actual time of the group discussion to arrange paperwork and receive beverage and light snack. This proved to be an effective adjustment tactic, as upon arriving students were met in an informal, undemanding atmosphere that enabled them to familiarise with other participants, the interviewer and the overall setting. Before the start young people were assigned a pseudonym and informed, about the purpose of the discussion, confidentiality and practical issues. Once participants were acquainted with each other, the group was gradually introduced to the topic. A script consisting of open-ended questions designed by the moderator facilitated discussions. The script was based on findings from past literature dealing with the phenomenon of young people's engagements with the Internet. Questions pertained to participants' online activity, starting from more general discussions to narrower and more personal experiences. After asking each question, I was trying to remain more peripheral to the discussion, and encourage students to build on each other's responses. This approach worked very well in all groups, creating organic discussions and opening new lines of inquiry. All group discussions were audio recorded, to ensure accurate analysis of the

content. In addition, field notes were kept during the process to further assist the interpretation of the data. Sessions ran for approximately 60 minutes.

However, there were some challenges during the group interview process. In the first group, LGBT+ youth group based in a large northwestern city (two females and one male), participants were talking over each other on few occasions. I had to remind that the conversation is audio recorded and it will be difficult to separate responses afterwards. In group two, (located in a large market town in northern England) there were eight female participants, but two of them were trying to dominate the conversation, so I had to step in each time and ask for someone else's opinion. In the third group located in the same large market town in northern England (four boys and three girls), two of the boys were trying to silence girls' opinions regarding pornography by interrupting them and making inappropriate remarks. At this time, it was necessary to step in and remind them the general rules of their participation. In group four, (midsize city located in northern England), there were three male participants, but one of them seemed reluctant to discuss more private matters (such as meeting people online and watching porn). I tried to prompt him to discuss his perspective, but his responses remained somewhat generic.

At the end of each discussion, the closing question gave students a chance to make comments or suggestions. For me it was a good sign that all of them remained present and shared their thoughts and opinions after the discussion. Many students admitted that they have never considered another perspective on certain topics before they had heard the response of a co-participant. Some shared a story or personal experience that occurred to them post discussion. Few students wanted to know more about the project and/or how much they have contributed to the inquiry. Beside the overall enthusiasm of young people, I received very good feedback from the schools.

Individual Interviews

Once focus groups were conducted, audio recordings were transcribed and analysed. The themes that emerged from the group discussions contributed to the formation of the semi-structured script for the individual interviews. After carefully reviewing the questions I applied for ethical approval in November 2018 as part two of the data collection. I was scheduled for interview with the ethics panel and approval was granted in January 2019. Once I obtained the approval I decided to pilot the initial list of questions with three participants from the target population to test the length of the interviews, language appropriateness and

potential sources of bias such as leading or unclear questions. After transcribing the data from the pilot interviews I identified some potential issues and applied corrections to the script to make sure it produced enough relevant data to address research question. Even though, piloting and adjusting the script took two weeks, I was able to begin face to face interviews at the beginning of March, as in most establishments who granted access they were considerate of students' workload and exam preparation, so I was provided with specific time frames. On the other hand, due to the initial efforts in recruiting schools and other youth services, getting access to young people for the individual interviews was much easier. Also, the fact that the interviews were carried out with a single participant further facilitated the process.

Individual face-to-face interviews were carried out in a private room in the library of the Huddersfield University. Each participant was given 10 minutes prior to the actual time of the interview to arrange paperwork (fill the demographic form) and receive further information about the purpose of the interview, confidentiality and practical issues. Interviews were facilitated by an open-ended script based on findings from Stage 1 of the research (focus group discussions). Interviews begin with few general questions in which the participant could tell more about themselves, their habits and current interests. Next, followed a discussion about the different ways in which they use the Internet and their online communication. After that young people were presented with few scenarios and they had to discuss how they will resolve it. At this point of the interview we begin discussing the use of online affordances in relation to their sexuality and knowledge of sexual practices. Female participants were very comfortable and open, which consequently led to better conversations and insight. In contrast, male participants were reluctant to provide details on the more sensitive subjects, such as pornography and sexting. One boy became particularly nervous when asked about his own experience with pornography. To put him at ease, and still get some understanding of his views, I proceeded to ask about his friends and their use of such materials. This brought a visible relief to the participant and was able to carry on with the interview in a more relaxed manner providing more information. Likewise focus groups, at the end of each interview, participants were offered the chance to share additional thoughts and/or suggestions. Once again they were enthusiastic and reflected on meaningful for them points.

Field notes and audio recordings were used to capture the conversations. Interviews lasted between 60-80 minutes, depending on the shared information, and consequently amount of probing. In most cases, audio recordings were transcribed no longer than a day or

two after the interview took place and/or before the next one. Since the data and observation from the individual face-to-face interviews was very rich, I saw it as important step in order to interpret the information meticulously. With respect to the online version of the interviews, link was distributed through different social media platforms and through email lists. Prior to the start participants had to go through the information sheet and consent form uploaded to the software to familiarise with the project. Once they were acquainted with the conditions and purposes of their participation they had to provide their consent electronically before proceeding to the interview. The script for all interviews (face-to-face and online) was exactly the same. At the end of the online version there was an empty box for participants to share any additional thoughts and ideas that might have come up in the process.

Materials

•   Letter of invitation (See Appendix B). Each establishment received an official letter from the researcher, approved and signed by the University. The letter was exclusively addressed to the particular organisation.

•   Consent forms parents/students for participation in Focus Group and Individual Interview (See Appendix C). Informed consent form (i.e. assent form and information sheet) was given to each participant, containing information about procedures, benefits and risks of participating, general topic, future implications and contribution, and contact details of the researchers. Each individual had to read and sign the form. Parental/ legal guardian consent was required for students at the age of 16 or below.

•   Demographic Information sheet for participants (See Appendix D). Prior to the start of each interview, participants were asked to provide basic information about themselves such as age, self-identified gender, sexuality.

•   Poster/ Flyer for participation in Focus Group and Individual Interview (See Appendix E). Posters and flyers (smaller prints of the poster) with information about the focus groups/individual interviews were located in predominantly student areas (Library, Reception, Canteen, Classrooms) around the institutions. Posters/ flyers contained information about the date, time, and location of the gatherings, as well as instructions of whom to contact to obtain participation pack (envelope with informed consent for students, parents, and legal guardians), or additional information about the research itself.

•   Focus Group Script (See Appendix F). A review of the relevant literature was conducted in order to generate questions for the Focus group discussions. A total of six open-ended questions were developed regarding young people's experiences, motivation, habits and interests in the use of the Internet.

•   Individual Interview Guide (See Appendix G). Data from the focus group discussions was used to generate questions for the individual interviews. A total of nine open-ended questions were developed to understand how young people make sense of their emerging sexuality, what are the main sources of relevant information, what role the Internet plays among other sources.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

One of the most challenging aspects of qualitative research is, perhaps, the analyses of the collected data. Since the study is exploratory, I chose to use an inductive approach and let the actual data itself drive the structure of analysis. Specifically, thematic analyses was chosen as a method for data interpretation since it offers a well-structured handling of the obtained information, helping to summarise key aspects in a clear and organised final report (King, 2004). On the one hand, the approach is suitable for the interpretation of large and complex data sets (Holloway & Todres, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006) and on the other; it offers great flexibility for identifying similarities/differences and uncovering unanticipated insights (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). Above all, however, thematic analysis is well-suited with the theoretical paradigm adopted by the present research. As discussed earlier, a leading argument of the social constructionism paradigm is that language is central to the formation of ideas which can result in bias. To overcome this potential barrier, I chose thematic analyses as it goes beyond the semantic content of the data, helping to identify underlying ideas, principles, and conceptualisations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although there are different inductive methods, thematic analysis was seen as the most appropriate for both, group and individual interviews. Results were analysed using the same approach to ensure consistency, as both data sets were used to reveal different dimensions of the same phenomenon (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). In particular, focus groups were used to examine shared opinion and beliefs, whereas individual interviews explored personal accounts and subjective experiences. As a result, when comparing the transcripts from the focus groups and individual interviews,

two levels of understandings of the phenomenon were noted. Focus group discussions brought initial understanding of the phenomenon revealing broader contextual factors, while individual interviews supplied detailed descriptions of individual's decision-making and the challenges encountered in the process.

In order to manage the gathered data and cut out unnecessary or irrelevant information, group discussions/ interviews were evaluated according to the six stages of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was selected to guide the present thesis since they provide the most consistent and comprehensive summary of the theoretical bases, application and evaluation of thematic analysis. First, the audio recordings from the session were transcribed verbatim. Focus group conversations took between seven and nine hours to transcribe, whereas individual interviews required between five and six hours. To avoid missing important aspects and undertones of the conversations with young people, each audio recording was transcribed without delay (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). Data was familiarised with through listening to the recording, reading the transcripts, as well as going through the notes taken during and right after the group discussions/ interviews to consider the non-verbal cues provided by participants and ensure that findings are interpreted as accurately as possible. Next, data was evaluated through thematic analyses, allowing the researcher to index the text into initial categories/ themes (open coding). Once codes were examined, information was placed under the appropriate theme; categories were refined (axial coding) and integrated into theoretical framework.

Although thematic analysis offers great flexibility, this is also considered its central limitation as it might lead to inconsistency and a lack of coherence when developing themes (Holloway & Todres, 2016; 2003). To assess credibility of the interpretation, the raw data and preliminary findings were discussed with the supervision team. Main themes were carefully considered to review whether they appear to form a coherent pattern, while the accuracy of individual themes was examined through reflecting the meanings and evidence from the data set as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was anticipated that through this stage of the data coding, some themes might appear too diverse or lacking enough support and therefore has to be reconsidered and potentially broken down into other themes. As argued by King (2004) this step will provide the opportunity to identify inadequacies in the initial coding and themes and make the necessary improvements (e.g. removing, inserting or clarifying).

Last step of the analyses was producing report through the final consideration of data extracts, presentation of rich, compelling examples, and discussion in relation to research

question and past literature. In particular, each theme was tested if it fits into the overall story in relation to the research questions. After this stage, members of the supervision theme once again reviewed the progress to determine if a coherent pattern is apparent. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analyses, findings and interpretations across the result chapters were supported with multiple direct quotes from participants placed in context, presented in a logical, traceable, and clear manner. A sufficient effort and time was invested in every step of the data analyses to that ensure that finding are presented in a meaningful, comprehensible and credible manner.

Focus Group Themes

As mentioned earlier, focus group data was used to contextualise the use of the Internet among contemporary young people, as well as provide further direction for the research. After analysing the data, a total of five themes emerged from the data (See Appendix I Focus Group Themes). Three of them (i.e. General use, Communication, and Self-expression) dealt with the importance of online affordances in young people's everyday lives; with Social Media being in the epicenter of their activity, used for communication, self-expression and information. The other two themes identified from the data (i.e. Intimate relationships and Sexual information) dealt with the role the Internet plays in romantic relationships as well as the various ways in which young people learn about sex and sexuality through the medium. The latter categories involved discussions surrounding intimate self-disclosure, Q&A/medical sites, Sex and Relationship bloggers, LGBT+ activists, and sexually explicit materials. All of these topics were tightly related to the main aim of the study, and therefore needed further exploration. As a result, the script of the individual interviews included questions seeking clarification and additional information on these aspects. Overall, using focus groups and individual interviews made three general contributions to the research. Group discussions drew a general picture of the role the Internet plays in young people's lives and generated new lines of inquiry to be explored through individual accounts. Also, using both methods of data collection helped identify individual and contextual circumstances among the younger generation, guiding the use of the Internet for sexual purposes. Last but not least, the convergence of participants' stories in group and individual interviews increased the credibility of the findings.

Ethical considerations

The research procedures as part of the present research are consistent with the highest standards of research practice as set out in the Data Protection Act (1998). In addition, the study was conducted in line with the standards of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and approved by the School Research Ethics and Integrity Committee (SREIC) within the School of Human and Health Sciences of the University of Huddersfield.

The current study was subjected to certain ethical considerations around informed consent, rights to withdraw, anonymity, confidentiality and (potentially) emotional distress. As it was stated earlier, all participants reported their written acceptance regarding their participation in the research and for those at the age of 16 and below a parental consent was also provided. Through the Information sheet it was clear that young people can terminate their participation at any point without providing justification for it. The right to withdraw was also mentioned again prior to the start of each discussion to ensure participants are aware of it and further put them at ease. In addition, it was clearly stated that participation is voluntary and no incentives will be offered to those who decide to take part. It was important for the quality of the research that young people are interested purely in discussing the topic and providing their own perspective. This is why they were fully informed about the objectives of the study before they decide to take part. With respect to anonymity and confidentiality, all young people were informed that their responses will be treated as confidential and used only for academic purposes. No personal information was recorded that might lead to the identification of the involved, and each member was provided with a pseudonym. In particular, pseudonyms were used for anonymous identification; to help participants refer to each other freely, without putting at risk their anonymity and the confidentiality of the shared information. Pseudonyms were also used in the thesis to present results and refer to statements made by individuals. Everyone involved (gatekeepers, parents and young people) were informed about the conditions under which data will be stored and who will have access. Also, the names of the institutions that have provided access were kept confidential at all times, and only the areas they are located was disclosed in the thesis.

Even though, the proposed methodological tools were not seen to bear any obvious risk for physical or psychological harm for the researcher or the participants involve, there were further steps taken due to the delicate nature of the discussed topic. Therefore, the researcher made sure that: a) when approached, individuals were presented with information on procedures, benefits and risks of participating and the general topic of the project; b)

participants were aware that they can avoid answering uncomfortable questions and have the right to withdraw from the discussion process; c) focus group script and individual interview guide were outlined in a way to introduce the topic gradually; d) the overall environment during discussions/interviews was relaxed and non-demanding; e) observed participant's demeanor and was ready to take the appropriate actions if sensed anything alarming; f) provided participants' with contacts of services that offer support to young people (through information sheet).

Research limitations and practical issues

As with every research, the present one has some potential limitations due to the methodology that should be considered. Only three boys took part in the face-to-face interviews and they were visibly more uncomfortable discussing the topic, limiting the overall perspective on boys' experiences. Another reason that can further be considered a barrier in obtaining male participants' views was the gender of the interviewer (female). With respect to the qualitative nature of the research, interpretations were based on opinion and judgment rather than clear-cut statistical results, and therefore, they are difficult to verify objectively. Last but not least, due to the sensitive subject under discussion and the general anxiety surrounding young peoples' safety, participants might have avoided discussing aspects associated with risks or harm. In terms of practical issues, in the process of the present dissertation probably the most challenging aspect was collecting the data. In particular, obtaining access to young people for research on a topic such as sexuality was particularly difficult at times. In trying to get the attention of gatekeepers, through engaging young people to take part, to ensuring parents that there are no risks associated with their child's participation. Many institutions delayed considerably the process of data gathering, or departed from their initial agreement. In addition, some participants did not show up for their focus group discussion/interview. Fortunately, the feedback from establishments and young people who took part in the research was positive, and has considerably helped with future recruitments.

CHAPTER 4

CONTEXTUALISING THE WEB IN YOUTH CULTURE

(Focus Groups Results and Discussion)

Understanding young people's engagement with technologies can be a little overwhelming. The data from the focus group interviews, however, was able to shed light on the matter and reveal how and why young people use the Internet as part of their daily routines. All 20 participants expressed the importance of staying connected and explained how the Internet assists various aspects of their social, personal and academic life. Initial conversations evolved around the different social media platforms they use and the purpose each of them serves. Probably, the main reason to go online on multiple occasions throughout the day was to maintain contact with other people. This contact could take many forms; exchange of messages, share materials such as photos, videos, or articles, and interact with other's online personal blogs. Maintaining online personal blog (social media profiles) was yet another daily task for young people. They used social networks to build their online image, and as it became evident in the discussion process, the audience (followers) on each platform affects their self-expression and representation. For example, posts on Snapchat were less filtered as the audience consisted of close friends, while the content on Instagram was more idealised representation due to the larger number of viewers.

Besides going online to communicate with others and for self-expression, young people indicated that they use the Internet to stay informed on various social and political events. To receive news and updates on important for them matter, many reported using Twitter. Unlike other social networks, they were most likely to be recipients of the content on Twitter, rather than creators. In addition to Twitter, young people shared that they also participate in online groups and follow public figures on Instagram to stay in touch with popular culture, news and trends. Many of the young people admitted playing games daily,

although the degree of engagement varied between boys and girls. Last but not least, participants indicated that the web is a valuable tool for education on various matters. Young people engaged with online sources to manage their academic work, as well as to gain knowledge on important subjects such as sex and sexuality. From our conversations, it became apparent that young people browse the web in a sophisticated manner, being aware of various risks and opportunities resulting from it.

In the following chapter I begin with a discussion of the overall use of the Internet as part of young people's daily routines, reviewing their digital habits, online contacts, and preferred social networking sites. Further, I explore in details their online communication in terms of whom and why they stay in touch with, the manner (e.g. texting, video/voice calls, exchanging publications/articles) and quality of their exchanges, as well as the potential effect of such engagements on themselves and their relationships. Later, I expand upon their self-expression and self-presentation online, providing a detailed account as to why young people use multiple platforms, what is the purpose of each one and how it might affect their image of the personal and social self. In the process of understanding participants' use of social networking, the topics of celebrity lifestyle and global marketing are also discussed. At the end of the chapter, I present evidence of how young people use the Internet as a tool for making sense of sex and their own sexuality through searching for sexual health information and other explicit and non-explicit online contents.

General use

Social Media Platforms

Young people have a sophisticated attitude towards social media and engage daily with multiple online platforms. Even though there are apparent trends in their online behavior participants indicated that young people's online activity could not be placed in tight categories. They do seemingly similar things, but their motivation, manner and outcome can

differ greatly. In addition, even though past research suggests that individual's online activity is largely regulated by factors such as age, gender and sexual orientation (Reitz et al., 2015; Antheunis, Schouten & Krahmer, 2016), the data from the four different group discussions in this research indicated that even though there are certain trends, day-to-day young people engage with the Internet in very similar ways. As the most common activity, outlined by participants is the need of staying connected to the world through comments and discussions on social networks, private messages and group chats. Unlike the older generations, contemporary young people have taken advantage of the affordances of the Internet, with social media being in the epicenter of their online activity. Vicky articulated her outlook on Social Media:

> It is like a massive online community. We can follow people on Instagram, and still speak to them on Snapchat, and still follow them on Twitter, and see their tweets, and be friends on Facebook and text. Everything is linked and you can speak to anyone in the world…It is a massive way of communicating with people. (Vicky, 16)

Since social networks vary in purpose and audience, young people use multiple platforms to maintain their social connections and online presence. In line with previous investigations (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017), across all groups that took part in the study, there was a general consensus that Snapchat is the most popular application. However, participants in this research reported that they use the platform to send private and group messages, upload and preview 'stories' and send 'streaks'. 'Stories' are not a unique feature as other platforms offer it as well. In the main, they are updates on everyone's activity at a certain moment that remains available for viewers in the next 24 hours. On the other hand, 'streaks' are when two people exchange direct snaps back and forth for seven consecutive days. The longer they go without breaking the chain of communication, the longer the 'streak' will be. During the discussions, several students provided an account of their daily routine starting with the exchange of streaks as soon as they wake up, and admitted that there is an

unconscious demand to not break the cycle. However, what makes Snapchat a "go to" application for young people is the confidentiality of the exchange, since once received and seen, the messages disappear and there is no history of it. This is, also the reason why Snapchat gained early notoriety as a network designed for 'sexting' (e.g. Roesner, Gill, & Kohno, 2014; Utz, Muscanell, & Khalid, 2015). Yet, what become apparent from the current investigation is that Snapchat's distinct features have unfolded in ways that go beyond the exchange of nudes for young people.

Following Snapchat, participants positioned Instagram as another popular network as it allows them to find, create or share interesting contents such as photos, videos, or posts. On the one hand, students admitted that the network allows them to construct an online persona that is often an idealised representation of their appearance and lifestyle. On the other, the rich and visual flow of information that goes through their feeds, constantly updates their knowledge on contemporary trends and topics of interest. In fact, Instagram is one of the central networks that gave rise to bloggers and influencers, which as we will see later holds a special place in youth culture (Jerslev, 2016). Further, in this chapter there is a more detailed account of how participants use Instagram as elaborated by them, and the implications resulting from it.

Besides social networks for communication and self-expression, the students that took part in the study reported using Twitter for news and opinions dealing with various social events and politics. Twitter has become increasingly popular among academics, students, policymakers, politicians and the general public as it offers concise message that is fast and easy to scan through. Therefore, regardless of the number of people and organisations young people follow, they can go through a big volume of information in a very short time. Most students described their use of the network mainly as recipients of the content, rather than creators. Further, although Facebook is the first large-scale social network that undoubtedly

gave rise to what is known today as Social Media, it seems that it is losing popularity among contemporary British teenagers, or at least its initial purpose (Johnson, 2020). In all group discussions, participants were consistent that the platform is used to stay in touch with relatives, family or distant friends that have relocated. Most students reported that they rarely post contents, but rather stay in touch by liking, commenting, or sending occasional messages. A few participants said that they tag friends in interesting publications (which however occur on other networks as well) or keep track on others' birthdays. Lynn provided a reason as to why Facebook has more restricted use among her and her peers, which was later confirmed by other participants as well: "People that I have met from college, I don't have on my Facebook. Facebook is strictly family" (Lynn, 17). Also, as stated by Alex: "I don't really post on Facebook, I just scroll through the feed to see what is happening…but I don't really use it, too many relatives" (Alex, 15). In addition, as captured by another participant:

> I go on Facebook, and I post something that my family would like, so Instagram is the opposite of that. Even that I have some family on Instagram too, but such a large network of my family and my family friends I have on Facebook. (Emma, 16)

In addition to visiting social networks, participants also shared routinely engaging in online gaming (although this varied between the male and female participants). While girls reported playing games online when they are bored, it seems that boys spend considerably more time on their game consoles. Particularly one participant shared that he spends about 3 hours in the evening daily, and on rare occasions, he has played for up to 24 consecutive hours (Jack, LGBT+ group). In addition, for boys it appears to be a group activity that can occur between offline friends as well as online 'game buddies'. What turned out to be very common among gamers is take part in a 'party'. Party is categorised as a live chat between the players while playing the game. In this way, they give each other hints, ask for help in the game, but very often engage in small talk and joke with each other. A few male participants

said that they have created strong bonds with some of the people they came across in game parties. For example, a male participant shared:

> At first I didn't know him. It was through a game that you have to sort of work together, so you need to communicate. There are some mean people you can meet there, but mainly people are nice. So then, I was like "Do you want to do another game" … so then we just send a friend request and said "Oh next time let me know if you want to play another game" …and it just happened and then we just build a friendship from there. (Jack, 17)

Game parties occur on yet another well-known platform among young people, called Discord. Not a lot of past publication has played attention to this application, but it occurred in conversations in two of the group discussions. And even though it started as a platform for gamers (similar to Skype) to allow live conversation between players, its use has expanded considerably. For example, an LGBT+ participant shared:

> I think that my favourite social media is Discord, because it is pretty fun to just meet new people and make jokes… Recently I joint a server, and made some friends there. I use voice chats or different channels to talk. (Brook, 17)

Last but not least, another common network among participants is YouTube. Similarly, to the rest of Social Media channels, YouTube started as a video sharing site used mainly for music video streaming, and soon expanded into a popular site for vloggers, comedy shows, how-to guides, hacks, etc. During the discussions, students reported using YouTube for finding information on different academic and personal matters. However, besides YouTube, participants reported using many other online sources for school and college work.

In summary, we can outline several reasons why young people go online on a daily basis. Primarily they use it to develop and maintain supportive relationships through communication. Not far behind is the use of the Internet for self-expression and self-portrayal by constructing social media profiles with pictures and videos capturing their own private life or interests. Further, they go online to join or follow significant for them groups and public

figures. Online gaming is popular across all young people; however, the degree of engagement varies between boys and girls. The Web is also valuable for gathering information on important matters related to their academic work as well as personal subjects. As for young peoples' choice of online platforms, what they all have in common is the emphasis on highly visual and real-time features that fulfill the need to shorten the distance (mimicking offline interactions) and fast update on various issues.

Online communication

The students that took part in this study reported using online communication tools primarily to reinforce existing relationships, with friends, romantic partners, family and relatives, but meeting new people is not uncommon. As mentioned previously, online communication can take different shapes, such as text messaging, video and voice calls, tagging in publications on social media, or exchanging media files. Further, they describe doing it out of necessity, curiosity and sometimes boredom (habitual). What is apparent, however, is that there is a certain demand for them to be present online (Chua & Chang, 2016) as today the line between the online and the offline world is blurred. As elaborated by Jurgenson (2012), modern societies can no longer separate their analogue existence from their online presence but rather should accept the formation of a new augmented reality where the two 'spaces' collide and co-construct.

