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Teachers' Discursive Constructions of Adolescent Sexting, Consent and Gender

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ABSTRACT

Sexting is the exchange of sexually suggestive content through technological means. Despite being tasked with addressing such incidents in schools, teachers are underrepresented in sexting research. The present study explores teachers' discursive constructions of sexting, consent and gender using Critical Discursive Psychology, analysing 30 interviews with educators and safeguarding staff. The first key finding uncovers the interpretative repertoire of 'Sexting as a threat'. This repertoire showcases the gendered positions teachers assign adolescents to, positioning 'Boys as oppressors; girls as victims of sexting', with girls being simultaneously constructed as sexting to attract boys' attention through the 'Girls as the validation-seeking Other' position. Regarding consent, we explicate three repertoires: 'Consent as an oxymoron in relation to non-consensual distribution', 'Consent as illegal' and 'Coercion as a power imbalance'. We contextualise and discuss these findings within the socio-political discursive terrain. We highlight their ideological implications and the need to initiate emancipatory positions and discussions regarding inclusive sexting education. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's Community and Social Impact Statement.

1 | Introduction

Sexting is the exchange of sexually suggestive photos, videos or texts through technological means (e.g., computers, mobile phones, applications; Van Ouytsel et al. 2017). This phenomenon has received prominent attention during the past decade (Madigan et al. 2018) due to public and media panics relating to its consequences (Bragard and Fisher 2022). Indeed, one study claims that 70% of young people who have engaged in sexting have experienced sexting coercion, often resulting in negative emotional impact (Englander 2015). By age 18, this percentage accounts for 1 in 3 young people in total (Thulin et al. 2023), raising concerns regarding the phenomenon's prevalence. Whilst engaging in sexting can be a product of pressure and coercion (Lemke and Rogers 2020), it can also be an activity related to sexual exploration. However, adolescent sexting poses legal consequences. In the United Kingdom, according to Section 1 of the Protection of Children Act (1978), it is an offence to distribute, produce or own sexual visual material of individuals under 18 years old. The police often treat youth sexting as a safeguarding issue, yet such incidents could result in prosecution of adolescents, even those who have been coerced (Reeve 2017; Salter, Crofts, and Lee 2013).

Issues of safeguarding are particularly relevant in schools, where teachers are often interpellated as responsible for dealing with adolescents (York, MacKenzie, and Purdy 2021). As teachers are one of the key stakeholders involved in the monitoring of adolescent sexting, it is important to explore how they make sense of the phenomenon. Therefore, this paper focuses on teacher's

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discursive constructions of adolescent sexting, gender and coercion. To situate our position, we first outline the approach that we take towards gender and sexuality. Next, we discuss literature on gendered agency and coercion in relation to sexting, as well as research focusing on the gendered positions of girls and boys who sext. We then discuss the limited research on teachers and sexting, before introducing the present study.

2 | Discourses of Gender, Sexuality and Coercion

Our conceptualisation of gender aligns with a social constructionist focus on language as the site where knowledge is constituted. Our Critical Discursive Psychology perspective (CDP: Seymour-Smith 2017; Wetherell 2003) similarly moves away from treating language as a transparent medium, instead shifting to a focus on language as 'action' – it performs particular functions. CDP treats gender as something that is 'done' in social interaction. For example, Edley (2001) highlighted that gender is a flexible identity that is discursively performed in social interaction. However, CDP combines this micro focus with a broader/macro consideration of the socio-historical context in which gender is produced. Thus, in their research on masculinities, Edley and Wetherell (1997) combine the notion that individuals are positioned by discourses in the Foucauldian sense, yet actively recreate positions for themselves.

As a result, our research is informed by scholars who take a social constructionist stance to understanding gender, (hetero)sexuality and coercion. According to Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1994), heterosexuality is subject to social and political control–they argued that 'men and (especially) women are coerced through a variety of forces including rape, child marriage, sexual harassment, pornography and economic sanctions' (p. 309). This has implications for women's agency, defined by Gavey (2005 p. 103) as their ability to be 'active, determining subjects'. Gavey questioned the limits of women's agency, pointing out that women must police their own behaviour; if their sexuality is perceived as unrestricted, discursive resources are employed to police them, including characterisations as 'sluts' or 'whores'. Women are arguably trapped in what is referred to as a discourse of the sexual double standard—specifically women are positioned as either virtuous or promiscuous (Gavey 2005). Gavey's post structural approach places more emphasis on dominant discourses, in contrast to our CDP approach which considers both the ideological construction of gender and how these unfold on the ground, such that matters of agency can be both invoked and resisted (Wetherell and Edley 1997). Despite recent discourses of women moving away from a position of chaste or passive sexual objects (Farvid and Braun 2006), they now have to negotiate new pressures of being 'sexy', available and experienced (Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010; Farvid and Braun 2006; Gill 2008). If women choose to withhold sex, they risk being called 'frigid' or 'uptight' (Gavey 2005).

3 | Gendered Agency and Coercion in Relation to Sexting

Sexting is characterised by the same gendered power dynamics as physical sexual encounters described above. Scholars argue that consent and coercion are shaped by power dynamics rooted in societal norms favouring boys (Gavey 2018). Such concepts perpetuate the notion that boys possess a stronger biological sexual drive, and frame girls as obligated to fulfil male sexual urges (Gavey 2018). This narrative contributes to the normalisation of male sexual aggression, and diminishes girls' sexual agency (Gavey 2018). The impact of this is that girls often encounter coercion and pressures to sext (Gavey et al. 2024). Girls often face victim blaming, while boys are portrayed as sexually aggressive predators. However, girls are also depicted as naïve victims (Setty 2019), and scholars argue that discussions surrounding sexting are characterised by a 'missing discourse' concerning girls' desires and agency (Tolman 2012). Discussions around girls' agency have sparked academic debates (Setty 2019); these debates are primarily centred on acknowledging girls' agency whilst recognising the heavily gendered and often oppressing cultural norms they must navigate, as well as their repercussions (Bay-Cheng 2019; Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010; Gavey 2012). From this, questions arise regarding what female sexuality means in a sexist world (Gavey 2012).

Madigan et al. (2018) highlighted that although the prevalence of experiences with coercion are broadly similar between genders, there is a difference in how boys and girls navigate this situation. Girls were often coerced into sending photos by persistent requests, anger and threats from male peers, and many complied in an effort to navigate the aggression, as refusal often led to further pressure or threats (Thomas 2018). Boys who experience coercion feel unable to deal with it due to challenges associated with disclosing experiences of coercion in terms of masculinity. More specifically, masculinity is constructed through the societal belief that boys are inherently sexually aggressive due to male hormones, with the implication they always want to engage in sexual acts. This can lead to feelings of isolation when they cannot disclose or articulate being coerced (Hunehäll Berndtsson 2022).

4 | Research Focusing on the Gendered Positions of Girls and Boys in Relation to Sexting

The competing discourses discussed above are reflected in adolescents' perspectives. Thorburn et al. (2021) employed participatory action research and conducted a series of three workshops with 28 girls. Thorburn et al. (2021) suggested that sexting is 'shaped by, and reproduces, the gendered power dynamics and social pressures underpinned by dominant discourses of heterosexuality' (p. 5). For example, girls suggested that they face pressure to sext, experiencing both direct coercion and also more subtle modes, such as the push to reciprocate 'nudes' on receipt of unwanted 'dick pics', a practice that was often worked up as normalised. Girls highlighted how a delicate balance was needed—if they refused to reciprocate such requests, this could result in social isolation or even harassment. Some participants noted a tension between their agency or empowerment to sext, and the gendered social pressure inherent in this practice. While there was a pressure to sext, there was a competing pressure to not sext. For example, the gendered double standard meant that girls' engagement in sexting was scrutinised and policed discursively via slut-shaming, whereas boys did not encounter the equivalent sanctions. As a result of these competing constructions, girls suggested that the discursive terrain they had to navigate was often built upon expectations of purity and abstinence.