Existing Relationships

Although there are ongoing debates whether online communication impairs or encourages existing connections, my participants emphasised that the time spent on online exchanges mostly helped them maintain and deepen existing relations. Naturally, the time spend together (although not in a physical proximity) and the nature of online communications (often lacking visual cues) allowed young people to create a deeper bond, or

created a space for self-disclosure on delicate/private matters. Students indicated that everyday face-to-face relationships are not replaced by the electronically mediated; rather the Internet has created a new space for authentic experiences. And while we can accept that to extend mobile devices reduce valuable face-to-face interactions, they also put individuals in a state of constant availability, and offer a lot of new opportunities. In support of this point, May shared:

> One of my friends, I met them in person first. But we only actually became friends after I got their online information. Then we started talking online, because in person we just sat there. Sometimes you don't really feel the same kind of anxiety about talking to someone face to face, when you are communicating through Messenger. (May, 17)

Further, Lynn explained how a group chat for schoolwork could assist relationships in real life:

> The second you get on group chat, you spend half an hour talking, by the next time you are in a lesson; you are all kind of bonded a little bit. Especially, with my philosophy class, I think that class is one of the closest classes I have ever been in. I guess we all just talk on the group chat as well as in the lessons. I think there are some benefits of actually having that much access to social media. It makes you connect with people a lot better. (Lynn, 17)

Further, the rich content available online, the constant flow of information and the affordance to design this flow according to your own aspirations and interests continuously opens new topics and discussions among friends, family, schoolmates and romantic partners. For example, Emma pointed at:

> So you like with the same person, but you have conversation with them on Twitter and Snapchat. You are having two different conversations simultaneously, then you mention it 'Why are we talking on two different social Medias. (Emma, 16)

Similarly, Kate said:

> I would say I use twitter for political things, because I am quite into politics, so I will tweet about that. I think a lot of people around me do the same, so we will speak about politics. (Kate, 18)

Lastly, the control over one's privacy on social media might also reinforce closeness. A number of participants mentioned holding both, private and official profiles on a same social network. The official ones are for wider audience such as friends, friends of friends and schoolmates, whereas private ones are with a very limited number of people that are considered close friends. Selecting someone for your private profile can be seen as a further confirmation of one's close bonds. As reported by Maria:

> On my private account I put funny videos and things I would never post on my actual account. I have only 50 or so followers on the private and it is just funny, and you can post what you want. (Maria, 16)

The quality of online relationships with strangers was also discussed in all four groups. When asked who they talk to online, most participants mentioned immediately friends, family, schoolmates and relatives. However, further into the discussion we began to talk to about the online contacts they maintained. A majority of the students said that the closest they get to meeting people online is through group chats. For instance, Maria explained:

> I would say that I have met people that my friends know. So if my friends know them and they say "Oh this is my friend from my school", I will talk to them on a group chat, but I never have met them. (Maria, 16)

Similarly, Alison reported: "I have met online friends of friends, and I have met some of them offline, but I will always be with some of my close friends that know them from before" (Alison, 15). When asked how they respond to strangers that seek contact with them on social media, participants said that they would ask friends if they know the person or start a conversation to see what that person has to say. According to Maria:

> Maybe, if someone messages you and say 'Hi', if it was a girl it will be less weird. I will likely respond, because they might know you from somewhere. But if it is a boy and he just say 'Hi', you don't really reply. (Maria, 16)

Likewise, Alex said:

> You get some weirdos, yeah, that send you message request, and they try to message you, so you accept it to see what they got to say. If you don't know them, and they are talking crap, you just remove them. (Alex, 15)

Meeting New People Online

An emerging theme among male participants was meeting people online through online gaming. Boys engage with their game consoles frequently, and most of the games they choose require live exchanges between the players. However, what became evident is that after 'a good game' with someone, boys often seek the same individuals for future play. Jack shared that:

> Well I got some friends online, you meet random, as you don't know who they are, but then it sorts of feel like a very good friendship. I have known people now for about 6-7 years… I have met like 2 of them. We just organised to meet up and then met up. (Jack, 17)

During the discussion, Robert also disclosed:

> We met on a game, then started talking, became familiar with each other. One day we decided to meet up, but I made sure I am with someone that I trusted… my dad. Just to make sure I was safe. Turn out to be one of my best mates. We know from 3-4 years now. (Robert, 15)

Unlike other students that rely on some familiarity with the people they come across online, or players that create contacts as a byproduct of their online gaming, LGBT+ participants were able to share a different perspective on the matter. A few of them emphasised that what led them online was the inability to come to terms with their sexualities in predominantly heteronormative environment, which did not recognise their needs. Kate explained of her experience in secondary school:

> I have met a lot of people online, I'd say. Just because I had really bad experiences in secondary school, so I was going online to sort of find community of people that was similar to me. I think a lot of my friends, that I made in the last year of the secondary school, did the same. Especially, in the gay community, I think that a lot of us sort of found each other online, because in secondary schools there is no LGBT group or anything like that. Because the schools just assume that once you have labeled yourself as gay, you have underage sex, even though that was not the case. So they didn't even want to go there and talk about it. (Kate, 18)

Further, May shared that she generally struggled with communicating with people, and this had partially translated into her online communication. However, she opened up about maintaining few close online friendships with people, and offered an interesting perspective on how the affordances of the Internet can affect communication:

> I have friends online that know more about me as a person than most people that I know, but probably they don't even know my real name. You just learn different stuff about people when you form an online friendship... I think that people tend to be more honest on the Internet, than they are in real life. (May, 18)

Brook also shared May's view and added about her two-year relationship with her boyfriend from America that started online:

> Yeah, I think people are different online, but not different as faking it, but because they are being more honest about themselves, or just more open about their personality… I met my boyfriend online, so I obviously talk to him quite a lot, because we don't talk in person. (Brook, 17)

Even though through the focus group discussions it seems that young people who did not conform to dominant constructions of sexuality and gamers are more likely to establish contact with strangers online, all participants were aware that there is a possibility to meet someone they get along well on the Internet. For instance, Lynn has a friend that met a boy from America through a group chat. After some time, they began talking on private messages and eventually admitted falling in love for each other. In another case, Emma's sister as well

as a close friend of hers, both met other girls on social media with similar interests and became good friends. Similarly, Gail shared the case of one of her friends that came across a Harry Potter fan on a fan page and over time evolved into good friends. Therefore, as young people spend a considerable time online exploring their interests and talking with other people, there is a chance that accidentally they can come across strangers with a lot in common. Following this discussion, the conversation naturally turned to dating apps and cases in which people intentionally search for contacts. Generally, participants were not keen on using them. Few students reported downloading the apps but use it either as a joke (concealing their identity), or trying out of curiosity. Tinder, Grindr, Plenty of Fish and Yellow were the only platforms that were mentioned, however all of them have the reputation of 'hook up' app rather than dating sites. What appeared to be the most troubling aspects of going online to meet a potential partner were a) the fact that it takes more time to move forward and decide if you want to meet the person; b) unsure of the intentions of the other person and fear of being catfished; c) age restrictions on dating/hook-up sites; d) risks associated with safety. The latter point further fueled a discussion over sex offenders targeting underage and vulnerable individuals online and the case of the Grindr murderer. However, Kate shared a different perspective:

> I do think just from knowing the gay people in college, a lot of people use online dating apps when they are gay just because there are not as many people out and in college. Just people look online to see the online community in terms of dating is quite common among gay people at our age. (Kate, 18)

In support of the same point, May stated:

> I think it is OK. Especially from an LGBT perspective it is a lot better to meet people on a dating app where have signed up. Because it real life it just so awkward…And if you ask that in real life can put you in danger. So the dating app is good. (May, 18)

However, granting that electronic communication gave Brook and May anonymity to explore and discuss topics without much of the social consequences following analogue socialisation, they also seemed to be very aware that it might not always work in their favour.

In line with past research (e.g. Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, Valkenburg & Livingstone, 2014; Lomanowsk & Guitton, 2016) our discussions also indicated that a big part of the communication online occurred with family and friends. In fact, a lot of efforts have been directed towards understanding the influence of mobile devices on family relations. As noted in Part II of the Literature review, even though mobile devices can have a negative impact on the time spend together, online communication could also provide members with an additional channel for communication. Therefore, digital devices and the Internet are not inherently bad, but the way they are implemented by the individual make the difference. The participants in this research shared that they communicate with family members daily via individual and group chats and that the median helps them stay more connected. The majority said that they have family members on social media (mainly Facebook), and post/share contents that they think their close ones will enjoy and approve. However, further in the conversation most discussions evolved mainly around young people's communication with peers. This is not surprising considering the fact that it's a normative for adolescents to obtain autonomy and independence, and there is a natural shift from predominantly family to peer interactions (L'Engle & Jackson, 2008).

As discussed in Part 2 of the Literature review, research on the effects of online communication on the quality of young peoples' existing friendships largely depends on the individual's use. Specifically, our group discussions revealed that online communication can enhance and further social connections in various ways. As in the case of May the median gave a chance to overcome her anxiety and establish a much closer bond with someone she knew from before. According to Chambers (2016) the nature of the online interaction stripped

from visual cues and immediate response can help individuals get through certain gating features of their personality. These gates often prevent less socially skilled individuals from making a realistic first impression and consequently form a relationship to the point of closeness and greater self-disclosure.

Online Social Gatherings

Besides close friends, the Internet can assist interactions between a group of people. The concept of group chats is a growing trend among young people, and group texts act as the 21st century version of gathering in front of the locker. My participants reported using it to announce events among peers, stay in-touch with a group of friends or the family union, take part in a support groups or keep updated about schoolwork with classmates. Even though the phenomenon is growing in popularity among young users it is still somewhat under-researched. Yet, if we look at it broader terms, as an online social gathering, past literature has unraveled some of the dynamics of these interactions that can promote closeness. Since the group is created to function as a source of information in a closed circle (e.g. organising a party) or general socialisation among people that experience similar challenges (e.g. schoolwork, support group), it can also promote intimacy among members (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008). Further, similar to overcoming unfavorable characteristics of one's personality (e.g. shyness, nervousness), the invisibility offered by online communication further neutralises factors such as rank, physical excellence and signs of discomfort or shyness. The prolonged time for response and the emotional charge of the situation can further bond members and create supportive and safe environments. Although there are cases that clearly show, group chats can be yet another venue for drama, bulling and exclusion (Woo, 2017), in my focus groups these interactions were described as a space that offers a sense of community and acceptance. As experienced by Lynn, the sociology class group chat allowed members to get to know each other better and created a closer bond.

Throughout time, many different hypotheses have been suggested as to why young people might choose the Internet to search for contacts. Some scholars have proposed that individuals who already have strong social networks and possess strong social skills will translate this dynamic over to the Internet (the-rich-get-richer hypothesis) (Kurt et al., 2002). They will be more likely to share their joys and/or ask for support online, and consequently establish stronger bonds through the cyberspace. On the contrary, several authors supporting the social compensatory hypothesis have suggested that adolescents who lack social resources due to social anxiety (Mazalin & Moore, 2004), depression (Peter, Valkenburg & Schouten, 2005), and poor social skills (Subrahmanyam & Lin, 2007) are more likely to go online in attempt to compensate. In addition, digital communication has been recognised as a key tool for queer intimacies, allowing LGBT+ youth to find support and establish connections that are otherwise impossible (García-Santesmases Fernández, Vergés Bosch & Almeda Samaranch, 2017). In fact, all LGBT+ young people that took part in the group discussions stressed on the importance of the Internet in addressing social barriers. They explained that growing up in a minority group, meant having fewer people in the immediate environment to talk to about potential challenges associated with it. What is more, forming romantic relationships offline was particularly difficult as at that age individuals are still struggling with the stigma surrounding same-sex relationships.

In conclusion, following the conversations with my participants, we can accept that both hypotheses (i.e. the social compensation theory and the rich-get-richer theory) are plausible, but somehow limited in their view. Our discussions revealed that since young people use the Internet extensively, they routinely come across new contacts. Besides the stories shared by my LGBT+ participants, all students (including the LGBT+ youth) reported meeting new people in very spontaneous ways, through online gaming chats, fan pages, group chats, and support groups. Such exchanges occurred by accident, out of necessity or pure

curiosity, but most agreed that online communication can be equally authentic and fulfilling as the offline ones.

The Online Self

As mentioned previously, following online communication, participants reported that posting contents on the Social Media related to their appearance, lifestyle and interests is a central activity. Self-expression is an important way to display feelings and thoughts. Orehek and Human (2017) argue that self-expression is an action to assert one's individual traits and especially during adolescence, a valuable tool for exploration of the self. According to Orehek and Human the virtual world allows people to express aspects of their essential self more openly. The majority of the participants reported posting private contents on two large platforms- Instagram and Snapchat. On Snapchat, besides creating an avatar, the only form of self-expression was the so-called 'stories'. Generally, the stories uploaded by participants could be divided in two categories, posting a short video using a filter offered by the platform (augmented version of their appearance, which can be funny or emphasise their attractiveness) or uploading a highlight of going to a nice restaurant or on a holiday. Most students reported being more interested in watching other's updates than putting something themselves. Particularly, Jack disclosed: "Probably Snapchat, watching stories. That's what everyone does now, look at their crush and look at the story. See what they are up to" (Jack, 18). Also, it seems that Snapchat is for a more private circle of people. Students reporting having only people they know as followers, but also moderating the privacy settings to select an even tighter circle of viewers. The latter approach was also commonly used by participants who have strangers in their profile. In addition, few participants admitted that they are uploading content rarely and the app is used mostly for watching others and message exchange. However, even though young people shared mostly positive experiences on social media, the

following paragraph reveals thar sometimes they feel pressured to present themselves in a certain way.

Online Self-Expression

As previously mentioned, different platforms have different purpose according to young people. Even though use varies, Instagram was described as the most suitable place for self-expression and self-presentation and was rarely used for messaging. Also, on Instagram young people reported having a wider audience compared to other networks such as Facebook or Snapchat. Further, Instagram is one of the fastest-growing online photo social web services, with the majority of its users being young women (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Consequently, even though all participants admitted using the platform for posting content or following public figures, girls appeared keener to discuss the platform. While talking more generally how she uses social media, Emma made an interesting suggestion that opened up a further discussion in the same group:

> I am quite confident and I will mess about and joke about quite a lot of the time. So, that is what I would put on. I will present myself in that way on Snapchat. On Facebook, I will just put masses of videos. Like funny videos, I will just share stuff I find funny and tag my mum. In food videos as well. This is what I am like on Facebook. (Emma, 16)

Emma further addressed her presence on social platform:

> On Instagram probably more serious than mess around and joke. Because I have literally everyone there. On Snapchat, I've got the people I am friends with that can see my stories, Instagram is like big on. So if I post something funny I will be probably a bit more worried about how I come across. I feel more judged on Instagram I would say. (Emma, 16)

Further, Angela clarified:

> On Instagram, if I have a good picture that I know people would not speak about or generate any negativity. So I tend not to post very regularly on Instagram. You feel you are being more judged because the platform is bigger. (Angela, 17)

Also, Emma added:

> I actually love the idea of a private account, because if I am upset about something, I will go on my private and just laugh. The stuff on there are really a representation of my persona and my humor. I will put the funniest things, funniest photos on there. Everything to do with me is on that private, and I feel that after I made my private account, when I go to my main one I think "This is boring". (Emma, 16)

Even though, social networks such as Instagram are supposed to give young people the freedom to express themselves, Emma's comment suggested that there are limitations to that as well. She further elaborated:

> Because what people post on Instagram, they know they are going to get likes. And if they post something, that gets less likes, they will delete it, and that is not how it should be. If you want to post a photo, you should post it because you like it and is a good representation of yourself. (Emma, 16)

During the discussion in a college located in a large market town in northern England, it became apparent that Instagram's public and private accounts were a necessity, as young people reported feeling judged and receiving negative responses once they go off the presumed standards of the platform (e.g. share mundane activities). Therefore, on their private accounts they have a limited number of people (about 50, as opposed to the general accounts with approx. 1000 followers) that know them well and their post would not be interpreted incorrectly. As Kate pointed, "It is a form of social conformity where individuals erase anything that could be seen as unique" (Kate, 18). Down the line participants also shared a story everyone was aware of, as it happened to a fellow schoolmate, and captures what can occur when the content and its audience are not carefully considered:

> She is quite popular person in A1. She put loads of photos of her doing drugs, on her private Instagram. She obviously though, and was probably a bit naïve in a sense that

she posted photos, and she did not let her closest friends follow it, she let other people she knew follow it... They screenshotted photos of her doing drugs, printed them out and send them by post to her parents... And it was all anonymous, she doesn't know who did that. Her parents absolutely grilled her so bad. (Emma, 16)

Cases like the latter, less likes than normal and negative responses prevent young people from expressing their trues selves on Instagram. What can be problematic out of this is that they are being taught strict standards that might affect them even when they log off. As we will see later from the shared accounts of participants, one such standard is altering appearance through photo editing applications that might bring young people plenty of 'likes' online, but leave them feel less satisfied with their actual physical appearance. Similarly, receiving less attention or even negative response when posting content related to personal interests or hobbies, can affect their confidence. Beside instances when young people receive feedback on their own publications, looking at other people's altered content can affect their overall self-esteem (e.g. making the feel less attractive, interesting, and prosperous).

Girls described using social media for self-expression keeping in mind who will be the recipient of the content. Most reported uploading contents that are carefully selected and admitted that they present a rather filtered version of their self. And even though female participants were eager to share their own challenges on social media, they also described how the strict standards of platforms like Instagram can affect the behavior of other peers. According to them many boys act over confident online, when in reality they can be very different. In Kate's words:

Definitely, with boys on Instagram, they might be posting looking really tough, flashing stuff. Or on Snapchat they might even put drugs on, like picture of drugs, that is quite common, but then in person they are completely quiet and don't say anything, completely different person. (Kate, 18)

Similarly, Emma pointed:

> Yeah, let's say I've come to college and I've met people, and then I get a request from them on social media and I'll add them…. Their stories and what they put on is horrendous. I did not have any idea, and I am thinking am I just a bad judge of character or is this person different in person. Some of their stories (online) are very controversial, stuff that you should not be putting on. (Emma, 17)

Further, Kate concluded that it is not a matter of being male or female, and that a lot of young people feel the need to compensate for their insecurities through their social media. She confirmed that Instagram is the place where people upload photos and videos presenting them vastly different from what they are in person:

> I don't think that is just with boys either. I can think of a few girls that are trying to be over confident when in fact, when I spoke to a lot of people they are quite insecure and/or unconfident in themselves, but their Instagram…. I think is usually Instagram with stuff like that, the photos of how they are presenting themselves that is vastly different. (Kate, 18)

Online Self-Reflexion

Past publications suggest that the rise of social media, and specifically Instagram, has created a new set of expectations for young people (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). At present young people are surrounded by the so-called 'celebrity culture', being continuously exposed to an immense range of images related to the lifestyle of influential figures such as favorite movie stars, musicians, athletes, TV personalities, writers and others. What is more, since celebrity culture has been recognised as an evergrowing phenomenon (Omenugha, Uzuegbunam & Ndolo, 2016), in recent years there has been a rise in new types of 'digital' celebrity groups such as bloggers, vloggers and Instagram influencers (i.e. micro-celebrities). The contents celebrity profiles produce, has brought both groups (public figures and the audience) closer, changing fans' anticipations of reality and setting expectation that everyone should create and maintain a digital persona. Not surprisingly the topic of online celebrities came up in my conversations with young people as well. Male

participants seemed more interested in rappers and youtubers, mentioning Drake, Fredo and

Bugsy Malone. In turn, girls placed as the most popular celebrities Kylie Jenner, Kim

Kardashian, Beyoncé and Selena Gomez. All participants reported following public figures

mainly on Instagram and Snapchat. The way Gail described her involvement was:

> It is mainly on Instagram. Because they are all open, like all celebrities have open
> accounts. So you just kind of stalk them a little bit. You go onto their account and they
> tagged other celebrities, because they all mingle with each other. And then you going
> to another one, and end up spending like an hour, going on glitch *(a sudden, usually
> temporary malfunction)*. (Gail, 17)

Other girls from the same group also admitted spending considerable time looking into

celebrity lifestyles, with Vicky stating that this is the main reason she goes on Snapchat.

Similarly, Jack (18) stated that he goes on Snapchat to look at his friends' stories, as well as

the ones uploaded by celebrities and youtubers. When asked about why they preview the

content shared by public figures, Alex elaborated his interest as the following:

> If they (rappers) make song and think it sounds good, they share it on Snapchat for 60
> seconds, and just say 'New album coming soon… sounds good'. So you get to hear
> the song early. The day it comes out, I have notification when they post, so I am being
> sent one when they upload stuff. If something is uploaded 2 minutes ago, I will get the
> song straight away, before everyone else. (Alex, 15)

This fascination with knowing ahead of others and being up to date on important

matters through celebrities was also observed with female participants. A few girls from the

college located in a large market town in northern England shared their fascination with Kyle

Jenner and Kim Kardashian, and Maria shared that through Kim's online account she is

constantly updated about new makeup lines, while Emma explained that she is not interested

in buying or knowing about make up trends, instead she follows the account to look at her

appearance and lifestyle. However, Lynn found the contents shared by A-list female

celebrities boring to look at as their social media profiles comprised mainly of beautiful

photos related to their appearance and style. Instead she has chosen to watch people that make her laugh such as Philip Schofield.

Sharing personal content online or maintaining a web profile has become an important part of young peoples' daily routines. In a way it has turned into a visual communication that has the potential to display personalities, lifestyle and current moods. Participants in the present research revealed that they mainly use Instagram and Snapchat for creative self-expression and social influence among peers. Even though students described mostly positive experiences on social media (e.g. strengthening their friendships, allowing them to express themselves, bringing sense of belonging), they also shared some of the challenges they encounter daily. Specifically, on Instagram, young people reported having a wider audience, and consequently feeling very conscious about the content they share and the feedback they receive from it. What is more, likes, algorithms and trending features carefully select the information flow, allowing young people to compare themselves to a countless number of peers and celebrities. In a way Instagram has taken the concept of "the group" to the extreme where young people aim to fit in among a very large and diverse group of people. And in order to create cohesion within this global group, Instagram has sat rather tight standard for its users.

While the purpose of Instagram overlaps somewhat with other social media sites, Instagram use is focused mainly on self-presentation rather than building and maintaining relationships (Noon & Meier, 2019). Consistent with Instagram being an outlet for self-expression and presentation, participants revealed that there is a particular need for attention and validation through "likes". Common likes-seeking behaviors are using hashtags to reach a wider audience, modify photos to make them more appealing (performing digital plastic surgery), engage in more extreme or provocative self-presentation; exchange likes for the sole purpose of increasing their count (like-for-like), or explicitly purchase followers or likes

through secondary sources. According to Huang & Su (2018) users can engage in the self-presentation of one's actual or ideal self, while viewing similar content from others. In my focus groups it became apparent that young people have the need to do both; present a filtered persona to receive validation but also express their true self without being judged. For the purpose most participants admitted holding two profiles where the self-presentation occurs in the public account and the self-expression in the private. In addition, participants in the present research disclosed that while Instagram restricts many young people to openly express themselves, others (especially boys) are encouraged to present a very different persona from the offline one. As Kate suggested, young people are conforming to the "norms" set by the platform, and purposefully camouflage unique features of their appearance and personality. Therefore, even though the platform is designed to communicate self-generated ideas and messages, scholars suggest that the content is largely influenced by the Global marketing, and particularly celebrities as the so-called 'human brands' (e.g. Jerslev, 2016; Serafinelli, 2018; Noon & Meier, 2019).

Celebrities have been powerful mediators in western societies for a long time (Chan & Prendergast, 2008), and now the proliferation of social media platforms has further expanded their influence into the everyday lives of fans and followers. Celebrities act as role models, guiding customers to product purchase and advising on various political and social issues (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017). This is why the messages celebrities communicate through social media can be very powerful and have the potential to reinforce or challenge social norms. However, what is often overlooked by the public is that popular figures use social media as an outlet for expression in order to shape their public image and generate publicity, and the images they post online only give perceived access to their private lives. According to Khamis, Ang & Welling (2017) celebrities and consequently individuals who want to identify with them are not admired for their talents alone as social recognition is now largely

performed through visibility and self-speculation. Therefore, visual promotion of the self is a new way to shape identity and gain recognition.

Participants reported following people on social media from show business. Girls that expressed their interest in celebrity lifestyle shared following popular females for beauty trends and a glimpse of their everyday lives. And even though they admitted the content these celebrities share is boring (comprising mainly flattering photos of their face and body, or including other famous people they associate with), female participants reported posting predominantly selfies (pictures of oneself, taken by oneself) and groupies (picture of oneself with others) on their main Instagram profiles. In fact, a study has determined that peer groups often surveil each other's social networks to guide and advise on what is socially acceptable to post online (Forsman, 2017). For instance, according to Siibak's (2009, 2013) sample of young people, a good selfie should be a high-quality photography with visual standards resembling celebrities. In addition, in other investigations it was noted that the post should present an attractive person (preferably the most attractive in the photo) (Albury, 2015) as well as an interesting and fun lifestyle (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015). In turn, boys shared interacting through social media predominantly with male rappers. And even though, participants were particularly interested in the music, these artists also share stereotypical content for men in general. As a result, girl shared that boys often display online behaviors that do not correspond to their offline persona such as "posting looking really tough" or "put picture of drugs", while being very shy and insecure in person.

Intimate relationships

Young people appear to use electronic media to reinforce existing or potential romantic relationships, just as they do friendships and family relations. During the group discussions only four participants revealed having a romantic partner and how this translates into their online activity, however, a few male participants admitted flirting with girls through their

social media. One of the students (James, midsize northern city) reported using different platforms to update his activity as well as preview others', but stated that the only girl he talks to online is his girlfriend. In another group, Brook said that in her spare time she talks to her boyfriend online, who lives in America. She stated that online communication is sufficient to enable people to get to know each other:

> Communicating online is not just messaging the other person anymore. You can voice and video call. Granted it is not the same as talking in person, you still get to know what they are like, and you know it is not just some kind of online person that they have. You do get to know the real person. (Brook, 17)

During the discussion in a college located in a large market town in northern England, Alison and Beth also reported talking to their boyfriends online, however, Beth mentioned that a somewhat new feature on Snapchat allows them to stay more in-touch then previously imagined. She elaborated:

> Through Snapchat I communicate with my boyfriend and check his location. He can see mine too. In my settings, I have enabled only him to see this kind of info. I am just more relaxed in this way, it tells me where he was, how long he stayed there, everything. If he turns it off, I get really anxious. (Beth, 15)

The Internet plays an important role in adolescents' existing or potential romantic relationships, and few participants admitted that they use the medium to flirt, stay close to their existing partners and/or express feelings. In fact, past investigations signify that the Internet makes it possible for young people to to establish contact regardless of time and context and the Internet provides an additional opportunity for self-disclosure between romantically involved individuals (Boyle & O'Sullivan, 2016). Similarly, individuals can find information about someone they are interested in or are in relationship with much easier than before and display affection privately or to a broad audience (Fox, Warber & Makstaller, 2013). However, mediated communications as well as social networking practices might elicit some unwanted side effects for those who are already in a committed relationship. According

to Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet & Peeters (2016) online activity might provoke jealousy and facilitate abusive behaviors such as partner monitoring and desire for control. In the case of my participant Beth, she admitted feeling concerned and uneasy when her boyfriend switched off a feature on Snapchat that allowed them to monitor each other's location at all times. The extent of such arrangement is well documented in Rueda, Lindsay, & Williams (2015) who noted that the affordances of the Internet to connect peers and create additional space for meeting and flirting with others enhances feelings of jealousy and insecurity. Further, Lucero, Weisz, Smith-Darden & Lucero (2014) found that monitoring social media accounts is common practice for control among young couples.

In the case of romantic relationships that are established and maintained over the Internet, past literature suggests that although self-disclosure is a meaningful way of establishing and maintaining closeness, it can prove insufficient if people are apart for a long periods of time (Jamieson, 2013). Instead, aspects of co-presence such as providing practical care and engaging in physical affection are central components of intimacy. Yet, according to Choi & Aizawa (2018) it is possible for people to compensate for their absence with skillful and creative use of technology that will allow them be more expressive and satisfy each others' emotional needs. Throughout our group discussions, it became evident that establishing and maintaining a romantic relationship is not common, but is also not unheard of. One of the participants admitted meeting her partner online, and explained that the through the use of various online tools they were able to establish and maintain a fulfilling relationship for the past two years.

Sexual information online

Sexual Health Information

Consistent with previous investigations, the conversations with my participants also confirmed that they use the Internet routinely for communication, self-expression and as a source of information. In addition, past research has suggested that anonymity offered by the online contexts provides young people with an additional forum for sexual exploration (Wise & Balon, 2011; Stevens et al., 2017; Attwood, Smith, & Barker, 2018). However, when presented with the question whether they use the internet to search for sexual health information, most male participants were reluctant to talk about it. In one of the groups (located in a large market town in northern England) with predominantly male participants' responses generally denied the use of the Internet for such purposes; only one boy admitted searching the web for the symptoms of puberty. Similarly, in the group located in a midsize northern city, boys either denied using the web for such information, or further clarified that they are already fully informed. When asked where they got their knowledge on the matter some suggested it was from school (Rod) or through conversations with others (Alex). However, when discussing the same topic with participants from other groups, the majority described sexual education at school as disappointing and inadequate. According to Emma:

> We were year 10 class, and learning about sex through frogs! Oh yeah I am so going to relate to this when it comes to my time, when I am curious about it. All I have in my head is how frogs do it. Biology by all means teach us how frogs have sex but humans?! It was not helpful at all. (Emma, 16)

Similarly, Brook shared:

> I mean school has not been that great either. They have some OK stuff, like we had a lesson on consent that was pretty good, and then some basic stuff about variety of contraceptives, but they do not really speak about any LGBT stuff. There was no information, for what you use when you are in a same sex relationship. That is

> something people might need, especially if they are approaching 16 or something like
> that. (Brook, 17)

Emma's comment touched upon issues of censure and reluctance of SRE education, while Brook addressed criticism about the lack of practical knowledge when it comes to experiences of LGBT+ identities. Even though a new curriculum is soon to be included in schools across the UK, the focus remains on risk prevention (Department of Education, 2019). Similarly, while the prospectus attempts to address topics about sexual interactions and relationships, there are still barriers in integrating the positive aspects of intimacy such as pleasure and desire (Wood, Hirst, Wilson & Burns-O'Connell, 2018;2019;). Consequently, as noted by Kate, some school-based sex education does not meet the needs of young people, and fail to equip them with knowledge and skills to negotiate positive outcomes:

> I found that especially in secondary schools with people 16 and under, they are very
> scared to even talk about it. At the end of the day, they have 16 year olds' there, that is
> the age of consent, and they need to be doing it. They need to just start talking. I think
> that they think if they are going to talk about it, they will be encouraging it. At the end
> of the day, people will be having underage sex, and the way to deal with that is to
> inform them on how to do things properly and have the right precautions, not just
> about getting pregnant, but just about spreading infections and stuff like that. (Kate,
> 18)

Further Kate noted that she learned a lot about sexual health through the Internet. She explained that she accessed LGBT youth forums and YouTube as the mainstream education, being heteronormative gave her even less clarity on the matter. Ironically she later realised that through accessing the forums she was able to get much more comprehensive knowledge compared to her heterosexual peers. Additionally, May from the LGBT+ group disclosed:

> I think I have learned more about sexual health online, then ever in real life. Just no
> one talks about this stuff. It is like what we discussed earlier. People will write an
> article where they talk about it extensively, because it is the Internet, you are not

saying to someone's face, it is not awkward. They will go into great detail, in a way that someone in real life would not. (May, 17)

Students that were open to discuss their use of the Internet for Sexual Health information agreed that the NHS web site was a reliable source, but admitted that it can also be a double edge sword. Few participants explained that searching symptoms online is common but can be misleading. Specifically, Jack shared that he prefers to talk to a doctor if in doubt and suggested that there are some websites that offer a live chat with a professional. Generally, even though most participants acknowledged there are valuable sources online, they also noted that many are unreliable and misleading.

Pornography

Moving away from the deliberate search for sexual knowledge on the Internet, the topic of online sexually explicit materials also came up in our discussions. The boys from the midsize northern city were once again hesitant to express their opinions; however, the topic received much consideration in the other groups. Unlike previously discussed topics, we could see some gender differences in the way young people view pornography. All boys from a college located in a large market town in northern England initially described porn as "great", "best creation on the Internet", "exhilarating" and "relieves stress". Nick and Robert admitted that watching sexually explicit materials might not be great in all of its forms, but helps people explore their sexuality and make better sense of their sexual identity. Further, Nick pointed that without access to porn a lot of inexperienced young people might not know how to approach an intimate contact. Even though he agreed that a large proportion of the materials are unrealistic, he still thinks it can teach some of the basics. Besides recognising them as being 'fake', all four male participants noted that watching sexually explicit materials can turn into a compulsion. Andrew further explained:

> It kind of is addictive, because when you watched it once, you want to watch it next day, and the next day after that because you want to recreate the buzz you had the first time. And you think it can happen again. (Andrew, 16)

In addition, boys explained that pornographic materials should not be banned from free distribution just because younger individuals can come across it. They agree that pop-ups are inappropriate, and people online should come across such materials only if they deliberately search for it; but their main critique was towards parents that do not take upon the initiative to explain to their children porn is fake. The lack of appropriate education from offline sources was also brought up in another discussion by Brook. She also believes the responsibility lies within parents and the school to explain both, what a consensual act is between two people, and that sexually explicit materials are unrealistic in the way they present appearances as well as the physical act.

With one exception, all female participants approached the topic of pornography with more pessimistic views compared to boys. Their general arguments were that porn creates unrealistic expectations of the body and the sexual interaction between people. Summed up by May:

> The stuff that they show in porn are so unrealistic. The consent is always really kind of blurry or outright just not there. Also, people that are in porn they don't have bodies that are indicative of the norm. Frequently there are…there are so many example…but literally their genitals do not look like how normal people genitals. So, if you are a kid who can access the internet freely, which most kids can, and you find that sort of stuff and you think yours are supposed to look like that, that is terrible. (May, 17)

Other girls also expressed concerns about what porn teaches men in general. According to Emma:

> Yeah…and what they see, they think "oh this is how you do it" and later on it creates this lack of the whole love aspect. Men then also see women as just items, objects. Means to an end, just get the willies wet. That's what it is. It becomes an obsession,

> and all they want to do is do that, or "Oh how many have you been with, had sex with. (Emma, 16)

Further Angela added:

> It can damage adult relationships as well, because if you are in a relationship with someone and you are committed to them on 100% and you find out they have been watching porn, finding pleasure elsewhere, it is kind of disloyal. It is like they don't see you as so important figure, or don't find satisfaction in you. (Angela, 17)

Although girls' arguments were mostly with respect to males' consumption of pornography, they also agreed that to an extent it is a requirement for boys to be familiar with the matter (e.g. engage in conversations with male peers) Emma believes that at a young age watching porn might not even be out of curiosity or self-exploration, but a form of social conformity as everyone is talking about. In addition, Gail suggested:

> Also, I think that boys feel the need to make the first move. Boys have to have particular confidence. So, I think if they were to watch pornography maybe that will give them that confidence. Because that is what our society pressures them. Men have to be the ones to ask the women out. If they want to get engaged, they have to propose to the woman. (Gail, 17)

Concerns were also expressed about the government strategy to deal with pornography. Participants in the LGBT+ group located in a large city in the North West of England agreed that due to the nature of the Internet it is not realistic to believe all materials can be taken down, or that a particular age group can be restricted from viewing it. Further, Brook suggested that people with rare sexual fantasies and fetishes can satisfy these needs mainly through online porn. On the one hand, they can find materials online faster and easier compared to searching for a suitable partner offline; and on the other, they might purposefully decide to leave a particular fantasy just as that. In addition, Brook suggested that in countries with less freedom of sexual expression, sexually explicit materials can help individuals from sexual minorities to self-discover. Even though, girls do not agree with the mainstream

representation of sex in pornographic materials, half of the female participants acknowledge it is not inherently bad and serves a function. What all of them agreed, however, is that there is a need for better education, so young people can interpret correctly the information they come across.

While concerns about young people's sexual practices and relationships are not new, concerns about the influence of the online environment on young people's sexual health, behaviours and practices have grown considerably (Livingstone, Haddon, Vincent, Mascheroni, and Ólafsson, 2014; Martin, 2017). In my conversation with young people it became apparent that sex education from official sources is available either too late or in inaccessible formats. Most participants reported that often contemporary education focuses on the risks associated with sex, rather than offering practical suggestions on what they are really curious about. As a result, young people relied upon different sources to make sense of sex and their sexuality. Also, among other source, most students reported using the internet to access information related to their sexual health such as googling the symptoms of pregnancy or signs of puberty. According to Martin (2017) the most common barriers for young people to access sexual health information online are non-relatable sources, big volume of information that can be interpreted in a wrong way (open further doubts or cause concerns) and difficult to navigate websites. The author, also, found that there is a particular stigma among young people to be seen accessing sexual health information, which can also explain why some of the participants were reluctant to discuss the topic and provide their own accounts. In fact, in our discussions it appeared that many students have reservations in searching for information online, as engines can produce too many results, which can be overwhelming. Yet, participants varied in their confidence to search and identify online sources. Specifically, LGBT+ participants shared that the internet helped them learn a lot about their sexuality. On the one hand, they have received guidance from support groups

leaders in where to look for such information, and on the other, they were able to access information that is hardly available offline. Magee, Bigelow, DeHaan, & Mustanski (2012) suggested that the internet plays a central role for LGBT+ young people as traditionally settings (e.g. school, family, peers) often fall short in providing sufficient sexual health information. In addition, platforms such as Twitter and YouTube are often used by LGBT+ bloggers to post useful updates on challenges, personal experiences and advices related to their sexuality.

Perhaps the most controversial topic related to the impact of the Internet on young people, is the easy access to pornographic materials. As a result, research on the relationship between adolescents' exposure to sexual content and their sexual developmentn has advanced greatly (e.g. Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Attwood, Smith, & Barker, 2018; Koletić, Kohut & Štulhofer, 2019). One of the main arguments against the wide spread distribution of pornographic materials is that they act as a guideline for young people. Said otherwise, images from porn can impact individual's sexual scripts; informing their actions, anticipated results as well as providing cues as to how they and their preferred sexual partner should look (Wright, 2011). While discussing the topic with my groups of young people, there was an apparent divide in the opinions between male and female participants. Boys willing to discuss the topic held more positive attitudes towards porn. Although acknowledging sexually explicit materials can be addictive and some of the online contents are not recommended for younger viewers, they also proposed that it helps people explore further their sexuality. In turn, girls expressed their concerns related to porn viewing referring mainly to the unrealistic representation of sexual acts and the objectified bodies. In their opinion, since mainstream porn was created for male viewers there were much more stereotypes placed on women to deal with. Rothman, Kaczmarsky, Burke, Jansen, & Baughman (2015) found that women experience pressure to perform particular (novel) sexual

acts after watching pornography themselves. However, results of a longitudinal investigation among adolescents showed that viewing sexually explicit materials can result in sexual uncertainty in boys too, as they naturally compare their own sexual skills to the superior skills of the actors (Sun et al, 2016).

According to Peter & Valkenburg (2010) the effect of sexually explicit materials on young people can be understood based on their response; the affective response state describes the cases in which young people enjoy sexually explicit materials and view it as entertainment, while the cognitive response is when they use such materials for its perceived utility. The affective response state can be characterised as the extent to which the viewer experience positive feelings from the content. Also, such individuals are found to develop sexual beliefs as shown in the contents they engage with (Vandenbosch, van Oosten, Johanna, & Peter, 2018). In contrast, the cognitive response state is characterised by the effectiveness of sexually explicit materials as a source of practical information (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010). Viewers who have the latter approach to sexually explicit materials evaluate content based on how much they correspond to real life situations and more realistic materials are more likely to affect their sexual beliefs. In addition, Kaczmarsky, Burke, Jansen, & Baughman (2015) have concluded that the affective response state may precede the cognitive, and therefore compromise the judgment of those who want to view 'realistic' content.

Even though a large proportion of the past research treats the viewing of sexually explicit materials as an activity to stimulate arousal based on the exposure-effect model, Attwood, Smith, & Barker (2018) consider it as a much more complex phenomenon. In their views, it can be a way for young people to understand their own feelings, sexual identity, practices and bodies. Such engagement can open up a discussion among peers and stimulate an exchange of views and experiences, which subsequently will broaden their knowledge. In other cases, it can reduce stigma for those whose fantasies does not correspond to mainstream

ideals, and allow people to explore themselves sexually on their own or as part of a relationship (Hald & Štulhofer, 2016). Similarly, a majority of the participants acknowledged the effectiveness of sexually explicit materials in providing valuable information to those who are young and/or inexperienced. Therefore, besides the downsides of sexually explicit materials discussed with young people, no one could classify the practice as inherently bad. Rather, young people agreed that in order to make good judgment and use sexually explicit materials in a productive way, government, parents and academics should put collective efforts in educating students on sexual topics.

The Internet society has arguably brought new dimension to sexuality through both extending traditional sexual practices (e.g. limitless access to X-rated materials, sexual health information) and creating new forms of sexual expression (e.g. sexting, cybersex). In turn, this shift of the sexual landscape has sparked a wave of concerns regarding the sexual development of young people. Substantial proportions of past research have approached the subject without considering the changes as a part of a larger social and cultural revolution. Yet, sexual learning is no longer a product of only traditional forces, and there is a need for more thorough and progressive account on the matter (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Bragg, Renold, Ringrose, & Jackson, 2018).

The focus group discussions in the present research were designed and carried out as the initial step in understanding the role of the Internet in young peoples' lives. The chapter aimed to provide an overview of participants complete engagement with the virtual world in order to understand its role as a source of sexual knowledge. The significant message from the focus groups is that contemporary teenagers are living in an augmented reality where virtual and analogue experiences are equally authentic and meaningful. Therefore, to understand how younger generations make sense of their emerging sexuality and how the Internet affects

contemporary sexual youth culture, we need to understand how all sources of relevant information (traditional and alternative) interact with one another.

CHAPTER 5

SOURCES OF SEXUAL KNOWLEDGE

Individual Interviews Results and Discussion

As it became apparent from the previous chapter (Chapter 4), contemporary youth culture is not being lost due to the rise of technologies and the Internet, but more like appropriated by it. Whilst the new affordances can turn unfavourable and there are many unanticipated side effects that can result from it, young people are being offered unseen opportunity to stay connected and explore on a global level, regardless of physical location. Through the Internet they are presented with a growing body of information that has proven its overwhelming power over almost every sector of their daily lives (e.g. music, fashion, education, socialisation) (Bennett & Robards, 2014). Therefore, in order to understand the cultural significance of the Internet and digital technologies on young people's sexual development, it is important to look without a bias on how their web experiences evolve. However, in order to make sense of the present situation, it is important to explore the significance and the interaction of all relevant sources (offline and online).

As anticipated, discussing sexuality and sexual education with young people proved to be very worthwhile through individual interviewing. All fifteen participants from the individual interviews opened up about the sources and practices involved in their own quest for sexual maturation, providing unique access to private experience. Initial conversations evolved around traditional sources such as family, school, and friends/romantic partners. Even though young people acknowledged the importance of family and educators at providing certain normative beliefs on the matter, they also addressed a lot of critique (i.e. insufficient information, outdated concepts, focused on risk-prevention, censure). On the contrary, friends and romantic partners were described as playing an important part through open conversations and emotional support. This was especially common among my LGBT+ participants, who

initially opened up about their sexuality to friends. Moving from traditional to alternative sources, young people described a very complex and diverse use of the Web for sexual knowledge and experiences, classifying it as an important point of reference in evaluating information.

In the following chapter, I begin with exploring the impact of family relations and conversations about sex with parents and siblings on young peoples' understanding on the matter. After that, we discussed the SRE curriculum at school and the role of educator in guiding them through their sexual maturation. Later, we go over the sexual socialisation with peers and romantic partners, discussing the topics they discuss and the feedback they receive from it. Further, our conversations evolve around the role of the Internet on their understanding about sex and sexuality, talking about sexual health sources and strategies for evaluation of such information, YouTube vloggers and Instagram influencers that promote sex positive education through personal experiences, and the influence of online communities (LGBT+ people, fatphobia). At the end of the chapter, we discuss the consumption of sexually explicit materials online and what might the outcomes resulting from it for contemporary young people.

Offline Sources for Sexual Learning

Sexual socialisation is the process by which young people obtain a lot of their sexual knowledge. As we will see from the conversations with young people, at their age sexual learning is less about the practical act and more about forming attitudes, beliefs and values about identity, relationships and intimacy. Moore and Rosenthal (2006) argue although biological factors are involved in young people's sexual development, social factors also play a significant role. However, not all social factors have the same impact, and some sources might be more influential than others or emphasise different aspects of the sexual self. Therefore, in order to understand what influence young peoples' sexual beliefs and

consequently behavior, it is important to identify all sources and the messages they deliver. First we started by discussing and evaluating the traditional offline sources (i.e. family/sibling, school, friends/romantic partners).

Family/ Sibling as a Source of Sexual Knowledge

The social order of each culture can be found in the family structure, and parents are the primary sources from which children obtain norms and values (Georgas, 2003). Similarly, in the context of sexuality, parents' sexual values and attitudes are the earliest to which children are exposed and provide the foundation for subsequent sexual development (Lukolo & van Dyk, 2014; 2015). Therefore, the nature of the family and marital relations, conversations about sex, and maintaining open discussion with the child can have a big impact on young people's sexual development (Miller, 2002).

As noted in Part I of the Literature review Fitzharris and Werner-Wilson (2004) suggested that there are three themes of sexual communication between parents and young people. In our conversations, it became apparent that most participants have established a sexual conversation with a parent or older sibling, but feel uncomfortable going into details. 'The Big Talk' and the 'Tea Talk' were more likely to occur. For example, when asked about discussing biological/physiological changes that occurred in her body through puberty GiGi (19) said: "For some stuff, like body odor family is a good starting point, it is not an embarrassing topic really to discuss with your mum and dad". Similarly, talking about contraception and STI Gab shared:

> It really depends what kind of family you have. If they are religious, then they might not react well to it. Could do, but in some families it could be awkward. If it was me, I'd probably talk to my parents, if I had questions. But we have this kind of relationship. (Gab, 17)

Also, when discussing Gia's outlook on sexual conversations with parents she said: "Yeah I am quite close to my parents, so I think so- yeah. I talk about stuff like that with my mum so I feel that I am not clueless. Plus, your parents have your best interest" (Gia, 16). In other cases, sex education at home came as a warning without further explanation or discussion of sexual matters. For instance, Pam said: "Yeah, so my dad, he is quite protective of me. He will say that he was my age once, and know what boys are all about" (Pam, 17). This, however, is not the case with all young people that took part in the study. One of the participants Hannah was brought up in a deeply religious household and for her sexual conversation with family was absent:

> With my siblings I have discussed some stuff, not very openly but enough to get an idea. But generally, I don't really like talking about it. I don't have this relationship with them. I don't know if it is because of nervousness, but it always these crude jokes or they make me uncomfortable... so you don't go into the conversation. (Hannah, 18)

Besides families that avoid or neglect sexual topics as it might contradict their beliefs, there are also parents that find it hard to approach the subject emotionally. For instance, when initiating a conversation about sexually explicit materials with her mother Molly shared:

> Recently I spoke to my mum about it, but she seems to get more awkward than me. She said, "I don't want to talk about that", and I am like "who am I supposed to talk to". I would never be able to talk with my dad about it, because he will be just really awkward. I have spoken to my brother recently, just generally about sex. I think, as you get older you get more comfortable taking about it, but my mum is still uncomfortable. I don't know why, because she is like 50. (Molly, 17)

Probably the extent to which young people feel comfortable talking to a family member about sex is best captured by Kirsty and GiGi. When asked about discussing sex topics with family, Kirsty said:

> Yeah I will talk to my mum probably. My mum is really open though, I mean sexually. She got new sex toy for Valentine and she was showing it and asking me "aww what do you think". Or she will talk about sex in front of all my friends and

family. Like my friend is giddy and she'll be like "Aww you want me …. John, don't you". You need to stop mum! She will slap his bum and stuff… and I am "please just leave him alone."(Kirsty, 17)

However, even though Kirsty seemed to be able to freely discussion sexual topics with her mother, it turned out not everything is open for discussion. In the process of making sense of her own sexuality, she found out she is not strictly attracted to just boys. Further she elaborated:

> Basically, my family members are all Mormon but I am not too fussed about labels. I just think that nowadays love should be whatever it is. If you are a boy and you like boys, you should just go for it. So, I was searching stuff like "Is it normal to like girls if you are definitely straight". It is a No-No in my house, anything other than a boy. I didn't tell my mum anything about that, because she is obviously…she is just weirded out about it because her experiences with sexuality have never been amazing. She believes she just be with one man all her life and that's it. Or at least you should be in a long-term relationship with him. (Kirsty, 17)

Similarly, GiGi explained that the circumstances in her family prevented her from receiving sexual guidance from her parents, but to an extent she could rely on her older sibling. In her own words:

> Personally I never had that talk with my… well I only have my dad. I think if my mum was still around probably would have been able to talk about more things. She was more open to stuff like that. Again, I had an older sister so I was asking her questions, and she would explain stuff to me. To be fair, she was my 'go to' person for most things. I think that if people have that relationship with parents, then they should definitely do that. I never had that… My sister, for example, she is my best friend… she is sex positive and she is OK with sex but to a point. I don't think we talk much about this stuff because she still feels quite uncomfortable. (GiGi, 19)

Past research examining sexual disclosure between siblings tend to be very descriptive in nature. A large body of prior research has focused on positive and negative outcomes for adolescents associated with the sexual activity of older sibling. For example, an early

publication found that young people with a sexually active older sibling are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse compared to adolescents with nonsexually active older sibling (Kowal & Blinn-Pike, 2004). Others have found that an older sister who is a teen mother increased the likelihood for the younger sibling to become pregnant at an early age as well (East, Reyes, & Horn, 2007). More recent studies found a correlation between sexually active older siblings and adolescent's own sexual initiation, but also indicated the role of older siblings as a confidant and mentor (e.g. promoting safe sex, better communication with intimate partner) (Killoren & Roach, 2014). However, according to Killoren, Campione-Barr, Jones & Giron (2019), in some cases older siblings might view sexual socialisation with younger sibling inappropriate, as naturally the younger one will have fewer experiences than the older.

For the most part my participants indicated receiving guidance from family members in the process of learning about sex and sexuality, but they often perceived these conversations as narrow. In some households, members found it difficult to approach sexual topics out of shyness, while others were guided by worries for young person's wellbeing. Besides those who felt inadequate or were biased, there were families unable to provide sufficient sexual education to their children simply because they are lacking the knowledge themselves. This was a view shared by Ema:

> My parents don't really talk with me because they know I am gay. What are they going to say to me about gay sex?! I know more than them probably. We never really had that sort of conversation. (Ema, 17)

In addition, even though some topics might not be open for discussion in a particular household, parents still transfer knowledge and attitudes to their children (either passively or actively). For instance, Molly shared her process of understanding and making sense of the LGBT+ community:

They might teach now, but when I was younger no one talked about this stuff. I was brought up to think that gay people are weird. It was 14, when I started to know more about it. Until then I had my mum saying "That's weird" when she sees gay couple kissing. (Molly, 17)

In my interviews with young people it became apparent that parents (especially mother-daughter conversations) take upon the initiative to discuss sexual topics, but the quality of the discussions is sometimes insufficient and young people have to search for additional sources. According to Moore & Rosenthal (2006) in some households, young people receive early on the message that sexual topics should be discussed carefully, or as in the case of Hannah avoided at all costs: "With my siblings I have discussed some stuff, not very openly but enough to get an idea. But generally, I don't really like talking about it. I don't have this relationship with them" (Hannah, 18). As a result, the hesitancy to talk on sexual topics and lack of confidence in doing so can further reinforce negative sexual messages of unacceptability and prohibition (Stone & Ingham, 2002), and those families reluctant to encourage openness about sex and relationships may very well be contributing to negative sexual health outcomes. In contrast, willingness and availability to talk about sex and relationships has been associated with young peoples' competence in making healthy and informed choices (Stone, Ingham, & Gibbins, 2013). In general, the analyses of qualitative data revealed that the majority of child-parent sexual socialisation evolved around the aspects of sexuality associated with biological changes, STI and contraception, with very little active efforts to carry out the so-called "Open talk" addressing matters such as sexual orientation, pleasure and sexual aggression. Regardless of the individual standpoint, whether parents were unable to address the subject emotionally, they were being motivated by their fears, or lacked sufficient knowledge themselves forced young people to search for additional sources.

For those whose parents were unable to address various issues related to the sexual education of young people, the school comes as the next reliable source of knowledge on the

matter. Given parents involvement, promoting Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) in school can broaden pupils' perceptions, giving them confidence to resist cultural pressures around sexual behaviour and gender expression as well as improving their decision making, social and emotional skills (Alldred, Fox, & Kulpa, 2016). At present, there is international and cross-disciplinary agreement that schools should play a central role in the sexual education of young people, yet, the subject is currently still under much considerations and debate. The main reason for this is not so much the opposition of various officials and institution, but the resistance of many parents who disagree with the curriculum (Formby & Donovan, 2020). Specifically, policy makers in the UK have required assistance from parents and/or communities in designing the school SRE curriculum, which according to some has resulted in overestimation of parental opposition as the critical voices were considered more than the supportive ones (Alldred, Fox, & Kulpa, 2016).

School as a Source of Sexual Knowledge

Although, in recent years a lot of changes were made to the SRE curriculum in the UK, my interviews with young people indicated that further work should be done in order to adjust the subject to young people's needs. Same as parents, schools also transferred knowledge and attitudes to their students, both actively by discussing the subject, and passively by responding to occurrences and/or evading responsibility. Generally, all participants agreed that the school served a purpose in their sex education, but on a very basic level. According to Gia:

> Well, in my school before year 10, we had a class called PSE (Personal and Social Education) which teaches you about social issues like consent, sexuality, and all that stuff, so it feels that it is preparing you about what might come up… I feel that this helped. Not in any details, but at least you are kind of informed of what to expect. (Gia, 16)

Further, Gigi shared:

In primary school, you learn about reproduction, or puberty and hormonal changes. Then in college, you don't really learn about sex properly. It always has to do with making babies or being healthy. You never hear about masturbation for fun and etc. Also, it always about boys' orgasm not girls. This is a personal frustration I have. There is not really gay sex education. It might be just a sentence somewhere but that's it. I don't think I had any idea how gay people have sex until I was much older. So there is sex ed at school, but it is more 'don't get pregnant'. I think they should play much bigger role in sex education. Still a long way to go. (GiGi, 19)

Gia and GiGi admitted that the school made them aware of important issues such as consent and how to cope with certain changes occurring throughout puberty, but equally, both participants found that knowledge somehow limited. A possible reason for the partial information provided during SRE at schools was suggested by Hannah:

I would say school is again looking at the negative side of it. Like 'Oh don't get pregnant or get a disease'. It doesn't speak about losing your virginity, or where you might find someone to talk to about it if you can't do it with family and friends for whatever reason. Or even what happens afterwards. I would say school talks about practical things or the more negative side. (Hannah, 18)

According to Pound, Langford, & Campbell (2016) our society is anxious about young people's sexual activity, and teachers make no exception. Sex education is often negative, heteronormative, and out of touch, which in addition is taught by poorly trained and embarrassed teachers. Instead of implementing a wide range of sources and strategies in their teaching, information is presented in a textbook driven manner, providing young people with numerous facts (Herbert & Lohrmann, 2011). Therefore, instead of providing learners with a solid basis that has the potential to guide them throughout their life, they are left with insufficient knowledge that will most likely fade away instantaneously. As shared by Ema:

In sex education we had a really catholic teacher that had to go through PowerPoint bullet points legally. She was sort of going through it with her head down. Saying is as

> quickly as possible, so we never did anything in depth. Just 'tick the box' kind of
> thing. (Ema, 17)

Besides changes that have to be made on the topics included in the curriculum, such statements highlight how important is the delivery of such information. It seems that at present the nature of the relationship between teacher and students has to be reevaluated, as well as the roles and boundaries during SRE classes. Past research that has paid attention to the relationship between students and their SRE teacher suggests that to make an impact, school-based sex education should be delivered in an open and honest manner (Hirst, 2013; Pound, Langford, & Campbell, 2016; Dobson et al., 2017;). However, an open, relaxed and more informal approach is difficult to occur within the traditional hierarchical relationship between educators and their students.

Moving away from how such classes are delivered, the bigger problem is still the mandatory topics included in the curriculum. At present, young people's sexual health (including consent and abusive relationships) as well as gender and sexual identity are areas of growing research and advocacy (Formby & Donovan, 2020). Naturally, this has led to some much needed changes in the educational program, and specifically bringing awareness and acceptance of LGBT+ people. However, as the current guidance states that each school should determine how to do this (Department for Education, 2019), and given recent protests against LGBT inclusive curricula (e.g. Parveen, 2019; Mbakwe, 2019), the degree of LGBT+ inclusivity is still uncertain. The lack of appropriate information about non heterosexual and gender identities came up in my conversations with young people as well. For instance, Sarah said:

> I feel like they should teach more about understanding. About sexual understanding
> because people have a lot of stigma like confusion around it. I feel like they should
> teach that more. Like transgender people and I know uni have been doing a lot of
> things like helping understand trans sexual people but not pan sexual or not trans
> people. (Sarah, 17)

Further, Molly elaborated on the same point:

> I just think that in education we need to teach more stuff about LGBT people, to prevent lots of people feeling that it is abnormal. I still have people in my classes that say bad stuff about gay people, because they haven't been educated. If there is a boy in class who is gay, some of the other might not like him just because of that. Because girls are ok with a girl being lesbian, and guys as well. I have spoken to two of my guy friends, and they don't like gay boys. So, it should be brought up at school and made normal. That's where a lot of bullying comes from. (Molly, 17)

The gaps in the SRE curriculum with respect to LGBT+ identities result in much more than a generation of young people who are ill-informed. The lack of appropriate information nurtures homophobia and stereotyping which can be crucial for many young students. As in the case of Kirsty, it left her confused and in a search of further sources: "However my school was not great at all, people were a bit homophobic. So I couldn't be open at school, I couldn't be open at home. So when I told my friend, and she said its fine, it made me feel better" (Kirsty, 17).