Using the same data as Thorburn et al. (2021), Gavey et al. (2024) subsequently focused on how girls understood harm prevention advice related to sexting. They used two sources to stimulate discussion—first, texts from New Zealand's online safety agency's webpage on sexting which is aimed at parents, and second, an overview of findings from a study of young women's and men's views about sexting. The girls were critical of the way the advice framed girls as both victims and sources of problematic sexting. Gavey et al. (2024), p.334 highlighted 'the girls observation of a gendered economy of responsibility, wherein girls are both hypervisible and responsibilised as 'sexters', while the role of young men is largely hidden from view'. Some girls linked this to wider societal understanding about heterosexuality, where society is characterised by a belief that boys are sexually driven, which is often used to minimise and excuse their 'coercive or unethical behaviour and blame women for their own abuse' (p. 335). Girls suggested that online safety advice should shift the focus from not sending nudes to addressing the unethical use of them (often by boys), and the need to challenge rhetoric related to gender inequality. It was argued that currently, girls have to negotiate their freedom of sexual agency against the risk associated with a world with gender inequality.

5 | Teachers and Sexting

There is currently limited research about sexting in educational settings. However, some researchers have explored sexting more broadly in terms of computer and internet use in educational contexts and media literacy (Nguyên and Mark 2014; O'Bannon and Thomas 2015; Tomczyk 2019). For example, Thomas, O'Bannon, and Bolton (2013) examined teachers' perceptions of obstacles to classroom- mobile phone use and 24.4% of the participants perceived sexting as a key challenge. Such challenges could be related to teachers and adolescents having different conceptualisations of sexting; this can be seen in Barrense-Dias, Suris, and Akre (2019), who employed a qualitative approach to compare the definitions of teachers, parents and young adults/adolescents in Switzerland. They used focus groups and thematic content analysis to investigate how sexting was defined. Teachers were unfamiliar with the term 'sexting' and did not realise it could involve text messages. Teachers and parents expressed more concerns about the online safety of various applications than young people did. They also believed that sexting encompassed aspects such as blackmail, harassment and the non-consensual sharing of explicit content, which differed from adolescents, who considered coercive sexting as primarily harassment.

The only existing study—that we are aware of—to explore teachers' perspectives on adolescent sexting was conducted by (Oliver and Flicker (2023)). They conducted interviews with 35 teachers in the Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum, and focused on teachers' practical responses to sexting. Teachers suggested they felt out of touch with technology compared to young people and, without training, struggled to incorporate technology-related topics such as sexting in the curriculum. A limited number of the participants who taught sexting education tried to initiate conversations around safe sexting, consensual sexting and non-consensual dissemination. However, teachers typically employed messages of abstinence, warning young people about the dangers of sexting. Abstinence was believed to be best presented via legal routes, such as inviting police to give guest lectures. Many of the teachers evoked traditional gender norms when discussing girls, with the consequences they face being the focus of educational sexting discourse, specifically in terms of the non-consensual sharing of their images.

6 | Scope of the Present Study

Teachers constitute a highly understudied group. Oliver and Flicker's study (Oliver and Flicker (2023)) usefully explores sexting education from a Canadian educational context but does not include how teachers—who are often responsible for handling sexting incidents at school—conceptualise and construct sexting, consent and gender, which are key factors to be discussed in sexting education. We do not currently know how teachers have been influenced by the rapidly changing societal and cultural contextual factors regarding consent, coercion and gender in relation to adolescent sexting. Specifically, the field lacks an understanding of how teachers make sense of the social and gendered norms and contexts influencing sexting (Klettke, Hallford, and Mellor 2014; Setty 2019). It has been suggested that more qualitative studies are needed in relation to sexting in educational settings (Anastassiou 2017), and so exploring this research gap can be beneficial both in terms of research and real-world implications.

Our study explored how teachers in the United Kingdom made sense of adolescent sexting using CDP (Edley 2001). Through this methodological and theoretical approach, it is possible to explore the way that teachers mobilise broad patterns of understanding regarding adolescent sexting, combined with attention to how adolescents are positioned within these in relation to gender. Our primary contribution lies in expanding knowledge of these discursive practices. Discourse both constructs and is constructed by social reality (Locke and Budds 2020). Therefore, exploring the discursive manoeuvring of teachers at both macro and micro levels can provide an important foundation for the design of future interventions, policies, and sexting education that do not reproduce gendered or other power dynamics. This contribution to the literature can lead to more inclusive knowledge production, informing workshops for adolescents as well as those addressing the areas where teachers may need additional support. Moreover, such research can provide guidelines on how to handle sexting incidents in a manner that tackles and subverts societal power imbalances.

7 | Methodology

7.1 | Study Design and Data

We conducted semi-structured individual interviews with teachers and school staff working with adolescents, to explore how they make sense of adolescent sexting, consent and gender. The research project took place during the Covid-19 lockdown. Consequently, the interviews were conducted through Microsoft

Teams or via a phone call and were audio-recorded via a digital recorder. They were conducted by the first author, a young, white, immigrant woman and lasted approximately an hour (ranging from 24.42 to 63.08 min). The interview schedule was based on four conceptual pillars: How participants frame sexting; Consent and coercion; Sexting education; and Gender roles in relation to sexting, consent and coercion.

Interviews are a common form of data collection within CDP but do come with contingent problems that deserve some attention (Potter and Hepburn 2005), such as being underpinned by certain concerns of the social scientist conducting or interpreting them. The stake and interest of both the interviewer and interviewee can be complex, as the interviewee can be recruited under certain categories but could also belong to other categories of relevance to the research question at hand. Our participants were recruited under the category of teachers, but they may also categorise themselves in other ways; as a result, participants may have responded based on their interests, and managed these issues within their speech. Finally, it is suggested that in interviews, the interviewee is asked to act like a pseudo-scientist eliciting information about events, structures or concepts as a way to understand their lives or social reality (Potter and Hepburn 2005), for example here to theorise adolescent sexting behaviours. In the analysis we—where possible—include the interviewer's question.

However, Wetherell (2003) argues that the aforementioned criticisms are based on a misinterpretation of what constitutes context and discourse. In CDP, interviews explicate what is ideologically constructed as common sense, instead of whether participants' constructions are valid. The constructive process develops socio-historically through cultural negotiations, formulating positions and representations. Exchanges take place within a contextual history, where the ideologically hegemonic aspects are discursively employed as opposed to other competing constructions; what is absent from the discursive terrain showcases to us what is considered cultural common sense. The arguments against interviews assume that discursive elements can be separated from extra-discursive elements, via the boundaries set by the researcher. In this process, certain contextual factors are considered relevant, while others—located outside the immediate discussion—are seen as beyond the realm of discourse. However, CDP draws on a Foucauldian approach, with all social practices involving discourse, expanding the definition of discourse to encompass cultural and historical constructions. When people respond to interviews, they still employ constructions from the societal discursive terrain instead of conceptualising new elements.

7.2 | Participants

The inclusion criteria for participation were teachers or school staff with duties relevant to safeguarding or sext(ing) education and the Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) curriculum, who were currently working with adolescents aged 12–18 in the United Kingdom. The present dataset consisted of 30 individual interviews with teachers of adolescents. The age range was 24–55 years old. Seven participants self-identified as men and 23 self-identified as women (further information in Table 1).

8 | Analytic Approach and Procedure

CDP was employed, as it effectively combines the exploration of both identity work and the wider reproduction of (often oppressive) socio-political apparatuses (Wetherell and Edley 2014). CDP explicates micro- and macro-discursive constructions and interactions by explicating fine-grain elements of speech and the broader socio-political context of discursive constructions (Wetherell and Edley 2009). It relies on the Gramscian conceptualisation of ideological hegemony (Bates 1975), suggesting that we construct and are simultaneously constructed, and that we produce but are also produced by ever-changing—albeit ideologically dominant—concepts, often constructed as societal common sense (Edley 2001; Locke and Budds 2020).

The main analytical tools of CDP are interpretative repertoires, subject positions and ideological dilemmas (our analysis did not employ the concept of ideological dilemmas thus, we do not discuss the concept here).

- Interpretative repertoires (IR) are rhetorical depositories via which we formulate interactions and construct individuals, incidents and phenomena (Edley 2001; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell 1998). They constitute familiar patterns of arguments arising from our societal notions of common sense (Edley 2001; Potter and Wetherell 1987).
- Subject positions: Ideology and discourse shape societal constructions, making us subjects as well as producers of discourse (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). As Locke and Budds (2020) suggest, we are both producers as well as products of the discursive terrain. Via discourse, we assign and are assigned social roles based on pre-existing identity concepts, reflecting cultural stereotypes (Althusser 2014; Davies and Harré 1990). CDP examines the socio-cultural discourses that reinforce but also disrupt identities or constructs (Edley 2001). Therefore, we construct individuals ideologically, placing them in positions (Edley 2001). An individual is constructed and often re-constructed in social interactions; thus identity is flexible and fluid, based on how individuals are positioned in the discursive terrain and the societal positions and discursive affordances. Simply put, our constructions consist of positions, signifiers and evaluations which allow agency and plurality in our identity formulation (Davies and Harré 1990).