Since the sexual landscape is shifting due to changing attitudes towards sexuality, greater variation in sexual behaviour and increased gender equality, today more than ever there is a need for more comprehensive SRE. Yet, my discussions with young people clearly indicated that the family and the school are far from being main sources of such knowledge. As a result, the wider social arena becomes even more powerful influence in shaping their attitudes, beliefs and opinion on the matter.

Friends/ Romantic Partner as a Source of Sexual Knowledge

Throughout adolescence, there is a natural shift from primarily family interactions to peer socialisation (L'Engle & Jackson, 2008). At that age, young people seek autonomy and independence, and the friend group becomes a new setting for cognitive, emotional and social development (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008). The lack of direct supervision makes social

gathering with friends a very powerful source of information on a range of issues. Particularly, in the context of sexuality, individuals are able to exchange experiences and discuss topics in a more comprehensive (e.g. less censure, greater details) way as opposed to conversations with family members and/or teachers (Steinberg, 2010). In my interviews with young people it was noted that sexual discussions are commonly carried out with friends. In the case of Gia, conversations with friends were a valuable point of reference for evaluating one's sexual knowledge and experiences. In her own words:

> I have a group of close friends, and we have discussed some of these topics. Just personal experiences with this stuff. I feel it has helped because it makes it less wired. It is good to know that your friends are on about the same stuff. (Gia, 16)

Like Gia, Geece also stated that she and her friends kept an open discussion about sexual experiences, and although there are certain limits she would not risk to cross, she has more freedom talking to them than a family member. In her own words:

> Yeah, definitely the sexual stuff. With friends, we share stuff with each other. Just talk about our experiences, and things we are worried about. Well saying that I would always put a limit on the stuff that I would say because I don't want to be embarrassed. So, more basic things, not in so much depth. And also I would not share even that much with family. (Geece, 19)

According to Cillessen, Schwartz, & Mayeux (2011) since puberty is a very dynamic period, involving a lot of experimentation and self-discovery, peers are seen as more approving of life choices compared to family members. Many parents experience anxiety and denial when thinking about their child's sexuality. As a result, they often focus on providing factual and 'orthodox' information about sex and neglect discussion of emotions, sexual pleasure, and contemporary values. Therefore, failing to appreciate modern-day trends in youth culture might create further drift between generations and turn young people to each other for support and guidance when making sense of the love scene and their own sexuality (Ashcraft & Murray, 2016; 2017). In this train of thoughts Pam gave an example of how and what she

discusses with her friend group: "Me and my friends talk about it. We are very open sexually. When we send nudes, we tell each other. But there have to be that trust, you won't just talk with anyone about it" (Pam, 17). It seems that talking about sex for young people, is equally about who can be trusted with such information as well as who can offer understanding and open discussion. GiGi's response is yet another affirmation that today's young people see sexuality as something natural and discussions that evolve around it are not uncommon among friends. GiGi said:

> I guess we attract certain people that are similar to us. I don't think I can be friend with someone who is shameful about sex, I don't think I will respond well. But generally I will say that my close friends are similar to me. My boyfriend and his friends use sex more for humour. I don't know whether that is a gender thing or just them, I am not sure. (GGi, 19)

For some young people, sexual development during adolescence includes same-sex attraction and experiences. Findings indicate that information related to LGBT+ sexuality is not readily available from family and schools, and such individuals often lack the initial emotional support and practical guidance (Kubicek, Beyer, Weiss, Iverson, & Kipke, 2010). Unlike, other minority groups (e.g. racial, ethnic, religious minorities), most LGBT+ individuals are not raised among similar other, and they have to make sense of their sexuality seeking support from the wider social arena. According to Kimmel & Plante (2004) young people with non-heterosexual identities have to go to through a process of "closeting" and "coming out" in order to act upon important aspects of their identity. Past research has indicated that revealing LGBT+ identity to significant others (e.g. family, friends) can free people from conflicting feelings associated with their sexuality and promote positive self-evaluation (e.g. Riley, 2010; Harrison, 2003; Baiocco, Laghi, Di Pomponio, & Nigito, 2011; 2012). On the contrary, concealing sexual orientation can cause a serious distress with further implications such as isolation, depression, low self-worth, and mental health complications

(Cocker, Hafford-Letchfield, Ryan, & Barran, 2018). In my discussions with young people, we found that friends (and romantic parners) play a particularly crucial role for LGBT+ individuals. For instance, Sarah shared:

> I had a girlfriend in high school but she never wanted to come out. There was a group of us that were 'just do it and it will make you feel better' and she did end up coming out and it did feel so much better for her. That was good. (Sarah, 17)

Similarly, GiGi (19) shared: "First person I went to talk to was a friend of mine that I knew was gay but was not out at the time. Basically I came out to her first, and then she came out to me. It was a mutual and quite sweet."

The majority of my LGBT+ participants indicated that they first opened up about their sexuality to a close friend, and normally this other friend also does not confirm to the dominant constructions of (hetero) sexuality. This is not surprising since the reaction of parents and other family members at the moment of identity disclosures is critical for both, the LGBTQ individual and the future of family relations. Past research has shown that the response from family members can have a tremendous impact on LGBT+ people's mental and emotional health (Zhao et al., 2016; Riley, 2010). Particularly, the period of adolescence is considered as the most crucial time for LGBT+ youth with higher rates of suicide thoughts or attempts, substance abuse, depression, and higher rates of victimisation (compared to heterosexual and cis peers). Therefore, it is possible that while still accepting their LGBT+ identity, young people will seek support from individuals that share similar values related to their sexuality or gender identity. The importance of support and shared values is well depicted by the responses of an LGBT+ participant of mine. Through her own experience, Molly concluded:

> I know that when I figured out my sexuality, the first time I kind of though "I am bisexual, but I'm not really sure". First time I really panicked about it, and I confide in my friend, but she…sounds really bad…but she threatened to tell people… And I

thought this was happening because I did something wrong. But now I know she was just not really there for me. (Molly, 17)

Besides of being rejected and threatened to be exposed by her friend, Molly found further limitations in discussing her sexuality with her heterosexual friend:

I feel like when I talk with my straight friends about my sexuality, they get uncomfortable or think I fancy them. This is never the case, because it's like talking to a boy. It doesn't mean you fancy them. So I only talk to a friend of mine that is lesbian. I send her like, Hayley Kiyoko music; she sings a lot of bisexual stuff. Talking about that makes me feel better. It is nice to be with people that are same as you. (Molly, 17)

Talking about sex and oone's sexuality with friends is an additional source for sexual learning among young people. A picture that emerged during the individual interviewing showed that friends (and romantic partner) played an important role in providing knowledge and support related to the different aspects of sex and sexuality. In addition, frank conversations appeared available mainly through friends as opposed to parents and other adults (siblings, educators). In the cases of LGBT+ young people, friends were the first people to open up to about sexual orientation. As mentioned previously, LGBT+ young people go through a very unique array of challenges, and growing up they rarely have similar others to guide them. Therefore, for them meeting other LGBT+ individuals was a key to gathering information and making sense of their own feelings. And even though, young people (regardless of their sexuality) are becoming increasingly accepting of sexual and gender diversity (Bragg, Renold, Ringrose, & Jackson, 2018), some of the stigma and misperceptions still persist.

Online Sources for Sexual Learning

While factors such as family, school, friends and peers are traditionally involved in shaping one's sexuality, today, with the increasing salience of sexual themes online, the

Internet has turned into a 'super peer' for young people (Elmore, Scull & Kupersmidt, 2017). The superpeer theory applies particularly to adolescents and suggests that media can exercise even greater influence than their peers; with the main argument being that media affects the entire youth culture (Strasburger, 2007). In the context of online media, information about sex can be found in many different forms, ranging from academic articles and health care blogs to sexually explicit professional/amateur videos and private exchanges. Prior research signifies that young people has taken advantage of the new affordances offered by the virtual world, engaging daily with multiple sources in a passive or active way, intentionally or by accident (e.g. Attwood& Smith, 2011; Van Oosten, 2015; Koletić, 2017; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Smith et al., 2016). The complexity of the Internet as a source of sex education and as a space for sexual exploration was best captured by GiGi's response:

> I came across online porn very young I think. Early high school, late primary school which is 11-12. But that was more out of intrigue because sex is a weird thing. I was looking at it, think "aww should be doing that". But then as I got older I use it more to explore…I think I would watch lesbian porn and heterosexual porn that might be both, influencing or reflecting my sexuality. So porn is a big one, I learned a lot. (GiGi, 19)

GiGi openly admitted that watching porn played a big part in exploring her sexual self; however, she further described many other ways in which the Internet assisted her inquiry:

> Other places online were Tinder and social media. Tinder was a big one for me. I don't think it made me Bi but led me to the realisation. Also, coming across images online, even non-sexual ones. Scrolling through Instagram, you think over people you find attractive and you are constantly evaluating stuff in your head… Maturing sexually a big thing for me were sex toys. Exploring different sides of sex and pleasure, like lube, toys, everything… Probably this is improving a lot of people's sex lives. I don't think I would never really have had the confidence to buy a vibrator without the influence of the Internet. (GiGi, 19)

Q&A Sites as a Source of Sexual Knowledge

From my interviews it became apparent that the Internet is used for both, as a primal source of sexual information as well as an additional source to expand on previous knowledge. In both cases what makes it particularly valuable for information gathering is the quick access, the variety of sources and the anonymity provided. Even though, my data so far suggested that friends are the biggest confidants, and young people feel free to discuss sexual topics with each other it appears that there are certain gaps in their communication that can be filled by the Internet. For example, GiGi (19): "I'd say stuff that are less embarrassing find out through friends and family, for the rest try online. Although, none of this should be embarrassing". Similarly, Hannah shared:

> I remember once someone has talked about erogenous zones… you know sometimes when someone says something, and you don't know what the word means, but then the other people around you know what it is, so you think it's not the time to ask. So that time someone said a joke, and everyone was laughing, but I couldn't understand what was funny about it. So, that I have done many times. Just searched online stuff that came up in conversations with others. (Hannah, 18)

Further, participants reported looking for information related to their changing bodies, contraception, or signs of pregnancy. Although, they admitted starting with a simple Google search, majority explained that they go through a number of sources, but are critically evaluating each of them. Among the most visited pages for sexual health information were Q&A website (i.e. Quara, Yahoo answers, Ask), Social Media (i.e. Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat) and the NHS site. One of my participants, Sarah, described information she looked up online:

> Yes, I have searched before contraception and different options available that are effective. Also, different positions and stuff. When I searched for information like that for contraception I looked at the side effect that could affect me in the long run and if it will affect your fertility when you are older. And then when I searched positions, it

> is like what is fun for my boyfriend… just the normal ones, which we could explore
> more. (Sarah, 17)

Sarah also provided a possible platform she might look at for such information:

> On the Snapchat there is a new one that you could click on it and it directs you to
> another website…There is like a links you can click on. I can't remember which it was
> but it is a quite a lot of these things on. One day I was just skipping things through and
> I saw it and I click on it and it directed me. I was just looking down, just browsing
> through it and it looked interesting. I feel like I wanted to try. (Sarah, 17)

Kirsty also gave an account of what her typical search might look like:

> I've googled about pregnancy… Probably like 10 minutes. I end up at the NHS site. It
> was kind of, like what all the symptoms are, or I should say signs, because pregnancy
> is not really a disease. I went through them one by one, and then it said how you can
> prevent it at the bottom…obviously like condom, pills, implant…and it gave you all
> these birth control things. I also went to this site… 'Ask' or something. You get
> people writing down their experience and lots of links to other sites. It's like a blog.
> (Kirsty, 17)

Kirsty's response touched upon two major themes in young people's involvement with the
Web for sexual purposes, medical sites and Q&A blogs. It is still unclear as to what the
universal requirements are for qualified online source of sex education and promotion of
sexual health (Ruan, Raeside, Singleton, Redfern, & Partridge, 2020). At present the
minimum standard is for the content to be written and edited by health care specialists,
avoiding conclusive diagnosis or referrals to treatment without further evaluation (Steiner,
Pampati, Rasberry & Liddon, 2019). Official sources such as the NHS site are undoubtedly a
quality source in terms of the accuracy and scope of the addressed topics. In addition, to
prevent people from treating symptoms and conditions on their own, information is carefully
selected and besides suggestions for further evaluation, such sites often offer words of
encouragement to ease apprehension. Among my participants there was a general consensus

that official medical sites are helpful and young people can obtain useful knowledge from them. For example, Sarah revealed:

> I normally use the Internet when I am curious about stuff. When I heard about what sex was so I search about it online… I was generally interested in what, how and when. I visited many medical sites, as they have information about everything. Personal blogs as well where random people can give their opinion and stuff. I feel that the medical ones helped the most because they give a lot of factual information. But the ones with the personal opinions, I feel that also helped because it was more of a perspective, it was bias but it was not too formal. (Sarah, 17)

Gia suggested that she learned a lot through medical sites and as an example of those provided Quora, NHS site, and Yahoo answers. Unlike the NHS site, the other two are considered as Q&A platforms. Quora is a mega website, with user generated content, where you can pose a question and get numerous replies from all kinds of people (Web analytics, 2019). Some of the replies are from actual experts in the field, but many are from people who are not qualified. However, the website has a rather sophisticated algorithm which displays answers according to how helpful they are (based on a number of factors). Yahoo answer on the other hand, are also user generated, but people are incognito (unlike Quora that encourages user identification). Answers are displayed in a chronological order and there is no procedure to filter bogus or misleading answers. Even though Q&A blogs as well as Social Media platforms are generally considered less reliable sources for sexual and health information (due to credibility issues) (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015), what makes them particularly appealing to young people is the ability to ask specific questions, obtain information at a convenient time and place, and receive not only personalised responses but also responses portraying different sides of an issue. In addition, such sites are normally unaffected by censorship and explain issues in more comprehensible, nonscientific way. While factual accuracy and bias can be drawbacks, the sheer volume of answers found in these websites guarantees that some answers will be found.

Social Media as a Source of Sexual Knowledge

In addition to medical sites and Q&A platforms, my participants revealed another major source of sexual information are personal blogs. Personal blogs can be found in many forms and on different platforms, ranging from YouTube vloggers to Instagram influencers. Through their Social Media presence, they are able to reach out to the public with very specific issues and share their experiences in a way that differs from most sources, being neither sensationalised, neither for publicity or financial gain. As elaborated by Hannah:

> Yeah, I prefer that than Wikipedia, Quora or whatever. I have been quite conscious where I look for information online. I prefer to watch people that really want to tell you their experience, instead of selling something. Even though it might not be something that I can live with, but somebody talking about their sexual experience where they are an only child, or living in remote area… that experience is completely different, it is linked to that one person rather than generally speaking. (Hannah, 18)

Similarly, Gia shared:

> Actually, I feel that YouTube is very helpful for that. Because you can find people and specifically follow their experience with an ongoing stuff. So see how it develops and what they go through. You can find personalities that you trust and can relate to. Also you can see other people's comments below that will add to it. So yeah, I was on YouTube quite a lot when I first heard about sex and stuff. (Gia, 16)

Youtubers act as 'micro-celebrities' in our society (Senft, 2010), influencing millions of people who follow their channels. Besides covering gymany topics of interest, what makes them appealing to young people is the fact that they are relatable, ordinary people (unlike celebrities). Born in transmedia, these individuals produce their own content outside the major businesses and organisations (although collaboration and advertisement are taking place). Generally, there are two types of vloggers on YouTube- standard, who create and share their own content on the platform, and special, who interact with their followers (Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016). The latter type refers to those who aim to establish intimacy with their

followers, through offering recommendations and/or suggestions, listening to subscribers' stories, and creating content requested by followers. In a way they challenge the traditional understanding of public/private, amateur/expert, non-for-profit/commercial, and intimacy/distance, which is in the base of the establishment of the 'Youtuber' phenomenon. What is more, the representation of the LGBT+ community on YouTube is by far the most inclusive compared to traditional media, allowing people with non-heterosexual identities to establish a virtual community that empowers and provides formal and informal education (Blanco-Ruiz, 2018). In this train of thoughts, Pam shared:

> So in the LGBT community bisexuality is quite prejudiced still. There are still lesbians and gays who think you either gay or you are straight, you can't be in-between. That was quite hard for me because straight, or heterosexual people they don't accept me, and then there is gay people that don't accept me. That can be quite hard, and a lot of bisexuals have felt that. (Pam, 17)

She further opened up about her experience in coming to terms with her sexuality:

> But I start watching YouTube, there is that married couple Rose and Rosie, and Rosie is bisexual and Rose is lesbian. Rosie talk a lot about bisexuality, and how she feels. I felt connected because I felt understood. She spoke about a lot of the stuff I was feeling, and problems I was having. It made me felt better that way. I definitely was not alone. Also, when you watch YouTube, and see lesbian couples, they are very happy. That made me feel really accepted, understood and hopeful… They usually do weekly videos, so I watch them weekly. I subscribed to their channel and I watch their videos. (Pam, 17)

The value of Youtubers is precisely in the seemingly natural, relatable way in which they present important aspects of their LGBT+ identities. Through discussing various topics that are interconnected with subscribers' desire to know details from their personal life, vloggers display their sexual identity as part of the everyday being. Videos in which vloggers answer questions posed by followers or vlogs that reveal their way of life (relations with family, partner, friends, favorite TV series or music bands) are among the most viewed (Blanco-Ruiz,

2018). However, vlogs related to their own experience with coming out of the closet, as well as those dealing with bullying they suffered, are the most valued. This is especially relevant as stories about LGBT+ inequality and discrimination are a) common experience among all LGBT+ individuals, and b) excluded from mainstream media (Pérez-Torres, Pastor-Ruiz & Ben-Boubaker, 2018).   While some of the videos are explained from an emotional perspective, others are created with educational purposes; tackling homophobia, talking over concepts related with gender/sexual identity and introducing useful coping strategies. As a result, the content displays sexual diversity beyond the normative and stereotyped model, which is not only effective for educational purposes, but also the channel itself, provides the opportunity for LGBT+ individuals to connect (Ramos-Serrano & Herrero-Diz, 2016).

According to Perez-Torres, Pastor-Ruiz, & Ben-Boubaker (2018) nowadays YouTube is one of the most relevant contexts for LGBT+ young people to construct their identity, as the platform enables them to connect and interact with other people similar to them. Prior research suggests that male vloggers predominate (Maloney, Roberts, & Caruso, 2018), yet in recent years the LGBT+ community on YouTube has gained great popularity among young people who identify with their experiences (Blanco-Ruiz, 2018). Specifically, the significance of Youtubers as a source of sexual education came up many times in my conversations with young people. In Molly's own experience and words:

> I think it was only this year that I realised my sexuality, so I was really confused. I would spend 4 days just watching…that sound bad, but just watching lesbian youtubers of how they knew they were gay... It was a video, it was just a girl talking about how she felt and how she figured out she was a lesbian. She just said how, for example, she fancied celebrities on the TV or her teachers, but it was people that she sort of could never be with. (Molly, 17)

Further, the participant reflected on current feelings about her own sexuality:

> Me, I feel that right now I am not sure if I am a lesbian or bisexual, because I never really liked boys… I went through very awkward stages, and boys just never liked me.

> But when the blogger said that she liked celebrities I could relate to her, because I though…like I've never really liked boys in real life, but I always had male celebrity crushes. That made me come to terms with it. That helped me a lot. (Molly, 17)

Similarly to Molly, Ema also found valuable information through LGBT+ Youtubers:

> There is a really good youtuber Steve, who makes safe lesbian sex videos…I guess, Steve was how I learned how to have sex with girls, like properly. Not like watching porn, but more educational. Someone who is just open about it. (Ema, 17)

She further added:

> She will have videos, really scientific though, of how to have strap-on sex, how to have oral sex. That kind of thing. It is sort of factual and gets rid of misconceptions. Obviously I was aware of my sexuality, and vaguely knew about lesbian sex, but there are all sorts of things like scissoring which is not particularly common. So it was 'how do I approach that' kind of thing. And if you have not been told anything about gay sex in your actual education, which I wasn't, it is a better thing to turn to than porn… When people were talking about their first time that really helped me realise that porn is not like the way it actually is. (Ema, 17)

As evident, Ema and Molly lacked practical knowledge, guidance and emotional support in a particularly challenging time for those who do not confirm to dominant constructions of sexuality. As previously discussed such individuals are rarely growing up among others who can provide them with the necessarily knowledge, and traditional sources have barely started to take into account the importance of inclusive sexual education. In addition, other media sources such as TV shows, movies and especially pornographic materials, often depict LGBT+ identities in the most sensational and superficial sense, deepening stereotypes and misconceptions. This is why the YouTube phenomenon has expanded so rapidly, taking a central role in the Internet culture. This new content not only enables young people from the LGBT+ community to feel recognised, but also provides all young people with a form of sex education that is uncensored, authentic and pro diversity.

Besides YouTube, many bloggers/vloggers reach out to the public through other Social Media platforms. A new wave of influencers are using Instagram as a form of sexual activism, opposing traditional concepts about gender and sexuality and bridging the gap between pornography and the lack of sex education in schools. It is safe to say that 'sex educators' on Instagram go much further than sex educators in schools, offering information that is sex-positive, body-diverse, pleasure-inclusive and consent/trauma-informed. Therefore, Instagram, although being condemned as one of the most corrupt source of sexual knowledge and body image, might also be the best place to fill in the blanks (Chang, Li, Loh, & Chua, 2019; Brown & Tiggemann, 2020). Besides celebrities and lifestyle influencers who are prevalent content on the platform, a lot of novel and enthusiastic accounts are forming a sex education community helping people become more comfortable with their bodies and their sexuality. For example, Hannah stated that there is an additional load in being gay in a Muslim community, and discussed some of the ways Instagram can be in favor for such people:

> On Instagram, there are loads of, not necessarily poets, but groups of people who openly talk about being gay and being from that kind of community…and what challenges and stigmas they have come across. There are quite a few well-known artists that I know, who has started talking about their work and their sexuality. The things that they faced. So this is what I will definitely look into. Also, how do people tell their family and friends? I am sure that if I decide that this is what I am into, I will tell my close family and friends, I just have to find out what are the best ways for it. (Hannah, 18)

Through creative self-expression and through discussing in details often embarrassing and sensitive issues, sex educators on Instagram have gained social recognition and influence (Goodyear, Armour & Wood, 2019). Although they are rarely traditional in their appearance and methods, Instagram sex educators talk loud and in detail about hormone replacement therapy, how to have pleasurable sex, fatphobia, what is the difference between sperm and

semen and post-birth vagina facts, just to name a few. In addition, there are a number of sex-positive influencers who have opened a dialogue about how different sex is experienced by each and every person (e.g. Locatelli, 2017; Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John & Slater, 2019). With content aiming to be inclusive and to empower people, their goal is to reduce shame and stigma, and dismiss strict standards of appearance and performance. In this line of thought, Pam, explained how an Instagram account made her feel more comfortable with her big breasts, after some of her schoolmates were making inappropriate comments about it:

> Horrible! So self-conscious and my self-esteem just went so low. But I think there is a women's movement at the minute on Instagram. She is called Jameela Jamil… Yeah I love her. She is great; she is really empowering women that every body is great as long as it takes you from A to B. Seeing stuff like that makes me feel a lot better. I just should not listen to these immature boys. Obviously, I have a girlfriend now, but if we break up I will find another mature person who accepts me for who I am. There are a lot of plus size models and all that. I think that I have trained myself… not trained but… Instagram and women movements had really helped me realise some stuff and stand up for myself with boys. (Pam, 17)

Similarly, Alexis described her encounter with body-positive influencers on the same platform:

> I am quite overweight so over time i realised how fat-phobic people and media really are. Initially, when i made my Instagram account it affected me really bad. I developed an eating disorder. I started binge eating and self-harming. I just had really horrible self-image at the time. One day I found a body positive Instagram account with overweight people and things begin to change. So seeing this people loving and appreciating their bodies just made me realise i can love myself and my body the way it is, and that there are other people like me out there. (Alexis, 17)

A number of organisations have taken a more proactive approach in educating and supporting young people in the process of sexual exploration, reaching out through popular social platforms such as Instagram. For example, Pam shared: "There are a lot of Instagram

accounts that you can go to and direct message them questions you have, and they will reply. There is Stonewall… They are usually more experienced and they will get back to you" (Pam, 17). In addition to health organisations, many public figures use social media to talk about aspects of their experience and/or promote sexual health. In Kirsty's own words: "Yeah, when you go down your Instagram feed. I follow a lot of drag queens and quite a few of them are advocates for safe sex. So I will scroll down and see HIV statistics, and stuff like that" (Kirsty, 17). Instagram, same as YouTube, has created a space for connecting people and communities. One of my participants (Sarah) was also a moderator of an LGBT+ centered account on Instagram with 60,000 followers. Sarah explained that although she has two other personal accounts, it was the LGBT+ one that enabled her to connect with people from different countries, which over time turned into a virtual community. Sarah further described how the platform and her blog offered support and discreet exchange of sexual information:

> I sometimes see and learn things from the gay account on Instagram, like Dental dams and that sort of things. Or other accounts similar to mine that will post things. Also, you get a lot of videos and comments and DMs asking sometimes for advice about "How do I come out to my parents, I am really nervous about that", just people wanting another gay person to talk to, particularly if they are in the closet. Or they live in a place where they can't just really be themselves... I try to validate people's feelings. I always tell them to put their safety above everything. (Sarah, 17)

Also, Pam revealed:

> I usually see them on Instagram because I follow lots of feminist pages. And I don't just read the headline and leave it. I go into researching and learning more about that... because I am a massive feminist so I like to know new things about what is happening with women's rights, LGBT rights. (Pam, 17)

Of course, as with any large-scale social media platform, there are downsides to learning about sex and sexuality. Especially with respect to body image, Instagram is notoriously prevalent with very tight standards of beauty. According to Kirsty:

> When I was growing up I used to be really skinny, and I noticed one of my ribs was sticking out (I end up having scoliosis) so I will searched up to see if its normal for your boob to stick out, and there were people saying its normal, but others were suggesting probably I've puncture my lung, or just saying it is not normal... Particularly on Instagram you get a lot of photos where a curvy girl and a skinny one are placed next to each other… saying that the curvy one is normal or more attractive. (Kirsty, 17)

In addition, GiGi also described her struggles with Instagram:

> You compare yourself to other people which creates so much pressure. Even if you don't realise it, it influences you. Just a few years ago, you could not imagine people can make a career out of it. But there are so many 'influencers' now, that's crazy. It started of YouTube, and then it spread to other popular sites. It creates a dependence to reassure yourself constantly that you are ok, and you are doing stuff right. (GiGi, 19)

Sex education on Instagram can be found through sex mentors, writers, qualified therapists, activists, and people who work in the adult entertainment industry. At present there are many perspectives of a same problem on a display but it seems they are just scratching the surface of the essential work of bringing awareness to these discussions. As argued by Lili Loofbourow (2018), sex is always a step behind social progress as it involves intimacy and very private feelings, but if people talk openly and in details, Instagram educators might make it easier for people to embrace their differences and appreciate sex in their own terms.

Sexually Explicit Materials as a Source of Sexual Knowledge

Undoubtedly, the Internet has become a new way of observing and understanding the processes underlying sexual learning among young people. Although during the interviews we discussed both, traditional (i.e. family, friends, school) and alternative (i.e. online) sources, today the most dominant theme associated with young peoples' sexual learning is the freely available and consumed sexually explicit content online. Debates around young peoples' consumption of porn are framed around the positive and negative effects of the

activity; whether it is risky and oppressive or liberating and empowering (Attwood, Smith & Barker, 2019). Yet, considering porn as good or bad, calculating the pros and cons and trying to identify the deviance-amplifying changes it might bring for young people is somehow simplifying a rather complex phenomenon. Therefore, in order to understand how it might shape sexuality and what the educating qualities of porn, such materials should be considered in a more close and contextualised manner (Attwood, Smith, & Barker, 2018).