A simplified version of the Jefferson transcription notation was employed to transcribe the interviews (Potter and Wetherell 1987) (Table A1). Post-transcription, the analytic procedure entailed repeated listening of interviews and reading of transcripts by the first author. Next, interpretative repertoires and subject positions were mapped out. To analyse IR and positioning, we followed Locke and Budds's (2020) steps on conducting CDP. Initially, the researcher familiarised themselves with the data, and conducted line-by-line coding, which included both description and interpretation. Afterwards, our attention shifted towards identifying discursive constructions and their action orientation elements. We then identified interpretative repertoires by explicating societally recognisable discursive constructions, aiming to contextualise the societal reality constructed by our participants, while also noting the constructs that were resisted or absent in the interviews.

TABLE 1 | Participant demographic information.

Int number	Name	Age	Gender	Position
1	Mia	48	F	STEM teacher, College
2	Nana	25	F	Geography teacher, Secondary
3	Marianne	35	F	Computer Science Secondary
4	Nate	45	M	English Secondary School
5	Lindsay	46	F	Science, 11–18 Secondary
6	Barbara	25	F	English, Secondary
7	Eve	24	F	English, Secondary
8	Sam	34	M	Maths, 16–19
9	Elisabeth	26	F	Science, Secondary School
10	Bella	29	F	Maths, High School
11	Fiona	29	F	NQT Science/PSHE Secondary School
12	Sharon	37	F	Assistant Headteacher, wellbeing
13	Nicolas	28	M	PT Neuroscience Teacher
14	Nikita	45	F	History/PSHE, Secondary
15	Pipa	40	F	Special Education Computer Science
16	Hubert	42	M	History, Secondary
17	Moira	51	F	SEND
18	Felicia	49	F	Safeguarding officer, Secondary humanities, PSHE/Sex Education
19	Lily	29	F	Module Leader
20	Freddy	45	M	Secondary PSHE/Specialist RE
21	Flora	33	F	Head of PSHE
22	Simone	44	F	SEND safeguarding lead
23	Vina	23	F	Sociology, College
24	Karen	55	F	Sociology and English
25	Harry	29	M	Music School/private lessons on instruments 4–65
26	Phil	28	M	History Teacher PSHE
27	Diane	27	F	Secondary School Science
28	Isla	42	F	Hospital Education
29	Charlotte	25	F	Languages, Secondary
30	Hailey	N/A	F	Citizenship Teacher

Furthermore, we observed common discursive constructions and their relationship to power dynamics. Finally, we pinpointed subject positions via the aforementioned IRs, and examined how issues of agency were addressed within these positions.

Separate word files were created where relevant data extracts pertaining to each of the analytic concepts were stored. The second author reviewed these files, and discussed any aspects that needed further clarification or checking with the first author, who then revised their analysis. During the write-up, the first author considered the function of the identified patterns. IRs and subject positions must explicate both practical and theoretical outcomes of the discursive constructions (Edley 2001). As a result, the analysis considered how certain affordances need to be challenged (e.g., portraying girls solely as having sexual agency to attract the male gaze) and discussed potential future positions (e.g., in the conclusion section, we address the existing discursive affordances and the absent positions in the discourse regarding gender and agency). These include portraying girls as agentic and desiring individuals, as well as the lack of discussions regarding non-cisgender and non-heterosexual individuals. The emergent analysis was then presented to the third and fourth authors—who do not have a background in CDP—as a means of sense-checking the understanding that was being developed in a broader context.

9 | Compliance With Ethical Standards

The study was approved by the BLSS Research Ethics Committee at Nottingham Trent University (reference number: 2021/297). The study adhered to the principles outlined by the British Psychological Society's code of human research ethics (Oates et al. 2021). As such, informed consent was obtained, and the safeguarding and legal aspects were in adherence with the United Kingdom legislative and institutional guidelines.