The role of pornography in young peoples' lives came up naturally in most of the conversations. With the increase of internet mediated activities, all participants admitted that porn is a big part of contemporary youth culture. For example, Geece shared:

> I'd say I look at certain stuff now and then. Whether it is out of curiosity or I have a specific concern. More general searches on Google…looking at different sources for a few minutes. Or I might go to the NHS site…but porn was mainly how I learned stuff and explored my own sexuality. (Geece, 19)

Also, Hannah explained:

> Yeah, porn is everywhere and you need to almost find a way to not watch it. If that makes sense. It's often not so much of actively choosing it, but avoiding it. For us porn is everywhere, people are sending videos or you open completely unrelated website and you see it. (Hannah, 18)

Kirsty described a similar image:

> I don't know a single person who hasn't watched it. I would say girls will keep it more undercover then boys, so you never really know if it's a regular thing. But boys are more open about it. In high school as all my friends were lads, during lunch they'll sat there and be like "do you want to watch this video I watched last night, its fucking grim and stuff". Like, some girl putting whiskey inside herself. In group chats they send link to porn all the time. (Kirsty, 17)

Although gender differences in regards to porn are explored in the next chapter (Chapter 6), it is important to say that while girls were very outspoken, boys were particularly laconic on the topic. All male participants that took part in the individual interview process found it hard to

elaborate their opinions on porn, and/or answered interviewer questioned with a single word or a sentence. However, according to Gab porn can be a source of sex education:

> I hear a lot of people watching it regularly, so it would not surprise me if they did. I'd say it is OK for people to learn from it; the only thing about it is that you can get wrong thoughts about it. But that is pretty much it, I'd say. (Gab, 17)

He further added: "I watch rarely. About my friends, I know of some that do. But I don't think they watch it a lot, it's only every now and then" (Gab, 17). Tom also thinks that looking at porn is the best alternative for young people at present to learn practical information about sex: "I have heard that porn is unrealistic as to how it actually happens, but there are no other sources out there to find out. So, it is the closest you can get to real sex". (Tom, 15)

As mentioned previously, prior investigations were primarily interested in the outcomes associated with such practices. For instance, results from the past consistently describe that engagement with porn might lead to/ or be a sign of 'permissive attitudes towards sex' (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010b; To, Ngai & Iu Kan, 2012; To, Iu Kan & Ngai, 2015). In itself, the statement suggests that having permissive sexual attitudes is something likely to be abnormal or carrying a potential risk for one's wellbeing. This further suggests that sex is either viewed in terms of 'good' and 'bad', or many scholars fail to recognise young people as sexual beings. This outlook focuses on concepts of normality (matrimonial union, procreation, monogamy) and their opposites, and leaves very little room in understanding the role of porn for contemporary young people. This is why, in this chapter we will be dealing with pornography as a source of sex education to the point of why young people choose to engage with it.

To understand 'if' and 'what' young people are learning from porn, it is essential to know the reasons for their engagement. Through the interviews, I was able to identify different motivations for young people to look at sexually explicit materials online. For example, Geece explained:

> Probably I started watching porn on a very young age. Being introduced to it, it was more from a straight kind of angle, but as I explored it for myself it was more from a lesbian's point of view. So I would explore more girls than I would guys. I used various websites. There is one in particular that I have viewed the most called xnxx.com. Its videos some are professionally made, but a lot is amateur porn. And they have a range of genre there. (Geece, 19)

Similarly, GiGi shared:

> I identify as a female, and for me porn has always been a positive thing. I learned about my pleasure. But I always looked for materials that suit me. If I see something that is all about the male orgasm, I change it, it's boring. (GiGi, 19)

GiGi's and Geece's responses indicated that once introduced to porn they used it to explore and negotiate their sexual identities. Geece looked for content in different website, explored different productions (i.e. professional movies and homemade videos) and looked at different scripts, which eventually led her to the kind of porn she found appealing. In the same vain, porn led GiGi to realisations about her own sexual preferences. Even though mainstream porn is said to be directed towards the white, heterosexual male, we can see that young people are not just a passive consumers of the content. As in GiGi's case, she discovered what is pleasurable for her and skipped contents that were somehow in conflict with it, showing that consuming pornography is not just a reinforcement of stereotypes, but also crossing them. Discovering and making sense of one's sexuality has commonly been associated with intense engagements with wide-ranging and diverse sexual practices even before the Internet (Barker, 2014). Today, with the presence of unlimited sexually explicit materials online, young people are given the opportunity to engage in much greater self-exploration. In the early days of the Internet Moor (1995) suggested that technologies will allow people to do old things in a new way. To extend we can agree with his statement, but precisely the affordances of the Internet might open new possibilities for people to unfold their sexuality.

In addition to exploring the sexual self, porn can be a way to explore one's sexuality in respect to others. In this regard, GiGi explained the role of sexually explicit materials as a part of a romantic relationship:

> Well we watch porn together as well; we are very comfortable with it. He is a boy, so sometimes he is quite typical boy in his choice of porn, but I am the same. I chose stuff that I like. There is a mutual understanding between us regarding porn. It was never a 'sit-down' conversation, where we need to talk about it, but more like in passing. And then if you are too tired, or can't be asked having sex, we might watch porn together. (GiGi, 19)

Similarly, Geece opened up to her boyfriend about her pleasure through porn:

> We used to watch it together. I would watch straight porn with him just to see what it's like and see how it made me feels…and then I just kind of showed him the stuff that I would watch just to get an idea. (Geece, 19)

Watching porn was also a shared activity for the romantic couple that could further enhance their intimate bond through showing what each other liked. According to GiGi, one can watch porn and still think of their partner; the visual part is used as a tool to intensify the fantasy. In her opinion, when you are in relationship "porn is used just to get off, while sex with the partner is amazing and it is so much more than orgasming". Research in the past has produced similar results and found that many couples watch porn together as a way to understand their own sexual desires in the light of a particular relationship, identify partner's preferences or just get into 'the mood' together (Attwood, Smith, & Barker, 2018).

Besides engaging with porn in the company of her partner, GiGi also revealed that watching and talking about porn can be a shared activity among friends: "I have watched porn with friends, but that was more out of finding it funny, and watching weird porn because it was funny, rather than sitting down and getting off of each other". GiGi and her friends looked at things that were considered somehow comical and/or unconventional. In this case, porn is used as a form of entertainment and possibly general knowledge of what else is out

there. In fact, prior research has found that watching porn with other and making fun of it can serve a number of purposes, including sexual gratification (Mulholland, 2013). Observing how such shared activities challenge concepts of private and public, the author concluded that pornography is a part of a larger social and cultural revolution involved in the formation of 'new norms'. The symbolic role of porn as interaction between peers was also explored by Scarcelli (2015) who found that such acitvity could have a reassuring and harmonising property to it. It enables girls to negotiate boundaries in a playful and secure dynamic that can eliminate the stigma around porn as a perverted practice and establish a guideline about what is considered normal within the group. In a similar fashion, Molly gave an account of how keeping an open discussion about porn with friends can be useful:

> Yeah. I watch porn whenever I am in the house alone. With my friends we are really open about it. The other day we were texting, and my friend say, "Oh I can't be bothered with revision, I am just going to watch porn", so I was like "Fair enough". We talk about it, not loads, but just to know that we are on the same page. A month ago we were all talking about how we like lesbian porn better, and we didn't know why, so it was a good conversation. After that we just don't feel like weirdoes, not weirdoes but you know…abnormal. (Molly, 17)

In the beginning of our interview, Molly identified herself as questioning her sexuality. Talking with some of her heterosexual friends about lesbian porn made her feel more comfortable with who she is. What is more, opening up about something so intimate as aspects of one's sexuality, pleasure and sexual fantasies have the potential to further deepen the bond with friends, reveal peer group norms, and provide insight about external desires (Scarcelli, 2015).

So far participants' responses suggested that porn can serve a number of purposes and it can be used to compensate for the lack of better sexual learning opportunities. For contemporary young people, porn provides an intermediate step between private fantasies and actual behavior. Such materials can help individual explore their own sexuality and sexual

identity in a safer and anonymous environment. It can be a shared activity among romantic partners in order to recognise each other's desires and/or explore together new sexual practices. Communicated with peers, it may also provide a guideline for what is acceptable and what is not beyond the tight mainstream criteria. In other instances, it might be directly related to the body, as a way of making space for its demands. It is important to take into consideration that in this context pornography is part of young people's emerging sex lives. As suggested by Attwood, Smith, & Barker (2018), preferences about porn can change and evolve with experience. This may include broadening or narrowing preferred porn scripts, watching more or less explicit content, engaging more often or not. Therefore, we can agree that watching porn is part of a complex and dynamic process of developing our own sexuality, learning individual/collective likes and dislikes, testing and crossing boundaries.

Even though this research is not the first to acknowledge the educational qualities of porn, there is no universal agreement as to what can be learned through it and/or how it might be educational. The more we look into the subject, the clearer it gets that such engagements can unravel in unpredictable ways for each individual. Accoding to GiGi:

> It is strange about porn that it is very good but also very bad. It gives a lot of people, especially homosexual people safe space if they can't be openly gay, at least they can explore it online. At least a small platform for them if they are not ready to come out. But at the same time with porn, there are so many fringes and misconstrued ideas of what sex and the body is. It teaches people good things, but also bad things like blowjobs are to be expected from women and women being always submissive. I guess there should be e better level of awareness that porn is not real and there is a lot of fiction and fantasy involved. (GiGi, 19)

She further concluded:

> So yeah, I believe people are learning a lot from pornography. But depending on the person and life experiences what they learn will vary. You already get a lot of males sexually aggressive that take out their frustration on women. (GiGi, 19)

GiGi's perspective touched upon two major issues associated with sexually explicit contents online, the stereotypical performance of gender identities in mainstream movies (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016) and the lack of adequate external sources of sex education that can offer a critical view to the consumer (Smith & Attwood, 2014). In her opinion, however, 'lessons' from porn are processed based on a number of personal factors and experiences. For example, Kirsty shared how porn affected her and her friend's body image:

> My high school best friend watched it, but felt more like me. It made her feel awful about herself. She said that she watched it because she was interested in sex, because she never had sex, but she didn't like the way they all looked, and how it made her feel about herself. She had small boobs, guys used to call her "pancake boobs", so porn didn't help. We went into a proper deep conversation about it. (Kirsty, 17)

Kirsty described a situation in which porn can deepen particular concerns and anxieties around one's body or particular body part. In fact, across the literature girls address a lot of criticism towards the physical ideals displayed in porn and the role women play (Löfgren-Mårtenson et. al, 2010). An investigation by Koletić (2017) found that girls who engage with porn regularly are also more prone to frequent body-checks. In addition, although young girls are aware that pornographic materials present unattainable and unrealistic picture of male and (more often) female bodies (Mattebo et al., 2012), they admit to being influenced by these ideals (Doornwaard et al., 2014), and feeling compelled to fit in (Koletić, 2017). According to some, the widespread use of sexually explicit materials has created new trends among women in terms of appearance (e.g. shaping or removing pubic hair) and performance (e.g. using 'pornified' vocabulary) (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; Scarcelli, 2015). Even though, public discussions and academic literature have paid more attention to the effect on girls, results among boys signify that regular consumers experience similar concerns (Doornwaard et al., 2014). In particular, regular users among men display less satisfaction

with their sex lives, reporting dissatisfaction with their own performance, penis size and their partner's female body (Orenstein, 2020). Molly shared her perspective on porn and boys:

But also for the man, as the ones in porn always have large penises, women expect that a lot. There is this whole stigma around small ones. That can make man feel really bad too. Overall, it is not really that great. It is good, you know, to get off, but…Especially if you are young and you watch it I will just make you think that everyone is like that. Also, the way people speak to each other, they don't speak to each other nicely. There are just different kinds, there is this really rough porn, but the passionate ones are more like real life. So a lot of guys think it is supposed to be rough and fast, but that can really mess it when it comes to reality, especially if you want it to be enjoyable for the woman as well. (Molly, 17)

While it can serve many purposes, there is a common belief that porn is a rather sensationalised portrayal of sexual acts. Therefore, the lack of access to other forms of education that promote skills to help young people navigate through such materials safely can result in the formation of misconceptions. As elaborated by Geece:

I would not say it is great, it misleads in a lot of ways. Especially if you are watching the sort of porn where you got glamour models or… you know they are doing some kind of wild things or super flexible things. It could lead you to think that this is how it should be. Or this is how you should react to certain things. (Geece, 19)

She further shared her personal experience:

I remember because I lost my virginity at quite a young age as well, I got asked to do anal…and I did it, but I did not enjoy it. I found it quite painful. The first thing I did afterwards was to look up online and see what it was like for other people. You know in porn they make it look painless, like no mess and all that kind of stuff. You think that you have done it all wrong and it is embarrassing. So you put yourself down for it. It's only as I got older that I learned not to take it as you see it. But at that time, I felt really embarrassed, just because it is not how it played out in real life… I just went online and looked for more porn videos that include anal. (Geece, 19)

Geece's story is a very good example of how porn can present information on particular sexual practices but to the extend it looks flattering and exciting for the viewer. Through

watching porn exclusively as a form of education and lacking other sources she is left to believe that she could not manage the task. Even though some authors suggest that young people are aware of the misleading representation of sex in pornography (Lofgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010), only as she got older (having more knowledge about sex in general, and porn in particular) Geece could critically evaluate the situation.

Even if porn is said to be a big part of contemporary youth culture, some young people are unable to ignore the processes involved in the creation of such content and use it for their own purposes. Especially for those looking purely for emotional or relationship components in porn, the activity might not be pleasurable. Yet going with the flow, Kirsty revealed:

> I did it at some point, but I think it was more because everyone else was doing it. I would not be getting off on it, it was more me sat there, uncomfortable, and thinking that I should be enjoying this but…I think it is just hard for me because I am watching all these men and women being put in situations where probably it is uncomfortable for them. Maybe I was overthinking, I know that most people are just "oh yeah…sex". But when I was watching I was thinking that it's not right, just two people who don't even want to have sex with each other. They just want money. (Kirsty, 17)

Hannah shared a similar outlook:

> As for porn, it's not real, but staged. Plus, there is always a third person that observes and controls the environment. So, there is no way it is a real presentation of a sex. Maybe I am thinking about it too much, but I do not find it appealing. (Hannah, 18)

Both participants expressed doubts in their views (i.e. whether they are overthinking on the subject), but were unable to look at sexually explicit contents without considering the circumstances. It is very likely that these doubts are as a result of the 'normalisation' of pornographic scripts in their everyday interactions with the world, and especially with their peers. Yet, especially Kirsty's argument is addressing probably one of the most damning criticisms of pornography associated with stories of abuse, exploitation and coercion in the adult entertainment industry. Even though abuse and explotation are not essential for the

creation of sexually explicit materials, Cawston (2019) argue that injuries and STIs are an integral part of the production due to not only hard-core scripts (including unprotected sex) but also the degree of work (and screen partners) performers are subjected to. Therefore, even if many young people are able to use their fantasy when viewing porn, some are unable to escape the reality of how such materials are created.

As we can see from my interviews with young people, porn experiences may be routine or special, straightforward or multifaceted, and pleasurable or damaging. Yet, they all are ways in which we can conceptualise the use of porn in contemporary youth culture and understand the many ways in which porn informs young individuals in relations to their body, sexuality, emotionality and imagination. Saying that I am far from suggesting that pornography is a great instrument for sexual education. Online media is filled with sexual themes, often portraying sex in the most sensational and superficial ways. Specifically, porn encounters appear either with little context or without any emotional or relationship component. What is more, health risks (injury, harm and STIs) are commonly downplayed, and sexual outcomes are sometimes unrealistic. Therefore, what we suggest is that young people need multiple sources in order to make sense of their emerging sexuality, and former sex education need to catch up with the current landscape. As long as there are multiple sources, providing different perspective, young people alone will have the skills to critically evaluate them and make informed decisions. According to Albury (2014), in an ideal world, educators will go over their initial skepticism over porn and try to learn more about young people's sexual culture in order to provide adequate learning opportunities and practical knowledge. Instead of protesting against the inevitable, today with the presence of the Internet, young peoples' sexual culture should be considered as part of a larger ongoing socio-cultural shift.

In this present chapter, I explored the different sources young people use for sexual information in order to identify the role of the Internet in the whole process of learning about and developing their own sexuality. The important message is that while most offline sources such as family and school are still holding on to traditional attitudes and values (focused on risk prevention, delay in sexual activity, and teaching heteronormativity), the Internet has brought a new meaning to sexual learning and sexual exploration for young people. The interviews with my participants indicated that the Internet is indeed a powerful source of knowledge, information, contacts and social experiences. The Web offers high volume and a variety of sexual information and content; from factual sources (i.e. NHS site) and interactive forums (i.e. Quora, Yahoo answer), to personal blogs (i.e. YouTube), sexual activism (i.e. Instagram) and explicit content (i.e. pornography). It has brought a new significance to intimacy, by enabling intimate communication over a physical distance and allowing intimate interactions stripped from most social cues present in the face-to-face interactions. In fact, the Web is unmatched in its scope to connect beyond the traditional time and space barriers, assisting young people to find contacts that have similar outlook, interests and challenges. Arguably, the Internet is not just a product of today's sexual culture, but it is also shaping it. In order to understand the outcomes associated with the use of the Internet for sexual purposes, in next the chapter (Chapter 6) I explore the ways in which the new affordances have translated into the sexual culture of a sample of young people in contemporary Britain.

CHAPTER 6

CONTEMPORARY YOUTH SEXUAL CULTURE

Individual Interviews Results and Discussion

Existing studies dealing with the online sexual exploration of young people are largely based on effect-centered perspectives. However, with the salience of sexual themes online, it is evident that research has to increase the knowledge beyond the fact that young people watch potentially 'damaging' content, take sexually suggestive photos, compare themselves to others on social media, or meet new people online. Thus, to avoid simplistic notions it is necessary to looking at technology mediated sexual practices not as a sole issue but explore how the use of the Internet for sexual purposes affects the social and cultural scene of young people in contemporary Britain.

This chapter is framed in two large sections. The first one deals with pornography, and evolves around young people's personal engagements as well as their experience with it as part of a larger context (the peer culture). First, I explore why the viewing of porn and respectively masturbation are seen as more suitable for boys, while girls' involvements are silenced. Next, I discuss participant's (girls) dissatisfaction with the state of mainstream pornography in term of objectification of female bodies and focus on male pleasure. After, I look at how porn scripts manifest itself in real-life for young people, and the outcome for both, boys and girls. In particular, I expand on the subjects of mutual pleasure, consent and formation of fetishes. The reminder of the section I explore issues related to the unrealistic (highly idealised) representations of the masculine and feminine bodies in porn and the effect on young people's sense of esteem. In the conclusion, I discuss the changing attitudes of girls that might bring change into the wider context as well.

The second section of the chapter deals with the practice of sexting, which is commonly seen as domesticated pornography, yet in my analyses, there was evidence that it

plays a different role in contemporary youth culture. Even though sexting is usually described as the exchange of sexual message or images I let young people describe it in their own terms. In the beginning I explore participants' attitudes and opinions towards sexting. Then I look at the practice as experienced in a steady relationship. After, I go through the motivation of young people to self-produce and exchange sexual materials. As it became apparent, in addition to personal motives, many young people felt compelled to engage because of external factors such as peer norms and/or peer pressure. Next, analyses evolve around experiences associated with the unauthorised sexual exposure of young people. We discuss the gender double standard emerging from peer culture and beyond; how female and male naked bodies are evaluated differently and the binary in social responses. Here I pay a specific attention to boys' attainment of status and girls' reputational damage. At the end of the section I discuss the lack of support and adequate approach from school establishments and law enforcement, indicating a serious gap between young people's experiences and adults' perception.

Porn Scripts and Contemporary Youth Culture

Perspectives on Gender

From the group and individual interviews, it became evident that the Internet plays a central role in the sexual exploration of contemporary young people. Unlike traditional sources, it seems that the median has provided young people with access to an unprecedented wealth of online information, tools, and services for the purpose. Undoubtedly, the practice of viewing sexually explicit materials was among the most charged topic, and consequently participants discussed it in greater depth. All young people had some engagements with porn, willingly or by accident. Granting that half of the girls openly admitted watching and enjoying porn, all female participants addressed considerable criticism towards the practice. On the

other hand, boys remained very brief and did not provide many details about their attitudes or habits related to porn. It is important to mention that exploring gender differences was not of initial interest; however, girls account commonly referred to the boys' and they were more eager to tackle the topic. Consequently, I decided to follow up on the matter and explore further why the use of sexually explicit materials is still seen as gendered activity among contemporary young people. Two female participants suggested that there is a biological difference between boys and girls that could result into boys' frequent use of pornography. However, it is possible that these biological factors might very well be social. For example, Pam shared:

> I feel that porn affects boys and girl in different ways. I think males are stereotypically more impressionable. So as I said before they will get these ideas about women, and their bodies. But with women, because they have all these body parts- breasts, bum…they are less impressionable. (Pam, 17)

Yet, she further added:

> Some girl they kind of judge because they have been conditioned to judge. They have been brought up in a way that implies masturbation for girls is wrong, you should not do it. They are very influenced by boys' view, because they want to protect their reputation almost. (Pam, 17)

Kirsty shared a similar perspective on the matter:

> I think it is a natural part to be obsessed with sex, for lads that are growing up. There is more of a curiosity about it. I think that women have to keep that curiosity more under wraps. (Kirsty, 17)

Both responses signify that there is a double standard between boys' and girls' practices related to pornography. In particular, the use of sexually explicit materials in the intensification of bodily pleasures is still perceived as a male activity. In GiGi's experience:

> I am in a relationship and we both are very sexually active, but there is an understanding that we both watch porn, we do masturbate… I used to think that was

> the norm but over time I found that a lot of girls will be scared to admit that they masturbate or refuse, because that is what a man does. (GiGi, 18)

The statements from most participants indicated that even though girls might engage in porn viewing or masturbation, they will most likely hide it to protect their sexual reputation. This could be through differentiating themselves from boys, specifically from the popular idea associate with boys' consumption of sexually explicit materials (excessive, violent, and perverted). Also, it can be related to certain social conventions and customs that have been imbedded over time; holding men and women to different standards of appropriate sexual behavior. For example, for a long time western societies have been evaluating positively men's manifestation of sexuality, but negatively women's' (Marks & Fraley, 2005). As a result, women have been granted less freedom of sexual expression. Even though more recent investigations suggest that this sexual double standard might be disappearing (Endendijk, van Baar, & Deković, 2019; 2020), the conversation with my participants indicated certain social habits are still at place.

Another potential reason for girl's conflict feelings regarding porn might be the target audience of such materials. Since pornography happened to be created by men for men, to this day most mainstream scripts are addressed to the 'typical' male viewer (Salmon, 2012; Moreira et al., 2016). According to Gab:

> It's more about the male pleasure and what they want rather than the female. Many videos will show the woman, but the guy will be out of the frame…mostly. Females want different things, but I guess they don't really show that side of it. (Gab, 17)

As observed by Gab, mainstream pornography is focused on the female body and response, so possibly boys would identify with and be more influenced by pornography's sexual portrayals than girls. In effect, most of the easily accessible pornographic materials online are, as Renato Stella (2016), among many others, defines it is 'Gonzo'. Stella (2016) describes it as a genre of hardcore explicit content that attempt to place the viewer directly into the scene, without

the usual separation between camera and performers seen in conventional cinema. What is particularly apparent in this genre is the physical and verbal aggression directed towards women. Internet porn is frequently criticised for exhibiting gender inequality (Scarcelli, 2015; Shim, Kwon, & Cheng, 2015), and this was a general argument among most participants. In this line of thoughts GiGi offered an insight into her initial experiences with such materials:

> I used to think that the woman should make sure the man get lots of pleasure. That physically, men come first. Very graphic sex and blowjobs, where the guy treats the woman as an object is pretty common plot for a porn movie. Also, I guess porn largely reflects the society we live in terms of stereotypes. So it took me time to teach myself that this is not the case, at least not for me. (GiGi, 18)

As pointed by GiGi, male pleasure and especially male orgasm is an essential component of porn movies, whereas the focus on female practices to satisfy partner (such as performing oral sex) is much greater. Similar views were also shared by Hannah:

> I am very conscious when I come across pornography or anything that is pornographic. The way women are portrayed there is not something I agree with. I don't have problem with sex in general, but specifically in porn there is a lot of misogyny and exploitation of people... It's about the male gratification or something you should put up with just to get it out of the way. (Hannah, 18)

She further added:

> Even from a religious, spiritual point of view, especially in my religion if you look at the scriptures, sex is a big part of person's life. But that is never spoken about in this manner. It has turned into something shameful or hidden. (Hannah, 18)

Unappeased with the representation of women in mass pornographic materials, Hannah and GiGi had to draw from broader conventions of sexual storytelling to make sense of their sexual pleasure and what sex represents in their life. As argued by Scarcelli (2015) the way women are portrayed in pornography makes such materials damaging or at least boring for girls. However, based on the following statements I would add that the misrepresentation of female pleasure in porn might cause harm both ways.

At first glance, mainstream pornography seem to be in girls' disfavour, yet this does not make it in support of boys. During our discussions, several girls raised an important issues related to the manifestation of porn scripts in real life situations. As experienced by Kirsty:

> When you are having your first sexual experience, they are pulling all those porn moves, that actually don't feel good… I had an ex-boyfriend in high school who used to always push my head down his 'pepe', and I hated that feeling of being forced into it. (Kirsty, 17)

Equally, Ema shared:

> I have female friends that are straight and they are not having much sexual pleasure because their boyfriends are just centred around that and that is probably because of porn partly. Because they have mentioned their boyfriend watching porn. (Ema, 17)

Molly expressed similar concerns:

> So a lot of guys think it is supposed to be rough and fast, but that can really mess it when it comes to reality. Especially if you want it to be enjoyable for the woman as well. (Molly, 17)

Although the above statements from my female participants once again pointed to the disadvantages for girls resulting from porn, it is possible that there will be consequences for the boys as well. In a healthy sexual relationship, partners have an equal voice in every aspect, including sex, and they are willing and considerate to each other. On the other hand, the sexual interaction amplified in most sexually explicit materials divert from core elements of loving relationships (e.g. intimacy, affection, mutual pleasure). Instead, online mainstream porn is overwhelmingly focused on the performance of various sexual acts (including some that requiring levels of proficiency and experience) that in many cases involves the display of aggression and/or degradation towards women (Shor & Golriz, 2018; 2019;). As evaluated by Kirsty: "… for every video a woman is being aggressive towards the men there are probably a thousand where men are being aggressive to women in some way" (Kirsty, 17). Scholars studying the effect of online porn as a source of sexual education for young people have presented evidence that frequent users approach real life sexual encounters with partner less

relational, and consequently compromise the quality of the relationship (Stewart & Szymanski, 2012; Sun, Bridges, Johnson, & Ezzell, 2014;2016;). The accounts shared by my participants, too, signify that pornography might not be just a mere fantasy or a personalised experience for boys. Instead, the findings are consistent with past research, suggesting that pornography consumption can influence real-world sexual interactions. In this case, although, girls might seemingly be the only victims, this could affect the overall relationship satisfaction for everyone involved (Sun, Bridges, Johnson & Ezzell, 2014;2016; Vandenbosch, & Eggermont, 2013), as well as lead to sexual uncertainty in boys when their sexual performance does not match partner's satisfaction (Stewart & Szymanski, 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010).

Besides transforming the interactions between romantic partners, learning from porn scripts might have additional implications for young people today. In Kirsty's opinion while boys also suffer consequences as a result of frequent engagements with pornography, the challenges for girls go further:

> I feel there are some consequences about boys, but most of it is on women. They will be comparing size, physique and body hair, but I think for boys is just a self-esteem thing, whether for girls is safety as well. (Kirsty, 17)

As discussed in the previous chapter (Chapter 5), porn portrays sex in a very sensational manner, where encounters appear with little context and risks (injury, physical/emotional harm or STIs) are usually downplayed. In my interviews with young people there were two stories that stood out with respect to porn scripts and safety. When discussing porn with Ema, she mentioned:

> I don't think it really teaches you anything, and you hear a lot about boys learning dodge things about consent. Particularly boys watching lesbian porn, they sometimes see you as an object, which has been problematic in my life. (Ema, 17)

She further opened up about her experience:

> I was 15 at the time and I was fairly drunk. I think I mentioned something about having an ex-girlfriend and one of the boys took a very strong interest in that, asking me a lot of inappropriate questions... Then I was going for a wee in the bushes because I was drunk, and he tried to follow me. I managed to get him to go away, but when I got back he just grabbed my head and shoved it into his groin and shook me about and stuff. That all started as soon as I mentioned anything about being lesbian. (Ema, 17)

According to Ema, her encounter was as a result of attitudes and behaviors towards lesbian women commonly displayed in pornographic materials. Indeed, there are claims that since pornography has long been thought of as a man's domain, lesbian porn makes no exception. The vision of lesbian women aimed at straight men has been highly eroticised in the adult industry, as the element of homosexuality between women might signify hyper sexuality, fuel a taboo, or increase (double) the pleasure (Puhl, 2010). In Pornhub's 2019 Year in Review for the UK, 'lesbian' appears as the most viewed category, while the term 'lesbian' is the most searched one (PornHub Insights, 2019). In addition, "lesbian scissoring" and "lesbian seduces straight" has ranked among the top ten searches. In the meantime, while lesbian porn is promoted as a heterosexual's male dream, consent in adult movies is often questionable (Whisnant, 2016). The latter point was captured by Geece, who described being sexually assaulted by a friend during a day walk in the park:

> So all of a sudden he jumped on me and pinned me down and started putting his hands down my pants. At first he started kissing me, and I was saying NO and kept turning my head, telling him that I just had got out of a relationship. So then he started putting his hand down my pants and I was keep trying moving from under him but he was a lot bigger than me. Eventually I gave up. (Geece, 19)

As argued by both, Rodger et al. (2009) and Ogas & Gaddam (2011), the human brain (especially male's) learn best through visual cues and when sexually aroused. In this regard, online porn ticks both boxes and further provides 'knowledge' as to what can be sexually arousing. In particular, online porn has frequently been criticised for the lack of verbalised consent when sexual acts are initiated. Many videos suggest that a willing partner is not

essential, with some promoting the lack of consent as something arousing and "sexy" (Marston, 2018). Besides the fact that porn does not often illustrate enthusiastic consent within videos, there are categories dedicated to 'drunk college girl' and 'no means yes' on most mainstream sites. In this case, the sexualisation and glamorisation of violence and nonconsensual acts is not an afterthought, but a central element of the script. Going back to Geece's story, like Ema, she was also 15 when she experienced the attack from her male peer. We can only speculate whether her attacker decided to do so as a result of learning from pornographic scripts, but as argued by Wright (2011) porn can contribute considerably as it is not only mirroring cultural sexual scripts but also producing new ones.

Porn and Stereotypes

Like the glamorised way mainstream pornography portrays sexual acts, most participants noted that such materials often favor unrealistic (highly idealised) representations of the masculine and feminine body. Scars, excess body fat, aging, small penises and bodily hair find place among mainstream porn more as a fetish than an attempt to be inclusive (Moreira et al., 2016). Despite the fact that obsession with the physical beauty for profit (lifestyle, beauty, fashion industries) has been part of Western societies for a long time, my interviews indicated that porn might reinforce stereotypes in a very intimate way. On a more general note, Kirsty noted:

> It just leads to girl feeling horrible about themselves, because obviously they are not going to put a girl in porn of average look. They will put someone who is perfect, skinny but not too skinny. You just see all of these esthetically pleasing people online. (Kirsty, 17)

In addition, Geece suggested that most of body standards fall on girls:

> Just because girls will watch it from the angle of what they feel they should look like, or sound like, or be like, or if they are able to do certain things. And guys will watch it from the opposite side, as if they put these sort of standards on the girls, as if they need

to live up to these certain expectations just because of what they have seen. (Geece, 19)

Given that porn displays naked bodies (which is not a typical view in most people day-to-day lives), and the fact that such materials are designed to sexually arouse, it is perhaps not surprising that young people will be evaluating the attractiveness of those bodies. As witnessed by Molly, pornography standards are making their way into the sexual culture of contemporary young people:

> Especially for boys I think it brings up really bad expectations in women when they look at stuff like that. A lot of guys seem to think that girl's genitals always look a certain way, and that is never the case… I had some of my friends say that they want surgery on their vaginas (Molly, 17)

Even though, Molly emphasised some of the challenges for girls resulting from porn, she was quick to discuss the male perspective as well:

> But also for the man, as the ones in porn always have large penises, women expect that a lot. There is this whole stigma around small ones… To be fair, I had some of my friends say to guys "Oh I want a massive penis". Then I say to them, "don't say that to guys, because some of them might think: Bloody hell mine is small". (Molly, 17)

More often than not porn displays physical ideals which represent a very small proportion of the body types in the general public; and although most actors are selected based on their ability to perform, their physical appearance is essential (Wright, Tokunaga, Kraus & Klann, 2017). For example, a majority of the male pornography performers are circumcised and have above average size penises, with black performers being expected to have especially large penises to fit in the stereotype of a popular porn category (i.e. Big Black Cock) (Skoda & Pedersen, 2019). In the same vein, female performers are expected to have small inner labia and remove pubic hair (Veale et al., 2014). Molly suggested that both, girls and boys who are watching porn might internalise this standards and experience dissatisfaction with their own body. In this regard, Pam shared:

> Personally I have quite large boobs. So I was getting intimate with a boy, two years ago. He didn't spread rumors, but some of my friends heard him talking about my boobs and how they are quite… they are not perky. (Pam, 17)

This, however, was not her only encounter with unrealistic expectation about women's natural breasts:

> Then I was talking to my friend Jake and he was talking about this girl that he is 'talking to' and how she got big boobs and they are not perky. And I am like "yeah, they are not going to be perky if they are natural and they are big, they are obviously going to sag because of gravity. That's natural". And he said "Yeah, but it is disgusting". (Pam, 17)

Although female breasts size and shape varies substantially from one woman to another, according to Pam, the unrealistic portrayal of such attributes (particularly visible in porn) seems to have sat tight criteria among her male peers. What is interesting in the statements made by my participants is the way porn consumption might work indirectly upon young peoples'desires. It might be through girl's engagements with sexually explicit materials, that boys become dissatisfied with their bodies and vice versa (Veale et al., 2014; Prause, Park, Leung & Miller, 2015). This further suggests that porn should not only be studied in terms of exposure-effect, but also as a set of cultural practices rising prominence in contemporary youth culture.

If we can notice a common thought related to ideas about porn and the use of it by girls and boys, it is different when we focus on the outcomes. Although in the previous chapters (Chapter 5) it became evident that girls also make use of online sexually explicit materials, and boys are aware that such contents are not entirely accurate, their real-word experiences differ. Yet, whether it is in the privacy of their own bedroom, a mobile phone passed around the classroom, or a graphic comment during lunch break, pornography becomes increasingly prevalent in the everyday reality of young people. Unlike boys, however, girls show more symbolic use of such contents, and their critique is not towards the growing production and

consumption of porn, but the normative cultural assumptions concerning gender performance and heterosexuality reinforced by it. In girl's submissions I was able to identify four sexual scripts appearing in contemporary youth culture: a) the sexual double standard in evaluating porn related practices, b) the focus on male pleasure, c) the script of harm manifesting in real life, and d) the script of unrealistic body expectations. In a sense, being disapproving of porn, could very well be girls' way to reject the powerful heterosexual and patriarchal logic emerging from their social, cultural and techonological environments. In some cases, they abstain from viewing such materials, but in others they consider porn scripts as much more flexible and open for improvisation. As shared by GiGi:

> I think as we are the Internet generation that will change the stigma around girls, porn and masturbation…and if people are into domination/subordination then they should make sure it is 100% consensual, and maybe explore the other perspective as well. (GiGi, 19)

Similarly, Geece interpretation:

> I'd watch straight porn with him just to see what it's like and see how it made me feel and then I just kind of showed him the stuff that I would watch just to get an idea. Obviously, lesbian porn, he did not have any problem with that. (Geece, 19)

As argued by Attwood, Smith & Barker (2018) like other cultural practices, preferences of porn change and develop with experience and knowledge. Initial engagements might be boring or even unpleasant but over time has the potential to become exciting and enjoyable with the investment of browsing. Therefore, girls opposing conventional ideas in porn through searching materials that suit them might be a step towards change. As I argue, the problem with pornography is rooted in the attitudes of its consumers. Instead of leaving young people to fill in the gaps in their sexual knowledge through porn, traditional sources (family, school) should provide better education to prepare them for the Digital (Informational) Era they are living in.

The Domestication of Pornography or Sexual Communication

The increased use of the Internet and mobile devices has changed the context in which younger users are managing their romantic interactions. Specifically, sexting practices have given rise to a new and growing body of research focused on children and young people. Apart from scholars, the phenomenon has attracted increased public attention because of its potential negative consequences. Yet, while some consider it as a form of domesticated pornography (Holoyda, Landess, Sorrentino, & Friedman, 2018), others define it as the new sexual language of young people (Döring, 2014). Taking into account past investigations, my main objective was to understand how young people perceive sexting, and the role it might play in contemporary youth culture. As captured by Hannah:

> Yes, I think sexting is very common nowadays. I see it as a way of distancing from yourself. Is like once it's just a picture of a specific body part, and there is no face in it, it's almost like not part of you anymore… It's like another medium to help u express a part of yourself that you can't otherwise, or you want attention, or to boost your confidence. It has become a new language we need to learn how to speak. (Hannah, 18)

Hannah associated sexting with the idea of the online self, which can be bravely different from the offline's. As seen in the previous chapters (Chapter 5), technology is often referred to as a safe space to explore oneself sexually due to the lack of visual cues and other face-to-face precautions. In turn, this technology modified persona can allow young people to go further and explore or express aspects that are otherwise difficult to act upon. In her opinion, the fact that sexting take place online is convenient for a number of reasons. Yet, since it is a display of identity, Pam found it difficult to separate the physical from the virtual self. She further distinguished:

> Yeah, I think that even though it is illegal before you are 18 to do it, I think a lot of people do it. Say for my friends, a lot of them do it…. but they do it with their

> boyfriends or girlfriends. But some do it to people they have been talking to, or dating but not serious. I think that is not a good thing, because sometimes it is really unsafe and it can get out of hand. (Pam, 17)

All young people expressed similar attitudes towards sexting. Although the practice is not necessarily the new norm in romantic interactions, in the sense that not all young people participate in such exchanges, it is viewed as something normal within their peer group (see Livingstone, 2008). However, most participants emphasised the importance of the context in which sexting occurs, as there are risks associated with confidentiality and violation of the law. In this train of thought, Molly shared:

> I think that as long as you are OK with the person, and you know that they are definitely not going to tell anyone at all. I have a friend she got a boyfriend, and they sext all the time, but she knows for a fact it's OK, as they've been together for two years now. (Molly, 17)

Geece further explained:

> I talk to my partner on a regular basis. We will exchange pictures, or voice messages or talk over the phone; flirty or in a sexual manner, just because we don't live together. I guess is a way of showing our appreciation for each other. So yeah, I think it is normal. (Geece, 19)

According to my participants, sexting between steady partners is seen as a safe environment. In Geece's case, sexting was a way to maintain intimacy and release sexual frustration in a long-distance relationship. Other investigations have found that within an already established relationship, the exchange of self-produced media (e.g. video, voice or photo contents) can be used for the purpose of experimentation, bonding, intimacy and entertainment (Attwood, 2009; 2011). Through exchanging intimate content over the Internet, partners can open up a discussion about sexual fantasies and trying out new things. Also, it could be an experimental practice for those who are not sexually active as well as for those who plan to go further with a partner by making the relationship sexual (Anastassiou, 2017). Therefore, this hyper-

connectedness further extends the duration of intimate interaction, leading to new (hybrid) intimacies travelling back and forth between the online and the offline space. As elaborated by another participant, sexting is a new way of doing old things:

> Whether it is for sexual gratification, or connecting with someone you are in a relationship with its just a new way of doing all that. People used to write letters 100 years ago, then people were calling each other, and now is sexting. Just now everything is a bit more… fast track, happens quickly. (Hannah, 18)

Hannah suggested that the Internet and new technologies are not only replicating but also amplifying traditional interactions that are already located within the peer culture. As argued by Ringrose & Harvey (2015) the constant plug-in afforded by today's tools transform young people's sociality, availability and sexuality. Therefore, instead of proclaiming sexting as inherently bad, it should be considered on a scale where experiences can range from trust and excitement to violation of privacy and sexual harassment (Setty, 2019).

Motivation for Sexting

In assessing the meaning young people ascribe to the production and sharing of sexual images, it is worth starting with their motivation to do so (beyond the exchanges that occur within a committed relationship). When discussing possible motivations for girls, Pam shared:

> I think it can be quite empowering for women… Because you can feel good about yourself, you can take these pictures looking really good. The boy you send it to can complement you and make you feel good about yourself. I think this is how it works. (Pam, 17)

For Pam sexting can enable girls to experiment and appreciate their bodies without getting physically involved. Based on the notion that acceptance of body image is an essential normative task for young people that require social reinforcement through feedback and confirmation (Davison & McCabe, 2006), obtaining positive feedback through sexting can be experienced as empowering. Not surprisingly, Molly stated that in her view, girls who lack

confidence are more likely to sext in an attempt to redefine their body-image. In her own words: "Especially if girls lack confidence they might send videos to boys" (Molly, 17). This point was further corroborated by Ema who shared her personal experience:

> When I had an eating disorder I used to just send nude photos a lot because I was looking for validation. So I kind of got that through sexting, even though I was never sexually interested in the people. I needed someone else's comment on how my body looks, because my brain just couldn't help it at the time. So, whatever someone else said this is how I felt about myself. (Ema, 17)

Searching validation through sexting for young people dealing with negative body image might take upon the function of a mirror or a scale. Particularly, Ema used her images not for any other reasons but anticipating the feedback of the receiver. In her case it can be argued whether the feedback is experiences as empowering or is further leading her on a path to self-objectification. Self-objectification is commonly discussed in relation to both sexting practices and eating disorders. Such individuals are more likely to internalise observer's perspective and develop a habitual monitoring of their physical appearance (Bianchi, Morelli, Baiocco & Chirumbolo, 2017), which as we see today can be technology-mediated. As a result of the preoccupation with body surveillance and constant evaluation on the basis of appearance, young people with body image issues might further feed into the condition and associate the experience mainly with shame and anxiety (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012).

In my conversations with girls it became apparent that the willingness to engage in sexting is influenced by not only internal but also external factors—such as perceived social pressure and subjective norms arising from the environment. For instance, Sarah revealed:

> I just remember that me and my friends would be sending nudes to boys we were seeing for a while. But boys were kind of head on or head up in high school and would send me a photo instead of you choosing to, and you would feel a bit pressured. You think that you don't want to be boring. (Sarah, 17)

She further described the content that has been exchanged:

> I haven't sent a full on like vagina or anything like that. Just me sitting in front of a mirror in a bra and boobs out. Some of my friends would do full on anything but that is, just like I said, a step too far. (Sarah, 17)

As with many other sociocultural phenomenon, the readiness to exchange own sexual images can also be shaped by the peer culture (Bianchi, Morelli, Baiocco & Chirumbolo, 2017). Through Sarah's comment it is evident that sexting was a normal occurrence within her friend's circle. In a way, the fact that she refers to the sexting behavior of her and her friends as well, can be seen as a justification for her own involvement. Sarah's additional remark regarding the content she was willing to produce and share, however, signified that peer standards of sexting are open for interpretation. In addition, the participant revealed that there is a certain pressure to get involved in order to stay relevant and not come across as 'boring'. The same motivation for sexting was also found in other investigations with young people, suggesting that sexting scenarios are less about 'stranger-danger' and more of a technology-mediated sexual pressure from peers (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, and Harvey, 2012). Besides Sarah's brief comment, Ben, Hannah and GiGi further centered their responses on motivations associated with peer pressure: "What happened quite recently, literally a week ago, kid at my school kept on texting a lot of girls asking for nudes. They all said 'no'... so he sent a lot of them dick pics" (Ben, 17). Also, according to Hannah:

> Based on gossip and rumors around school, people don't mess around. Especially boys, if they fancy you, they will send a 'dick pic'. There is no build up to it… Also, there is a pressure of feeling that you have to sext because your partner wants it. I would say there is a lot of that as well. (Hannah, 18)

In addition, GiGi said:

> A lot of my experience, and what I have seen other people experience it is mainly boys harassing girls. I have never even heard of a girl harassing a boy for nudes, neither a girl harassing another girl. But boys are doing to the point of harassment "show me your boobs", "show me your vagina", and just use very derogatory words. And it turns

into an emotional blackmailing, like "I would do this and that for you, if you like me you should send nudes". (GiGi, 19)

Both Ben and Hannah supported the notion that boys are the most common initiators of sexting, and they participate in with greater ease, being fast to exchange sexual images (i.e. 'dick pic'). In addition to random encounter sexting was described as a form of 'relationship currency' where girls are pressured into satisfying partner's needs though sharing a sexual image. Similarly, GiGi recognised boys as the most common instigators and further implied that through sexting girls are commonly insisted to take part and objectified by their male peers. Based on participants' statements, we can see that sexting is not a gender neutral activity, but reflecting and reinforcing wider youth cultural traditions related to gender and sexuality. As argued by Setty (2019) even in the sexting culture of young people, girls are recognised as passive, and consequently compelled to sext in response to the perceived uncontrollable drive of boys. In this regard, Pam shared:

> Boys just want to see other women's parts- boobs or bum or whatever you are sending. They just want to masturbate off it. Girls, maybe they wouldn't say it, but they want to feel good about themselves. I think there is a difference of what they are wanting from it. (Pam, 17)

It is particularly intriguing that, outside steady relationship, girl's described motivations for sexting that were not primarily sexual. Yet, what Pam further revealed signifies that there might be more than sexual gratification for boys as well. In her own words:

> I spoke to a boy and asked the same question. He explained to me that it is not the same. He said that in porn, it is quite fake, but when you are sending nudes you know it is real. They are sending it to only you, not the whole wide world. He said he feels quite special. Because everyone can see the girl in porn, but when they are nudes they are just for me. (Pam, 17)

Through obtaining such materials, Pam's peer admitted seeking (and possibly receiving) value that goes beyond sexual arousal. His remark suggests that girl's sexual images are

perceived and collected as 'trophies' through which boys receive affirmation of their masculinity and heterosexuality. In turn, girls are being further objectified through the collection, distribution and ranking of their sexual images. As argued by Ringrose & Harvey (2015) girls' images represent a system of grading among contemporary boys that can enhance their status within the peer group and increase popularity. In fact, few participants used the term 'popular' to describe peers that take part in sexting. For example, Ema: "It was kind of the popular boys will be collecting and sharing nudes from the girls. Or the friend will leak friend's nudes" (Ema, 17). Through such comment, the participant further confirmed that sexting and status are somehow related, and as much as the intimate exchange is an individual experience, it can also become a group practice through the unauthorised distribution of the content. As argued by Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, and Harvey (2012), the effects from sexting are not limited only to those involved, but influence and potentiate the entire peer culture.

Revenge Porn/ Sextortion

In my conversations with young people, there was a clear distinction between coercive sexting contexts regarded as pressure to exchange sexual media, and pleasurable sexting contexts for the purpose of experimentation, bonding and intimacy. Perhaps, the most damaging scenarios were the ones related to violation of privacy through the unauthorised distribution of sexting contents. Besides the fact that boys might be using girl's images to obtain status, participants described other motivations for technology-mediated abuse. For example, GiG shared:

> Leaking nudes online is very common. I have not have any close friends around me experience it, but situations where is like 'if I broke up with him he will leak all my nudes'. That is a very real fear. (GiGi, 19)

The internet provides nearly everyone with the opportunity to distribute content instantly. As a result, GiGi suggested that revenge porn has turned into an additional avenue for control and coercion within a romantic relationship. Past research has recognised that although both genders might become a victim of such deeds, it is females who suffer in the majority of the cases, in terms of exposure and the stigma attached to it (Cooper, 2016; Englander, 2016). In this train of thoughts, Hannah shared:

> But once they broke up, this video got send around to the point that the entire town learn about it… Girl reputation was ruined; she was seen as a 'slut' and 'slag'… He was seen as a 'shithead' for doing that, for showing the video, but not for being present and participating in the act, in that room. (Hannah, 18)

My participant described another case of revenge porn, where a homemade video of a couple being intimate was leaked by the boy once the relationship ended. What is interesting in the abovementioned circumstances is the display of an age-old double standard, where boys and girls are held to different standards of sexual expression. As noted by Hannah, in this case public responses were shaped by the gender of the involved; the girl being denigrated as 'slut' and 'slag', while there was no parallel expression for the boy. In their work, Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone and Harvey (2012) paid a particular attention to the challenges experienced by girls in youth sexting culture. As they argue, girls have to self-surveill and maintain a clear sexual reputation, while simultaneously avoid being seen as unapproachable or boring. The importance of a girl's reputation can further be understood through Ema's comment. As she recalled:

> There was one girl Anna (pseudonym) got upset with her friend and somehow got hold of naked photos of her and spread it around… That was quite a big thing. I think most people ended up watching it and she got a lot of abuse for a while. The school had to get involved as well. (Ema, 17)

Current or ex-partners are not the only ones who can be responsible for the distribution of 'revenge porn', but anyone who purposefully distributes someone's self-produced sexual

images with the intention to humiliate and punish. While girls are generally perceived as being less interested in receiving or exposing sexting messages (Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet & Peeters, 2016; 2017), Ema demonstrated that it is not always the case. Besides this being another event of unauthorised distribution to cause humiliation, what is intriguing in this situation is not the motivation but the perpetrator. In a way, the fact that one girl would do this to another as a form of revenge signifies about the damage it can cause. Based on the stories shared by participants, it is evident that similar to the engagements with traditional pornography, sexting might also produce gender specific risks.

The young people I spoke to were aware that engagements with sexting in the form of sexual message or rumors always carried the possibility of exposure. Much of the talk about exposure presented it as a dramatic experience, associated with humiliation, bullying and sexism mainly for girls. In the following paragraphs I attempt to explore this binary in the experiences of young people, but even more to understand how it manifests itself. According to Hannah:

> There is a different level of intrigue when photos like that are leaked. Guys, I think, is more about their ego, what is the esthetics of it, how big it is. And girls are being mostly labeled. Its weird you can see that we are still very much living in a patriarchal society. (Hannah, 18)

This was further elaborated by Gia:

> Girls have a lot more stigma on them. If you are a girl, you are called a 'hoe' for being sexual. I feel that it is even very normalised if a boy sends a photo of his penis. But if a girl does it, all the girls hate her, boys want to ask her for more photos. She gets treated like crap. (Gia, 16)

Hannah acknowledged that both girls and boys are dealing with certain pressures when exposed. Boys' images are subjected to visual scrutiny associated with their physique which can largely determine the social responses to the event. Meanwhile, girl's photos, although subjected to visual examination, always carry a reputational damage. A picture that began to

emerge is that sexting as well as the outcomes from exposure are not only normalised, but also capitalised by contemporary young people. On the one hand, boys have the confidence to send their nude photos (specifically 'dick pics') out of context and girls are getting used to receiving and looking at them. On the other, even though boys are the most common perpetrators, the attention is focused exclusively on the exposed female bodies that are further subjected to shaming and abuse. The latter point was best captured by the personal experience of a sexually exposed participant:

> So he texted everyone that afternoon and that next day I woke up and must have had 50 messages on my phone from them. From his friends, from my friends... So I went to school and there was whole bunch of drama. People just saying stuff under their breath. (Geece, 19)

Geece also revealed how her female friends responded to the event:

> Even a couple of my really really close friends, which are girls, came up to me and said "I did not expect you to do something like that". So even though I told them I did not want it, and I told him NO, they took his side, because that is where the majority of people were standing. I felt like I was really alone and the couple of friends that did stay on my side, for a good couple of weeks I would not speak to them. (Geece, 19)

Geece's story portrays a familiar scenario; the one of a sexual double standard, pressures to take part, unauthorised distribution by a male peer and a damaged reputation. Yet, what is remarkable here is the fact that her female friends were also drawn in the common-sense criticism of girls, while failing to recognise the role and responsibility of their male peer. Similarly, to the girl that exposed her friend's photos for revenge, Geece's friends failed to resist the sexual double standard, and therefore further reinforced attitudes causing harm to them and their female peers. As argued by Ringrose (2013) peer exclusion and lack of support in a time where a girl's sexual reputation is being challenged can seriously interrupted the formation of a positive sexual identity and sense of value. However, in my conversations with young people, there were some evidence that not all girls conform to the sexism arising

from youth culture, and they are brave and creative in their efforts to fight back. As shared by GiGi: "I know a girl that leaked her own nudes on Twitter because a guy was blackmailing her, so just did it to say 'you can't blackmail me'" (GiGi, 19).

General attitudes related to sexting among young people seem to be benefiting boys, however, they are not protected from the unauthorised distribution of self-produce sexual media. Moreover, boys are also under pressure to participate, judge and be judged according to the already established standards associated with the performance of masculinity in youth's sexting culture. Therefore, in addition to gender, experiences with sexual exposure might vary across contexts. For example:

> He would send a video of himself to a girl, and she'd send videos to him, like all the time. But he rang and told his mum because he was worried, and then the mum communicated to the school. Then somehow, everyone found out, and he ended up getting really badly bullied. After that I never saw him again. (Molly, 17)

As debated earlier all young people have to engage in sexting according to the standards arising from their peer culture, which are very much gendered. While girls have to balance between being boring or sexually exposed, boys have to prove their status through requesting, obtaining and sharing the images with confidence. The boy Molly referred to did not go along with the 'general rules' and jeopardised his status by expressing doubts about the exchange and seeking support from an adult. As highlighted by Setty (2019) boys can accrue social capital through sexting depending on their confidence and already established rank within the peer group. In contrast, nonconsensual distribution of male photos seemed to happen commonly to boys who lack status and charisma (Setty, 2019). Here, we can see that although constructed differently, the social status of boys and the sexual status of girls are equally important in regards to sexting outcomes; and being a boy comes with its own set of challenges. Another such challenge was depicted in a comment made by Kirsty:

> I know one boy in year eight moved schools because a picture of his penis has been sent around and everyone was making fun of it. They were calling him a mushroom head and stuff like that. (Kirsty, 17)

Sexual portrayals of girls' bodies seem to accumulate more attention than the one of boys (see Setty, 2019); yet, the story told by Kirsty offered a different perspective. She revealed how the self-produced sexual image of a boy caught a particular peer attention due to the stature of his genitals, which became a reason for his shaming and humiliation. This suggests that boys' bodies are also objectified and compared to the idealised models emerging from mainstream media, including porn (Bianchi, Morelli, Baiocco & Chirumbolo, 2017), and depending on the genital's size and stature it can either work in their favor or subject them to bullying from peers (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). Therefore, although general discussions evolved around risk associated mostly with girls, it seems that there are many other sub factors that can impact outcomes for young people.

Beyond the Peer Group

Possibly, most of the pressure for young people in regards to sexting comes from within their peer group. Yet, exposure incidents are further intensified through the lack of support from traditional sources such as school and law enforcement (Ringrose, 2013). Both institutions promote complete abstinence from sexting, placing additional shame and punishment on those whose bodies have been exposed. Through the stories shared by my participants it is evident that most of the misused sexual images are circling precisely in young people's school environments, but they said very little about the role of educators in tackling this issue. For example, Molly said: "We have been educated about it at school, telling us not to sext, and what are the consequences of it." (Molly, 17). In addition, Ema recalled what happened when a parent contacted the school regarding a sexual exchange between her son and a female peer: "And our school was not great so they didn't keep it confidential" (Ema, 17)., Geece also shared her ordeal with school authorities: "They brought

the school police and took him to one side, but basically just give him a stern warning. Turned out other girls had complained about it before." (Geece, 19). Young people were very brief and in a way indifferent when discussing the role of their schools in educating them or dealing with these occurrences. Yet, because sexting is associated with risks they have been lectured on at school, and since the law consider it as a criminal act between minors, participants were standing somewhere between desperation and guilt to request any support. Although it might sound harsh, such injustices are part of young people's (especially girls) everyday reality. As Gab recounted:

> In school, there was a story about these two girls sending pictures. So they got caught for I think child pornography thing… They send a pictures to a guy and he screenshotted them and send it to his friends. And then eventually the teachers heard about it and they got involved, and then got the police involved. The girls got a record because of him. (Gab, 17)

Pam also described a similar scenario:

> She got in trouble with the police because she sent nudes to this boy, and he got in trouble with the police as well. He was showing all of his friends because he screenshotted it. She didn't know he screenshotted it. He was sending it around all the school and everyone knew. So she got in trouble for sending it, but also he got in trouble for sending her nudes back and showing other people. (Pam, 17)

The anti-sexting approach of educators and police agencies often results in lack of justice for young people who have suffered the consequences of nonconsensual distribution of sexual content. Thus, they receive no adequate support and are further labeled as being the problem for deciding to engage in sexting. The spread of such messages and the harassment from peers that is rarely accounted for collectively gives meaning to sexting as shameful and legitimises certain practices and actions related to the mistreatment of young people, especially girls (Setty, 2019). As argued by Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, (2012) with respect to sexting, girls' sexual desires are muted, suppressed and/or largely unacknowledged.

The Internet and advanced technologies have enabled young people to interact with each other in new and unprecedented ways. The practice of sexting specifically serves a multiplicity of purposes, through which young people are able to fulfill and explore the sexual self in relation to others. However, the mediated by technology exchange can also bring its own set of challenges such as anxiety to perform highly idealised forms of masculinity and femininity, pressure to judge and evaluate peers, as well as the possibility to be sexually exposed yourself. For the most part, girls' images accumulate much greater attention compared to the boys'. My analyses revealed that they are not only subjected to visual scrutiny, but girls' identities are stigmatised and labeled without exceptions. In contrast, through sexting boys are able to obtain higher status within their peer hierarchies, although in some occasions exposure can lead to negative consequences for them as well. This binary in young people's experiences with sexting is further intensified by the anti-sexting approach of schools and law enforcement agencies. Instead, such displays should be used as a space to change traditional attitudes and learn critical aspects of contemporary youth culture.

The subject of the 'sexualised culture' has received a lot of attention from scholars in the past decade, with greater emphasis on the experiences of young people in relation to it (e.g. Smith & Attwood, 2011; Attwood, 2006; 2016; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2013; Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa, 2007). The term is used to describe the growing preoccupation with sexual values and practices in western societies, in the light of changing attitudes and the emergence of new sexual experiences, largely provoked by the new media (making sexual themes highly visible and accessible). Specifically, in the UK, growing concerns about the 'sexualisation' of young people can be seen through the proliferation of public reports, media coverage and policy makers trying to restrict access to pornography and prevent engagements with 'hazardous' technology-mediated sexual practices. Yet, there is a visible lack of evidence across literature whether 'sexualisation' poses a danger or is an

unprecedented opportunity given to contemporary generations of young people to explore their sexuality that has not been available before. Further, it is not clear what 'sexualisation' postulates and what are the processes involved. Without arguing that sexual practices, identities and bodies are becoming more visible and explicit, but this solely is not an indication that it will affect negatively those who are growing up amongst it. The fact that girls are the focus of popular discussions and concerns, on its own signifies that the moral panic is based on outdated perceptions about gender and sexuality or unsophisticated understanding of media influence. As a result, most public forces who have taken upon the task to assist young people have marked very little success.

Far from suggesting that pornography is a great tool for learning and sexting is a safe way to explore the sexual self, my conversations with young people indicated that they can serve multiple functions and not necessarily for the worst. Rather, criticism was directed towards the general attitudes, largely mirroring the society they live in. Probably the most damaging, especially for girls was the sexual double standard emerging from all aspects associated with the practices and representation of women in porn (in terms of role and appearance), masturbation seen as abnormal for girls, lack of appropriate education in the light of specific gender risks (e.g. consent, reputational damage), disproportionate attention to females naked bodies as opposed to males, boys' status acceleration on expense of girls and the gendered public responses to sexual exposures. However, the experiences of boys should not be underestimated and further work should be done in order to explore what are their challenges in negotiating competitive masculinity and acquiring status. Overall, what became evident through my discussions with young people is that although amplifying experiences, the Internet and technology mediated practices are just another context for societal habits to be displayed.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the key findings with regard to the research questions are summarised in order to address the main purpose of the study. In addition, limitations of this thesis are outlined to address the significance of the results and pose suggestions for further investigations in the field. This chapter concludes with recommendations based on the stories shared by my participants, the research question, and the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

During a time of great technological advancement there is also a great ambiguity about the effect of the new affordances on young people's sexual learning. Therefore, to get an insight of the changing context of present-day 'sexual education', the aim of this research was to explore young people's own understanding and experience with the medium for sexual purposes. With the purpose of providing direction for a study design that has the potential to develop new, more specific questions during data collection and analysis, five research questions were outlined.

Research questions and summary of findings

- How young people engage with the Internet? What role it plays in their social and personal lives?

Participants demonstrated sophisticated attitudes towards social media, using different platforms to do different things with different people and for different reasons. Their habitual use of the medium included self-expression through updating personal blogs, obtaining information on various topics of interest (including sexuality), and/or for leisure activities such as gaming, watching TV series or listening to music. Above all, however, they went online on multiple occasions throughout the day to socialise. Young people use the Internet to

maintain social ties with friends and family, meet new people or interact (actively or passively) with public figures and celebrities.   \

Conversations indicated that they use multiple platforms for the purpose, as each one offered different modality and audience. With respect to the quality of online exchanges, my findings are at odds with those of Turkle (2007; 2012;) and Kaliarnta (2016) who believed virtual interactions are unable to reach the same depth as face-to-face interactions. Even though few participants believed there are limitations, most young people agreed that digital intimacy is no less intense and meaningful than the analogue. Establishing close bonds with strangers online appeared to be particularly common for LGBT+ individuals. Being presented with a different set of challenges compared to their heterosexual peers, all LGBT+ participants used the Web to find similar others. Some of their engagements with individuals or groups of people appeared to be for information gathering, exchange of emotional support, or general socialisation. Other interactions were for the purpose of meeting like-minded romantic and/or sexual partners. The findings from this research run counter to the widely expressed view of 'stranger danger' (e.g. Genuis & Genuis, 2005; Whitty, 2008; Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009; Citron & Franks, 2014). Even though, all young people discussed the risks associated with encountering dishonesty, cyber-harassment, cyber-stalking, etc., they shared positive personal experiences. However, positive outcomes were not by chance or due to luck, but participants' ability to be thoughtful and evaluate critically such encounters. Overall, the conversations with young people suggested that technology-mediated socialisation does not affect negatively their social life, and has the potential to form new relationships as well as strengthen existing.

Young people clearly showed that they are equipped with sufficient skills to surf the Web in a manner that is favorable and assist their needs. Yet, it is not to suggest that their daily engagements are free from risks. Most young people shared that there is a demand to

multitask and be present online. Consistent with previous research (Livingstone, 2008; Chua & Chang, 2016), findings indicated that the constant connectedness pressured individuals to maintain online presence and reaffirm their status among peers. In order to remain relevant, young people had to engage actively in interactions with others, while simultaneously providing visibility of their ongoing matters and relations through personal blogging (e.g. Miller, 2011;). Additionally, girls discussed the rather harsh expectations to behave online in a certain way and upload contents that are 'likeable'. In particular, Instagram was described, as a platform that reinforced strong stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, pressuring young people to constantly compare themselves to other. Not that comparison between young people is a new phenomenon, but today with the shrunk distance between celebrities and the general population, demands are far greater (e.g. Serafinelli, 2018). Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the common display of the ideal self on social networking sites, although admitting they are taking part in it.

- How young people make sense of their emerging sexuality? What sources and methods they use for the purpose? How they evaluate these sources in terms of reliability and effectiveness?

Group and individual interviews revealed that young people are interested in talking about sex. Even though, a few (boys) were visibly uncomfortable going into details or discussing controversial topics (such as engagements with pornography), most participants had the urge to speak out and have their voices heard. The changing attitudes towards sex became visible through participant's stories. Young people talked about their "saggy boobs", "curiosity under wraps" and the "buzz" from porn, describing the various ways they made sense of their sexuality.

Constructing one's own sexuality is a complex and highly individual process, but participants were able to explain some of the way in which they addressed challenges and

goals associated with it. A big part of their awareness was obtained through sexual socialisation with family members, educators, friends/ peers, and romantic partners. Some sources were ranked as more influential, but each one highlighted a particular aspect of their sexuality. The family is traditionally the first instance for knowledge, and young people obtain attitudes and values similar to those displayed within it (Miller, 2002). Yet, in line with finding from Moore & Rosenthal (2006), my interviews also indicated that early on young people realised such topics should be approached with caution (e.g. Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). Some participants shared that they feel confident discussing sex with their parents, but described conversations as contained. Others were unable to initiate such discussions at all, being raised in a conservative or religious household. In addition, LGBT+ individuals revealed that family members could not provide sufficient knowledge, as adults themselves had limited understanding about the challenges experienced by young people from sexual minorities. Overall, participants considered sexual socialisation with parents or siblings as narrowed and insufficient, and therefore had to search answers from additional sources.

With family members being unable to set good foundations, young people also discussed the role SRE played in their understanding of sexuality. Participants acknowledged that school-based sexual education covered some important topics (i.e. sexual and reproductive health, puberty, consent, and LGBT+ identities), but equally they addressed considerable criticism. Consistent with past research (Herbert & Lohrmann, 2011; Hirst, 2013), finding from the current study indicated that young people are frustrated with the great emphasis on risk prevention, leaving very little space for other meaningful discussions (i.e. losing one's virginity, masturbation for pleasure, female orgasm). Also, few individuals mentioned the inability of teachers to speak in an open and engaging manner, with some describing the mode of teaching as "tick the box kind of thing" or "don't get pregnant".

Naturally, the gaps in the SRE curriculum left all students feeling unprepared, but especially young people with non-mainstream sexual orientation and gender identity.

Interviews with young people confirmed that peers are perceived as a major influence on their sexual learning. Consistent with findings from Steinberg (2010) and Cillessen, Schwartz, & Mayeux (2011), participants described conversation with friends and/or romantic partners as important in a number of ways. First, through exchange of ideas and experience, young people were able to obtain sexual information that was outside their individual standpoint. In addition, sexual socialisation with peers established better understanding of contemporary norms and challenges, while the straightforward and uncensored manner of the exchanges left little space for misinterpretation and confusion. Also, while parents and educators were focused on promoting abstinence, the socialisation with friends/ romantic partner encouraged young people to do the opposite and engage further in sexual self-exploration. However, even if peers were ranked as central figures in the provision of sexual knowledge, young people shared that sometimes they can also be a source of additional pressure (Dishion, Eddy, Haas, Li, & Spracklen, 1997; Dishion & Owen, 2002; Prinstein, Meade, & Cohen, 2003). As in the case of sexting, many shared that they felt compelled to get involved and align with the overall sexual culture of the peer group.

Interviews indicated that young people's sexual learning is impacted by a number of factors, ranging from the overwhelming influence of youth culture, to the less obvious outcomes associated with teachers/ parents socialisation. Besides those traditional sources, however, young people also acknowledged the increasing role the Internet played in their sexual education (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009; 2011; 2014; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Attwood, 2017).

- If, how and why the Internet is used for sexual knowledge (information, experiences, and implications)? What factors might navigate their experiences? How technology-

mediated practices might relate to other aspects of their lives, including sexual activity?

Findings revealed that the Web is an unprecedented tool for sexual knowledge and sexual exploration. The anonymity, affordability and accessibility of the Web allowed young people to find information on various issues that was often considered as too personal to confide in other people. Additional motivation to engage with sexual contents online was the variety of the sources, from official health websites and Q&A platforms to personal blogs and interactive practices.

In line with past investigations (Selkie, Benson & Moreno, 2011; 2013), participants indicated that as an initial step in obtaining information they started through search engines (i.e. Google) and sources were further selected based on the subject of interest. For instance, when in need of relationship advice, young people were most likely to rely on feedback from sites that offer peer communication styles (i.e. Quora, Yahoo answers, YouTube personal vlogs), while information on prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections was obtained through official medical sites (i.e. NHS). As argued by Mitchell, Ybarra, Korchmaros & Kosciw, (2013;2014), the present investigation also confirmed that the use of the Web for sexual health information was particularly relevant for LGBT+ young people, as traditional sources did not offer comprehensive accounts. Ironically, there were evidence that young LGBT+ people were better informed on sexual topics as opposed to their heterosexual peers, as the responsibility to make sense of own sexuality laid on them early on. As with traditional sources, however, there were shortcomings associated with the use of the Internet for sexual information as well. Young people noted that it is not uncommon to come across inaccurate information, as online sources lack quality criteria and regulation (Ruan, Raeside, Singleton, Redfern, & Partridge, 2020).

Besides searching for specific topics of interest, participants indicated that sexual themes are becoming increasingly visible through social media platforms. In particular, Instagram is becoming more than just a visual inspiration, but young people used it to learn about sexual rights and politics. In accordance with their own challenges, female participants discussed the remote support they received from equal sexual rights advocates, body positive movements and LGBT+ influencers. Participants described their engagements with such Instagram accounts as not only educative, but also empowering. On a not so positive note, the research found that while Instagram offered visibility to body and sex-positive accounts, it also reinforced narrow and highly idealised beauty standards (van Oosten, Peter, & Boot, 2015).

In addition to the deliberate search for factual knowledge, finding indicated that young people turned to porn for more precise and practical knowledge. While not all engagements with pornography were for educational purposes, participants recalled their initial searches being precisely for that. In the past decade, sexually explicit materials have been under much scrutiny (e.g. Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009a; To, Iu Kan & Ngai, 2015; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Koletić, 2017), but my interviews suggested that outcomes depended on sometimes contradictory and shifting factors. Gender differences became evident when discussing the topic with young people. On the one hand, girls were very critical towards the role of women in mainstream porn as they are commonly objectified, portrayed as submissive and readily available to satisfy man. On the other, female participants shared their frustration with the physical ideals reinforced by porn as well as the glamorised depiction of sexual practices (e.g. Wright, 2011). Above all, participants believed that the biggest problem with porn consumption could be found within the attitudes of boys and man who applied porn scripts in real life. In one way or another, all girls came to the realisation that mainstream porn is far from what real-life sex really is, but while some decided to abstain from further

engagements, others invest additional time in searching for suitable materials. Yet, despite the critique girls addressed towards porn, they also acknowledged that it can serve a purpose if approached with caution.

Male participants were not as outspoken on the matter, as their female peers. Half of the boys admitted watching porn, while the rest of the male sample denied or reported occasional use. Central reasons for boys viewing of porn were for sexual arousal, as a means to explore sexuality, and out of boredom. In addition, while girls discussed the pitfalls of mainstream pornography at length, male participants only mentioned that it can be addictive and/or create false expectations. It seemed that boys feel more comfortable discussing the subject in groups rather than individually. When the topic was introduced to two of the focus groups, male participants were drawing on each other's comments and were able to provide more details. In contrast, when presented with the question individually, boys were visibly uncomfortable and reluctant to provide insightful information.

In addition to factual and practical knowledge obtained through the Internet, results suggested that young people explored their sexuality through practices with shared quality such as sexting. The findings from the present research run counter to past publication suggesting that most young people do not exchange sexual messages (e.g. Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014). From my interviews it became evident that the majority had prior engagements with sexting, and the exchange was widely practiced within contemporary peer culture. Once again, participants demonstrated skills and critical thinking in evaluating the outcomes associated with it. Most young people agreed that sexting is 'the new language of flirting' and when practiced within an established relationship with someone trusted, it was a way to show appreciation, bond with partner prior to engaging physically, and/or explore aspects of own sexuality. On the contrary, young people also opened up about the hazards associated with the exchange of sexual contents outside a committed relationship. Without exceptions, all young

people witness the unauthorised distribution of sexting materials. Even though, consequences were commonly harsher for girls, some boys also experienced negative consequences. Besides the obvious legal implications (i.e. distribution of child porn), sexual exposure was related to reputational damage.

Arguably, most of the pressure for young people in regards to sexting came from within their peer culture. Girls felt pressured to take part risking to be labeled as either 'boring' or a 'slag'. Boys, on the other hand, had to defend their social status through requesting, obtaining and sharing the images with male friends. In harmony with previous finding, the present investigation also confirmed that female's bodies gathered considerably more attention compared to those of males (see Setty, 2019) and consequently girl's naked photos acted as a 'popularity currency' within boy's peer hierarchies and a 'visual gossip' among girls (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012). Therefore, when it comes to sexting, the social status of boys and the sexual status of girls appeared equally important and each one came with its own set of challenges.

- How the peer sexual culture might shape the online experience of young people?

For a long time, it was assumed that going online meant to 'log off' from the material world and put on hold authentic experiences. However, in the light of the present finding we can no longer draw a line between digital and analogue experiences as they are organised into a new kind of intensified whole. As argued by Ringrose et al. (2012) and Jurgenson (2012), young people travel back and forth between the online and the offline space, connecting together environments that were once considered separate. It is fair to say that much as young people's lives has been transformed due to the new affordances, online practices are equally shaped by norms and standards arising from the broader sexual peer culture. Consequently, the public display of identities enabled by the Internet opened up new opportunities, but also challenges for young people to perform highly idealised forms of masculinity and femininity

that were culturally specific. For instance, girls were pressured to live up to expectations reinforced by porn in terms of physical beauty and willingness to submit, while simultaneously hiding engagements and practices associated with it (i.e. masturbation). At the same time, boys were expected to initiate sexual communication and maintain open discussions with male peers about porn in order to remain relevant and obtain status. At odds with Endendijk, van Baar, & Deković (2019; 2020), the present study clearly demonstrated that online engagements are highly regulated by the still persisting sexual double standard emerging from young people's peer culture. A failure to comply with the 'general rules' arising from contemporary youth culture meant that young people were at risk of peer exclusion and reputational damage.

Original Contribution to the body of knowledge

The central task of the present thesis was to understand how young people use the virtual world to explore and make sense of their emerging sexuality. So far a large proportion of past publications has focused on particular practices without exploring the phenomenon in a more overreaching and contextualised manner. In addition, prior research has commonly employed a moral stand, considering online engagements in terms of risk and opportunities, and failing to acknowledge the dynamic and complex nature of the matter. Last, but not least past literature relied heavily on quantifying young people's involvement with the Internet, limiting results to what is already known and leaving out new and/or key aspects. Therefore, the present study has contributed to the knowledge and field of social studies by providing new insights into young people's learning about sex and sexuality in the light of their growing and multifaceted use of the Internet for such purposes.

The study provided fresh perspectives regarding young people's daily engagements with the Web, making sense of the various ways in which it enhances their social, personal and academic life. The thesis also enhanced understanding of the central sources for sexual

education at present, demonstrating that traditional sources have not been replaced by the online. Instead the finding indicated that the Internet has provided young people with an additional space for learning and exploration, which in turn has offered a new critical perspective on evaluating prior knowledge. Most notably, results rejected the one-dimensional views on young people's sexual engagements with the web, demonstrating that they are mindful and considerate in their approach. The work was able to increase the current state of the knowledge beyond the fact that young people look for sexual information online, come across sexual contents on social media, watch potentially dangerous porn, or exchange sexual photos. Finding were able to uncover motivations, experiences and outcomes associated with the aforementioned practices as well as follow up on the ways they updated participant's knowledge. Finally, yet importantly, the research highlighted some of the ways in which the social and cultural scene of young people in contemporary Britain has 'appropriated' their use of the Web, providing sufficient evidence that the virtual space is yet another context for societal customs to be displayed.

Limitations

One central limitation of the study is related to methodological issues; specifically with respect to the sample of the individual face-to-face interviews. A considerable effort was made to ensure the gender diversity of population under investigation, however, only three boys agreed to take part in this stage of the research. In addition, it proved to be challenging to involve them in discussing central aspects of own sexuality or their online sexual habits. When presented with a question reflecting such aspects, all three participants were visibly anxious and consequently provided short answers, lacking depth and insight into their own experience and understanding on the matter. It is possible that participants were generally anxious to discuss sexual topics, although, the reason can be related to the context of the interviews and the interviewer. As argued by Neuman (2013; 2014), the personal

characteristics of the interviewer such as gender, age, race, and ethnicity can negatively influence participant's responses. The fact that boys were asked to discuss multiple aspects of their sexual habits by a female interviewer be a possible expiation for their apprehension. As a result, individual interviews could not obtain sufficient knowledge regarding male experiences. Although, girls addressed the topic through their own point of view and boys' perspectives remain poorly explored. Future research has to take this potential limitation into consideration, and provide insight into boys' accounts in order to get a grasp of the full context of young people's experiences with the Internet.

Another potential limitation could be the mixed gender of the participants that took part in two of the group discussions. It was decided that interviewing girls and boys together can provide interesting debates over the standing differences in sexual practices between sexes. In fact, such debate occurred in one of the groups but it seemed that boys took over the conversation and silenced girl's arguments. In contrast, the remaining only girls and only boys group discussion were more productive in offering awareness into the gendered experiences and challenges of young people. In the light of the present findings, evidencing the sexual double standard, peer pressure and the dissimilar consequences related to girls and boys' sexual practices, it is possible that single-sex groups might be more suitable setting for open discussions (see Ringrose et al., 2012). Therefore, future research should take this into account and carry out single sex groups to explore the shared gendered norms and opinions.

Based on suggestions from past literature, it was decided to control study participantion based on sexual orientation and age. However, lack of lack of diversity among research participants can interrupt the interpretation of the results and lead to particular ethical and research consequence. Since the study was not controlled for identity categories such as race, ethnicity and gender, it is possible that the research participants do not reflect the diversity

and conditions of the studied cultural context. Therefore, this is considered as the central limitation to the present research and future investigation.

Practical Implications of the findings

Young people should be provided with knowladge, skills and motivation to make healthy and informed decisions about sex and sexuality. However, at present it is still unclear as to whose responsibility it is to prepare young generations for their sexual and intimate experinces. Given limitations on resources and the general anxiety to take responsibility, it makes sense to focus on already-existing resources, mainly parents and school, but also activists, media, areness-raising campaigns and every professionals whose work is directed towards the wellbeing of young people.

Recommendations for Schools

School curriculum should include gender considerate materials and address challenges experienced on that basis associated with pornography and sexting. Since teachers are often too embaressed or concerned to address sexual topics in a straightforward and detailed manner, training for professionals should be considered. In addition, information should be presented in a manner that is interesting for young people- notably through humor, up to date movies, and every other way that is somehow realted to popular culture. In addition, SRE on the outlined topics (e.g. porn, sexting, sexual health information) should be offered in a more neutral, non-moralising way.

Recommendations for Parents

Although the present research did not include accounts from parents, we were able to gain some insight through participants' stories. What became apparent is unlike the popular belief (that young people will avoid discussing such topics with their parents), the majority of young people shared that they wish family members were more proactive and sex-positive.

Therefore, parents need to keep more open channel for communication on sexual topics and take the initiative to ask question without invading their childrens' privacy in other ways.

The intention of this research was to produce a comprehensive and enriching knowledge related to young people's online sexual practices. The impotence of such knowledge is becoming increasingly evident through the drastic changes occurring in young people's context of sexual learning, and due to the mounting and somehow misguided debated over their appropriate sex education. Perhaps, many meaningful aspect of the ways in which young people engage with technologies for sexual purposes were not explored through the present investigation, which can be a call for future work to carry on the research tradition and explore the phenomenon without taking the usual moral stance.

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Appendix A
Participant's Demographics

Table 1. Focus groups participants (colored by group participation).

	Name	Age	Area	Gender identity	Sexual orientation
1	Vicky	16	Large Northern market town	female	Heterosexual
2	Lynn	17	Large Northern market town	female	Heterosexual
3	Angela	17	Large Northern market town	female	Heterosexual
4	Emma	16	Large Northern market town	female	N/A
5	Maria	16	Large Northern market town	female	Heterosexual
6	Gail	17	Large Northern market town	female	Heterosexual
7	Jane	16	Large Northern market town	female	Heterosexual
8	Kate	18	Large Northern market town	female	Lesbian
9	Jack	17	Large Northwestern city	male	Gay
10	Brook	17	Large Northwestern city	transgender	Questioning
11	May	17	Large Northwestern city	female	Lesbian
12	Alex	15	Midsize Northern city	male	Heterosexual
13	James	15	Midsize Northern city	male	Heterosexual
14	Rod	15	Midsize Northern city	male	Heterosexual
15	Alison	15	Large Northern market town	female	Heterosexual
16	Robert	15	Large Northern market town	male	Heterosexual
17	Beth	15	Large Northern market town	female	Heterosexual
18	Andrew	16	Large Northern market town	male	N/A
19	Nick	15	Large Northern market town	male	Prefer not to say
20	Robert	16	Large Northern market town	male	Heterosexual

Each color indicates group pariticpation

Table 2. Individual interviews participants.

	Name	Age	Area	Gender identity	Sexual orientation
-	Erica (**Pilot**)	16	Port city in Northern England	female	Lesbian
-	Eva (**Pilot**)	14	Port city in Northern England	transgender	Questioning
-	Lily (**Pilot**)	17	Port city in Northern England	female	Lesbian, Questioning
1	Molly	17	Large Northern city	female	Bisexual/Lesbian, Questioning
2	Ema	17	Large Northern market town	female	Lesbian
3	Kirsty	17	Large Northern minster town	female	Bisexual
4	Pam	17	Large Northwestern city	female	Bisexual
5	GiGi	19	Large Northern market town	female	Bisexual
6	Geece	19	Large Northern market town	female	Heterosexual
7	Gia	16	Large Northern market town	female	Heterosexual

8	Gab	17	Large Northern market town	male	Heterosexual
9	Hannah	18	Large Northern minster town	female	Heterosexual
10	Ben	15	Port city in Northern England	male	Gay
11	Sarah	17	Large Northern market town	female	Heterosexual
12	Tom	15	Port city in Northern England	questioning	Questioning
13	Alexis (Online)	17	N/A	female	Heterosexual
14	Dom (Online)	16	Large Northern market town	male	Heterosexual
15	Jack (Online)	16	N/A	male	N/A

Information from the pilot interviews was not included in the result chapters. Data was used to refine the questions for the semi-structured individual inverview questins.

Appendix B

Letter of Invitation *(Sample)*

University of
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THE AWARDS 2013
AWARD WINNER
UNIVERSITY OF THE YEAR

Date

Name of establishment
Address Line 1
Address Line 2
Postcode

Subject: Request to access research subjects

Dear *(Headmaster/ Group leader name)*,

Please permit me to introduce myself, I am Elena Golemeeva, a postgraduate researcher at the University of Huddersfield, studying for a PhD. I am enquiring to request your permission to conduct a research project at the *(Name of establishment)*, with a sample of your students.

My research focuses on how adolescents use the internet, particularly, how it is used to explore and inform adolescent identities, including sexuality, and the associated potential risks and opportunities that young people identify the internet may pose.

My research will utilise group discussions and individual interviews in order to capture how young people understand, use and feel about their engagements with the Internet in their own words, opinions, and experiences.

I am hoping, with your permission, that your *(school/group)* will permit me to approach approximately *(number)* young people, aged 14 and over, to ask if they would be willing to take part in my research. If your consent is given, then I anticipate that the interview and focus group sessions will take place during *(Term X of academic year XXXX-XXXX)*. I can assure you that I do not intend to disrupt the working environment and the smooth functioning of the school in any way. Indeed, I am happy to take your lead with regard to the practical arrangements of obtaining individual consent and with the conducting of all interviews.

Although by necessity this project must adhere strictly to the Code of Ethics and Conduct provided by the British Psychological Society, which covers all ethical concerns such as; obtaining fully informed consent, providing anonymity and confidentiality, data storage, participant feedback and any publication of the findings, I am happy to discuss this with you in detail should you wish. In sum, for this research, student participation will comprise of consent from your school, consent from the participant and if deemed necessary, also from

parents. All personal information, such as a participant's identity, will be anonymised and confidentially stored.

My research supervisor *(Titles, Name, Contact details)*, is happy to address any questions or concerns that you may have.

I very much look forward to your reply in the near future.

Yours Sincerely,

Supervisor Signature

Elena Golemeeva   Supervisor Name
PhD Researcher   Position
Department   Department
Email address   University of Huddersfield
+44 (0)xxx xxx xxx

Appendix C

Consent/ Assent form and Information sheet for participation

1. Assent form and Information sheet for participants (Focus Group)

University of HUDDERSFIELD
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Sexual Exploration in the 'Digital Age': Sexual exploration in the "Digital Age". How the Internet informs the identity and sexuality of contemporary British adolescents.

INFORMATION SHEET

You are being invited to take part in an interview regarding your use of the Internet and how it informs you on various matters (such as your own identity and sexuality). Before you decide to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with me if you wish. Please do not hesitate to ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the study about?
The purpose of this study is to get an insight of how young people use the Internet to make a better sense of who they are.

Why I have been approached?
You have been asked to participate because you are a representative of the population of interest for the research (i.e. adolescent, 14-18 years old, resident of the United Kingdom)

Do I have to take part?
It is your decision whether or not you take part. If you decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form, and you will be free to leave the session at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationship with the school or the researcher.

What will I need to do?
If you agree to take part in the research you will be asked to participate in an hour long interview that will take part in a private room within your school premises of the University of Huddersfield Library. Alternatively, you can receive the questions via an email and send your response in written form to the interviewer. If you come for an interview in person, the discussion will be audio recorded, so the researcher can go through it later on and analyze the information. However, you will be given a unique pseudonym to ensure your anonymity.

Will my identity be disclosed?
No your identity will remain anonymous. The audio recording from the discussion will be kept strictly confidential. Only the researcher and thesis supervisors will ever have access to it.

What will happen to the information?
All information collected from you during this research will be kept secure. It is anticipated that the research may, at some point, be published in a journal or report. However, should this happen, your anonymity will be ensured, although it may be necessary to use your words (in written form) when presenting the findings. Your permission for this is included in the consent form. However, if any of the information shared places you at risk, or incriminates you, the interviewer is required to notify your safeguarding officer.

Who can I contact for further information about the research?
If you require any further information about the research, please contact me on:

Elena Golemeeva
elena.golemeeva@hud.ac.uk
+44 (0) 454 020 906

If during or after the discussion you experienced any emotional distress that you would like to discuss with someone, please do not hesitate to contact Samaritans confidential helpline 116 123. Calls to this helpline number do not appear on phone bills.

Version 34: dated 18.09.2018

University of HUDDERSFIELD
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CONSENT FORM PARTICIPANTS

Title of Research Project: Sexual exploration in the "Digital Age". How the Internet informs the identity and sexuality of contemporary British adolescents.

1. It is important that you read, understand and sign the consent form. Your contribution to this research is entirely voluntary and you are not obliged in any way to participate.

I have been fully informed of the nature and aims of this research as outlined in the Information sheet version 34, dated 18.09.2018. ☐

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reason ☐

I give permission for my words to be quoted (by use of pseudonym i.e. anonymously) ☐

I understand that the information collected will be kept in secure conditions for a period of 10 years at the University of Huddersfield ☐

I understand that no person other than the researcher and thesis supervisors will have access to the information provided. ☐

I understand that **no** information included in the report could lead to my identification. ☐

2. Light snack and beverages will be provided during the interview. For the purpose, please read the following two questions and indicate as appropriate.

Do you have any food intolerance or allergies (e.g. nuts, dairy)? Yes/No
If yes, please state here…………………………………………

Are you affected by some medical condition (e.g. asthma, diabetes)? Yes/No
If yes, please state here……………………………………………..

If you are satisfied with the information provided and you consent to take part in this project, please put a tick in the box aligned to each sentence and sign below.

Signature of Participant:……………………	Signature of Researcher:……………
Initials:………… (Example: E.S.)	Print:……………………………………
Date:…………………………………	Date:…………………………………

(One copy to be retained by Participant / One copy to be retained by Researcher)

2. Consent form and Information sheet for parent/legal guardian (Focus Group)

University of
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Parental Consent for Children Participation in Research

Title of Research Project: *Sexual exploration in the "Digital Age". How the Internet informs the identity and sexuality of contemporary British adolescents.*

You are being contacted as the parent of a prospective research study participant. The information provided in this form should help you decide whether or not to let your child participate in this research study.

Purpose of the Study: If you agree, your child will be asked to participate in a research study about the use of the Internet for sexual education and romantic interactions. The purpose of this study is to get an insight into what young people do online, who they communicate with, what messages they receive from the Internet as well as how they feel about these experiences. The findings from the research might help us create online environment that offers freedom but also safety and guidance to young people.

What is my child going to be asked to do? Your child will agree on an individual interview regarding their use of the Internet. The interviewer will introduce the topic and guide the participant through the discussion by asking questions about popular networks (e.g. Facebook, Snapchat) and activities (e.g. SEM, texting) among teenagers as well as the context in which these practices occur. If you and your child agree to take part in the process, it will be a single session with an approximate duration of 45-60 minutes. Meetings will be held within the primacies of the school/youth group, or the library of the University of Huddersfield (depending on how the participant was recruited).

What are the risks for my child? There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. However, as a light snack and beverage will be provided. For safety purposes, please provide the following information:

Please inform us if your child has any food intolerance or allergies (e.g. nuts, dairy)? Yes/No
If yes, please state here……………………………………………….

Is she/he affected by some medical condition (e.g. asthma, diabetes)? Yes/No
If yes, please state here……………………………………………..

Also see "privacy and confidentiality" section.

What are the benefits? Through discussing the topic with the interviewer, your child will have the opportunity to reflect on their own online behaviour.

Does my child have to participate? No, your child's participation in this study is voluntary. In addition to your permission, your child must agree to take part in the session as well. Your child may decline to participate or to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect his/ her relationship with the college or the researcher. You and your child can agree now and change your mind later without any consequences.

How will my child's privacy and confidentiality be protected? If the participant agrees to take part, the discussion will be audio recorded, so the researcher can go through it later on and analyze the information. However, each participant will be given a unique pseudonym for anonymous recognition. Although, it is possible to use your child's words (in written form, using the pseudonym) when presenting the findings, the audio recording from the discussion will be kept strictly confidential and only the researcher and thesis supervisors will ever have access to it. Research records will be converted to a digital format and kept in the university online storage. Further, the information will be encrypted and password protected.

Whom to contact with questions about the study? Prior, during or after your child's participation you can contact the researcher by phone or send an email.

Elena Golemeeva
elena.golemeeva@hud.ac.uk
+44 (0) 454 020 906

This study has been reviewed and approved by The School Research Ethics Panel (School of Human and Health Sciences) at The University of Huddersfield.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to allow your child to participate in this research study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep by the researcher.

Signature of Parent/Legal guardian: …………………	Signature of Researcher: …………………….
Initials:……………………………………….	Print:…………………………………….
Date:………………………………………..	Date:……………………………………..

(One copy to be retained by Parent or Legal guardian / One copy to be retained by Researcher)

3.   Assent form and Information sheet for participants (Individual Interview)

HUDDERSFIELD
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Exploration in the 'Digital Age': *How the Internet informs young people's understanding of relationships and romantic expression.*

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

You are being invited to take part in an interview regarding your use of the Internet and how it informs you on various matters (such as your understanding of intimacy and romantic relationships). Before you decide to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with me if you wish. Please do not hesitate to ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the study about?
The purpose of this study is to get an insight of how young people use the Internet for sexual and romantic purposes.

Why I have been approached?
You have been asked to participate because you are a representative of the population of interest for the research (i.e. adolescent, 14-19 years old, resident of the United Kingdom)

Do I have to take part?
It is your decision whether or not you take part. If you decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form, and you will be free to leave the session at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationship with the researcher and/or the school.

What will I need to do?
If you agree to take part in the research you will be asked to participate in an approx. 60 minute interview that will take part in a private room within the primacies of the establishment (i.e. school/ youth group/ the library of the University of Huddersfield). Alternatively, if you decide not to attend in person you can still take part, by receiving link to a web address (**Qualtrics**) and submit your answers online.

Will my identity be disclosed?
No your identity will remain anonymous. If you agree to take part, the discussion will be audio recorded, so the researcher can go through it later on and analyze the information. However, you will be given a unique pseudonym for anonymous recognition. It is anticipated that your words might be used (in written form, using the pseudonym) when presenting the findings in the research thesis or further publications.

What will happen to the information?
The legal basis for the collection of the data is a task in the public interest. The University of Huddersfield is responsible for the secure management of the data, and the audio recordings/ Qualtrics transcripts from the interview will be kept strictly confidential and only the researcher and thesis supervisors will ever have access to it. Research records will be converted to a digital format by the researcher and kept in the university online storage. Further, the information will be password protected. You can contact the University Solicitor (as the Data Protection Officer) if you wish to complain about the management of the data. If you are not satisfied, you can take your complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Data will be stored for 10 years and then destroyed to ensure transparency of the project.

What are the risks for the participant? There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. However, if any of the information shared places you at risk, or incriminates you, the interviewer is required to notify the safeguarding officer.

For safety purposes, please provide the following information:

Version 36: dated 01.02.2019

Are you affected by some medical condition (e.g. asthma, diabetes, allergy)? Yes/No
If Yes, please state here………………………………………………..

What are the benefits? Through discussing the topic with the interviewer, you will have the opportunity to reflect on your own online behaviour.

If during or after the discussion you experience any emotional distress that you would like to discuss with someone, please do not hesitate to contact any of the following helplines:

ChildLine	0800 1111	childline.org.uk	Free 24-hour helpline for children and young people in the UK.
THE MIX	N/A	themix.org.uk	Online guide to life for 16-25 year olds. Straight-talking emotional support is available 24 hours a day. Chat about any issue on the moderated discussion boards and live chat room.
YOUTH ACCESS	020 8772 9900	youthaccess.org.uk	Operates a network of membership organisations who provide local information, advice and counselling services. The Youth Access website and helpline can direct you to services in your area.
SAMARITANS	116 123 (freephone)	jo@samaritans.org samaritans.org	Emotional support for anyone feeling down, experiencing distress or struggling to cope.

Who can I contact for further information about the research?
If you require any further information about the research, please contact me on:

Main contact:
Elena Golemeeva (Researcher)
elena.golemeeva@hud.ac.uk

Thesis supervisor:
Dr Jo Woodiwiss
j.woodiwiss@hud.ac.uk

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CONSENT FORM PARTICIPANTS

Exploration in the 'Digital Age': *How the Internet informs young people's understanding of relationships and romantic expression.*

It is important that you read, understand and sign the consent form. Your contribution to this research is entirely voluntary and you are not obliged in any way to participate.

I have been fully informed of the nature and aims of this research as outlined in the Information sheet version 36, dated 01.02.2019. ☐

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reason ☐

I give permission for my words to be quoted (by use of pseudonym i.e. anonymously) ☐

I understand that the information collected will be kept in secure conditions for a period of 10 years at the University of Huddersfield ☐

I understand that **NO** person other than the researcher and thesis supervisors will have access to the audio recordings from the interview. ☐

I understand that **NO** information included in the report could lead to my identification. ☐

If you are satisfied with the information provided and you consent to take part in this project please put a tick in the box aligned to each sentence and sign below.

Signature of Participant:…………………….	Signature of Researcher:………………
Initials:……………………………………..	Print:……………………………………
Date:………………………………………..	Date:……………………………………….

(One copy to be retained by Participant / One copy to be retained by Researcher)

Version 36: dated 01.02.2019

4. Consent form and Information sheet for parent/legal guardian (Individual Interview)

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Exploration in the 'Digital Age': *How the Internet informs young people's understanding of relationships and romantic expression.*

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENT/ LEGAL GUARDIAN

You are being contacted as the parent/ guardian/ gatekeeper of a prospective research study participant. The information provided in this form should help you decide whether or not to let your child participate in this research study. The purpose of this study is to get an insight into what young people in the UK do online, who they communicate with, what messages they receive from the Internet as well as how the Internet informs them on various topics (such as intimacy and romantic relationships). The findings from the research might help us create online environment that offers freedom but also safety and guidance to young people.

What is my child going to be asked to do? Your child will agree on an individual interview regarding their use of the Internet. The interviewer will introduce the topic and guide the participant through the discussion by asking questions about popular networks (e.g. Facebook, Snapchat) and activities (e.g. SEM, texting) among teenagers as well as the context in which these practices occur. If you as well as the young person agree to take part in the process, it will be a single session with an approximate duration of 60 minutes. The meeting will be held within the primacies of the establishment (i.e. school/ youth group/ the library of the University of Huddersfield). Alternatively, in case your child cannot attend the Interview in person, he/she can still take part by submitting the answers through online software (**Qualtrics**) used for anonymous collection and analyses of data.

Why was my child approached?
Your child has been asked to participate because he/she is a representative of the population of interest for the research (i.e. adolescent, 14-19 years old, resident of the United Kingdom)

What are the risks for the participant? There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. However, if any of the information shared places your child at risk, or incriminates him/her, the interviewer is required to notify the safeguarding officer.

For safety purposes, please provide the following information:

Is she/he affected by some medical condition (e.g. asthma, diabetes, allergy)? **Yes/No**
If **Yes**, please state here…………………………………………………

Also see "privacy and confidentiality" section.

What are the benefits? Through discussing the topic with the interviewer, your child will have the opportunity to reflect on their own online behaviour.

Does the child have to participate? No, child's participation in this study is voluntary. In addition to your permission, the child must agree to take part in the session as well. The child may decline to participate or to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect his/ her relationship with the college/school/youth group or the researcher. You and the child can agree now and change your mind later without any consequences.

How will child's privacy and confidentiality be protected? If the participant agrees to take part, the discussion will be audio recorded, so the researcher can go through it later on and analyze the information. However, each participant will be given a unique pseudonym for anonymous recognition. It is possible to use child's words (in written form, using the pseudonym) when presenting the findings in the research thesis or future publications. The legal basis for the collection of the data is a task in the public interest. The University of Huddersfield is responsible for the secure management of the data, and the audio recordings/ Qualtrics transcripts from the interview will be kept strictly confidential and only the researcher and thesis supervisors will ever have access to it. Research records will be converted to a digital format by the researcher and kept in the university online
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storage. Further, the information will be password protected. The data subject should contact the University Solicitor (as the Data Protection Officer) if they wish to complain about the management of their data. If they are not satisfied, they may take their complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Data will be stored for 10 years and then destroyed to ensure transparency of the project.

Whom to contact with questions about the study? Prior, during or after child's participation you can contact the researcher via email.

Main contact:
Elena Golemeeva (Researcher)
elena.golemeeva@hud.ac.uk

Thesis supervisor:
Dr Jo Woodiwiss
j.woodiwiss@hud.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed and approved by The School Research Ethics Panel (School of Human and Health Sciences) at The University of Huddersfield.

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CONSENT FORM PARENT/ LEGAL GUARDIAN

Exploration in the 'Digital Age': *How the Internet informs young people's understanding of relationships and romantic expression.*

It is important that you read, understand and sign the consent form. Your child contribution to this research is entirely voluntary and he/she is not obliged in any way to participate.

I have been fully informed of the nature and aims of this research as outlined in the Information sheet version 37, dated 01.02.2019	☐
I understand that my child has the right to withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reason for that	☐
I give permission for my child's words to be quoted (by use of pseudonym i.e. anonymously)	☐
I understand that the information collected will be kept in secure conditions for a period of 10 years at the University of Huddersfield	☐
I understand that **NO** person other than the researcher and thesis supervisors will have access to the audio recordings of my child.	☐
I understand that **NO** information included in the report could lead to my child's identification.	☐

If you are satisfied with the information provided and you consent for your child to take part in this project, please put a tick in the box aligned to each sentence and sign below. THANK YOU.

Signature of Parent/ Legal guardian:………	Signature of Researcher:………………
Initials:………………………………………	Print:…………………………………
Date:…………………………………………	Date:…………………………………

(One copy to be retained by Participant / One copy to be retained by Researcher)

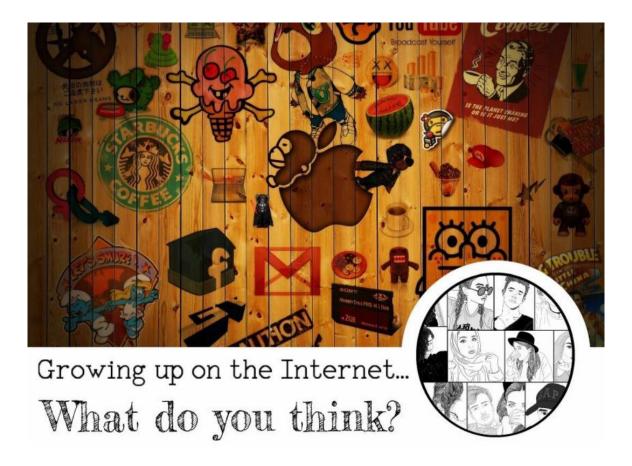Version 37: dated 01.02.2019   3

Appendix D

Demographic Information

Please write down a nickname for your anonymous identification (e.g. Billy Jean)

……….…………

1. How old are you? ……………
2. Which area do you live in? ……………
3. Name of school/college/youth service attended? ……………
4. Which of the following best describes your sexuality?
   - ☐ Bisexual
   - ☐ Gay
   - ☐ Heterosexual or 'straight'
   - ☐ Lesbian
   - ☐ Queer
   - ☐ Prefer not to say

   None of these (Please, specify) ……………

5. Which of the following best describes your current gender identity? (Please tick all that apply)
   - ☐ Female
   - ☐ Gender fluid
   - ☐ Gender non-binary
   - ☐ Genderqueer
   - ☐ Intersex
   - ☐ Male
   - ☐ Trans
   - ☐ Prefer not to say

   None of these (Please, specify) ……………

Appendix E

Poster/ Flyer used to advertise the research

1. Poster for Focus group

We are seeking volunteers (ages 14-18) to give us a glimpse of young peoples' interaction with the Internet. We want to know from you how modern teenagers make sense of their emerging sexual and romantic feelings through the use of the virtual world as well as what messages they receive from it. For the purpose we are planning to organize group discussions with 6 to 7 representatives that will give voice to millions. The findings from the research might help us create online environment that offers freedom and guidance for young people. Join us for a snack and friendly chat.

If you think of taking part, you can get a full Information sheet and consent forms from Mr. / Mrs. X, located (Floor, Room).

Meetings will be held next (Date/Times) at (Room).

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THE AWARDS
AWARD WINNER

Who is leading the project?

Elena Golemeeva
PhD Researcher
Department of Psychology
University of Huddersfield
elena.golemeeva@hud.ac.uk

2. Poster for Individual Interview

We are seeking volunteers (ages 14-19) to give us a glimpse of how they interact with the Internet. We want to understand through you how young people interact with the Internet as well as what messages they receive from it on important topics such as relationships, dating, sexuality, and etc...

For the purpose we are planning to organize individual face-to-face interviews with the braves among you that are ready to share their online experience. Alternatively if you are unable to attend in person, you can still take part by receiving the questions and submitting your opinion entirely via e-mail.

If this sounds interesting and you would like further information, drop us an e-mail.

Who is leading the project?

Elena Golemeeva
PhD Researcher
Department of Psychology
University of Huddersfield
elena.golemeeva@hud.ac.uk

3. Poster for Individual Interview (+online)

Appendix F

Focus Group Interview Script

I. Preparation / set up

The facilitator will arrive at the location 30 minutes before the participants to ensure:

a) Domestic arrangements and any refreshments are in place;

b) The room and seating arrangements enable participants to see and hear one another;

c) Set up recording device and make sure it captures the sound equally well from each seat;

d) The venue is comfortable and conducive for discussion.

II. Meeting participants

Upon arrival participants will be greeted by the moderator. They will be offered light snack or beverage. Also each individual will be given a tag with pseudonym to be referred to during the meeting. Students will be given starting time 15 minutes prior to the actual time, to ensure that everything will be set up and individuals will be ready to begin on time.

III. Introduction and Instructions (This part will take up to 5 minutes)

Hello, my name is Elena and I am a postgraduate researcher from the University of Huddersfield. As you already know, today we are going to speak about the role of the Internet as an arena for romantic experiences and sexual knowledge. Although the conditions of the discussion are provided through the Information sheet I would like to remind you to:

- Make sure your mobile devices are on silence mode? If you need to answer an important call or text, please do that in front of the room and join the conversation again.

- Also, keep in mind that you are participating in this project anonymously so please address everyone in the room by their tag number. Be thoughtful about the information you share and remember that everything said during the discussion should stay in the room.

- As you know, this conversation will be recorded, hence, it is essential that we take turns as we speak and not interrupt each other or talk at the same time.

- You can expect this discussion to last about 60 minutes.

At this point, group members can quickly introduce themselves:

Let's do a quick round of introduction. Can each of you tell the group your tag number, age and what grade are you in?

IV. Interview (55 minutes, approximately 11 minutes per question)

In this discussion, I am looking for different opinions and perspectives on the topic, meaning that there are no right or wrong answers. Everyone's views are welcomed and important.

---

1. How you use the Internet? Think about your online activity on a daily basis, from the time you wake up in the morning, through the day, till you go back to sleep. (This is a conversational start in order to put the interviewees at their ease. I am trying to get a sense of their overall digital engagement)

2. Who you communicate with through the Internet?

3. How would you describe Social Media? (Discuss their use of Social Media- e.g. Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat)

4. What is your experience of using the Internet to gain understanding about relationships, dating, and sexual interactions?

5. What are your thoughts on looking for sexual health information online?

Closing: 6. Does anyone have any additional comments that have come to mind or questions? I think we've come to the end of our conversation. Thank you for your participation and honest responses– you were tremendously helpful.

V. Wrap-up:

At this point the group discussion will finish. The moderator will express gratitude to all participating in the session and remind them that what was said in the room should stay in the room. After students leave the room, the researcher will collect all side notes, the script and audio recordings in a briefcase. Then, the room will be tidied up and all rubbish will be collected and disposed. Once, everything is arranged the moderator will inform the school management that the session is over and leave.

Appendix G

Individual Interview Guide

Hello, my name is Elena and I am a postgraduate researcher from the University of Huddersfield. The purpose of this interview is to understand how you use the Internet and social media as an arena for romantic experiences and sexual knowledge. I am also talking with other young people your age. I am looking for different opinions on the topic, meaning that there is no right or wrong answer. Everyone's opinion is welcome and important.

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? (You might want to say a bit about how old you are, what kind of things you like to do, do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend?)

2. Can you tell me a bit about how you might use the Internet? (You might want to say how often you might use the Internet and the kind of things you do or look at online. Also, what kind of sites you might visit and whether you use different sites for different things.)

3. Who you communicate with on the Internet? (You might want to say what is your relationship with the people you talk to online e.g. friends, family, partner, others; describe what kind of things you talk about/ exchange?

4. Now I will go through few scenarios, and after each one we can discuss it:

Scenario I

Pippa is 14 years-old. Growing up she was always interested in dating boys. One day she watched the movie "Twilight". During one of the more intimate scenes, she felt strong sexual attraction towards the main female character/ main actress. Since then Pippa is questioning her sexuality. What might you say to Pippa and what advice might you offer her? (Where do you think she might find further advice / information).

Scenario II

Tom has been dating his girlfriend for over a year now. They will often discuss the 'next step' of their relationship, but Tom himself has a lot of questions in terms of what contraception to use, is it going to be painful, how to approach the situation step-by-step so it would not be awkward for anyone. Where do you think might be good for Tom to go for advice and information before he 'takes things further'?

Scenario III

Jack is 12 years-old and in four months he will turn 13. Over the past year he has noticed a number of changes related to the way his body works, such as morning erections and strong body odor. Jack feels a bit concerned and he would like to know whether this is normal and how to better manage such instances. Where do you think might be good for Jack to turn for advice and/or information?

5. Have you ever used the Internet to find out about sex or explore your sexuality, and if so can you tell me about that? (You might want to say something about the kinds of things you wanted to find out about? Where/ what kind of sites you visited? Whether you found them useful or not? How much time you might have spent on them?)

6. There has been a lot of public concern about the amount of time young people spend watching porn, with some suggesting that most young people learn what they know about sex and the body from watching porn. What do you think about that? (Do you think lots of young people watch porn? Do you or the people you know watch porn? Do you think watching porn might be the same for girls, boys or trans young people? Do you think we should be concerned if young people are watching porn?)

7. There has been a lot of public concern about sexting among young people. What do you think about sexting among young people? (Do you think lots of young people exchange sexually suggestive messages? Do you or the people you know sext e.g. via text or voice messages/ image or videos/ voice or video call? Do you think sexting might have the same impact on girls, boys, LGBT+ young people? Do you think it is concerning if young people are sexting?)

8. Have you ever been asked about any of this before? If so, could you describe who you talked to and what was the conversation about?

9. Before we finish, is there anything else you think i should have asked you or wish you had said?

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix H

Data Collection Timeline

Table 3. Timeline for completion of Focus Groups.

	Sep 2017	Oct 2017	Nov 2017	Dec 2017	Jan 2018	Feb 2018	March 2018	April 2018	May 2018	June 2018	July 2018	Aug 2018
Contacting Establishments												
Completed Focus Groups						G1	G2	G3		G4		
Canceled Focus Groups	G2		G5		G6			G7	G8/G9			
Focus Groups Data Analyses												
Interview Script Writing												

G1- Completed Focus Group with LGBT+ youth group located in a large Northwestern city
G2- Completed Focus Group with College located in a large Northern market town
G3- Completed Focus Group with School located in a large Northern market town
G4- Completed Focus Group with School located in a midsize Northern city
G5- Canceled interview with Sea Cadets located in a large Northern market town
G6- Withdrawn participation from Non binary and Transgender youth group located in a large Northwestern city
G7- Withdrawn participation from LGBT+ youth group based in a port city in Northern England
G8/G9- Withdrawn participation from two school located in midsize Northern towns

Table 4. Timeline for completion of Individual Interviews.

	Sep 2018	Oct 2018	Nov 2018	Dec 2018	Jan 2019	Feb 2019	March 2019	April 2019	May 2019	June 2019	July 2019	Aug 2019
Recruitment Indiv Interviews												
SREP application												
SREP approval												
Pilot interviews												
Script revision												
Completed F2F interviews							5	2	3	2		
Online interviews						1		2				
Canceled interviews								1			1	
Data analyses												

Numbers indicate the amount of individual interviews carried out (colored in blue)/canceled (colored in red) at that period.

Appendix I

Focus Group Themes

Compensating lack of knowledge through Q&A and medical sites, blogs, SRE and LGBT+ influencers and activists, sexually explicit materials.

The Internet plays important role in existing or potential romantic relationships (flirting/sexting, self-disclosure)

Posting contents related to their appearance, lifestyle and interests (constructing idealised online persona).

Using online communication channels to reinforce existing relationships, but meeting new people is common.

Social media is at the epicenter of their online activity (for communication, self-expression, and information)

Sexual Information

Intimate Relationships

Online Self-expression

Online Communication

General Use