10 | Results

In this section, we outline four interpretative repertoires. The first, *Sexting as a threat,* positioned adolescents in relation to their gender; more specifically *Boys as oppressors; Girls as victims of sexting.* However, girls were also positioned as *The validation-seeking Other.* Next, we explicate three interpretative repertoires regarding consent: *Consent as an oxymoron in relation to non-consensual distribution; Consent as illegal;* and *Coercion as a power imbalance.*

11 | Interpretative Repertoire: Sexting as a Threat

The first IR frames sexting as a problematic phenomenon and threat to young people. Indeed, this was the most pervasive construction across the dataset, with 27 participants employing elements of this interpretative repertoire. Within this repertoire, sexting was framed as inherently dangerous, due to potential effects on mental health or non-consensual dissemination. Consider the excerpt below, where Phil answers the question 'how do you feel about adolescents getting involved in sexting':

Sexting here is constructed as something bearing lasting consequences due to the potential of non-consensual dissemination; this is achieved via the employment of the characterisations 'serious' and 'long term'. Phil highlights that his own approach 'always' stresses the lack of control element, and he invokes his teacher category to further legitimise his construction and to highlight his own stake as a someone who is responsible to discuss sexting with students at school. It is noteworthy that in line 4, there is a constructed assumption that the sexting content will be posted online, and students will lose control of it. This scenario is legitimised via the word 'fact' framing it as factual, as well as the extreme case formulation ('anything', line 4) (Pomerantz 1986). Young people are constructed as naïve ('they don't realise', line 5), a construction that is further legitimised via 'a lot'. Phil works up sexting as a threat to students' reputation via a show concession (Antaki and Wetherell 1999), initially suggesting that there is a reputational aftermath. Then—to showcase that he has considered alternative scenarios—he suggests that the photo will be taken down by the school, perhaps as a way to appear less negative about the consequences of sexting. However, afterwards, he resumes to the original point that the images online will not be forgotten as they 'could be in circulation somewhere'. He subsequently employs a script (Edwards 1994) which works as a cautionary tale; he works up the scenario of 'an incident' (a potential shared image) that a fellow classmate was aware of, who in this future scenario was interviewing them for a job. What is not directly said—but is implied—is that this could disrupt the sexter's chances of employment. The severity of the consequences is additionally highlighted by the repetition of the longevity of the dissemination's impact ('long term', line 9, 'in 20 years' time', line 11, 'years ago' in line 12). Furthermore, Phil suggests that sexting is also damaging regarding one's mental health, which is emphasised by the word 'fiercely'. Getting involved in sexting is constructed as making 'a mistake', further emphasising the construction of sexting as threatening and negative by nature.

Int 22-Phil, M, History Teacher/PSHE, 28 years old.

1 **P** it has serious long term repercussions on the young person and that
2 is something that I think schools really need to take seriously and
3 that (.) the approach that I've always use when teaching around is
4 the fact that they lose control of anything that's posted online(.)
5 and a lot of students don't realize that that the reputational
6 aftermath yes it goes down in school after a couple of weeks(.) but
7 it's not necessarily going to be forgotten about those images could
8 be in circulation somewhere(.) it could damage their reputation(.)
9 long term you're the person that is sitting next to them in class
10 I'm teaching in about it now(.) could be the person that's
11 interview them for a job in 20 years' time (.) and that's in the
12 back of their mind that incident happened years ago(.) it's also
13 fiercely damaging to the students(.) mental health(.) the whole
14 process afterwards when they realise they made a mistake (.) its
15 damaging (.) takes some time to get past that(.) so I think it's a
16 thoroughly negative experience for students

12 | Gendered Subject Positions: Boys as Oppressors; Girls as Victims of Sexting

The interpretative repertoire ‘*Sexting as a threat*’ created opposing gendered positions for adolescents. Girls were positioned as victims of societal pressure to sext, and teachers' constructions of sexting had a heavily cisgender gloss, despite the interviewer's questions being framed more openly. Consider the excerpt below:

Int 16- Hubert, M, History teacher in secondary school, 42years old.

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 1 A of boys or girls or transgender or non-binary(.)adolescents(.) who
 2   do you think might feel more pressure to comply with a request for
 3   sexually explicit pictures

 4 H okay(.)(inaudible)girls(.)girls(.)absolutely(.)and again(.)I don’t
 5   know(.)but I just think(.)I don’t think there’s any reason why this
 6   would be different than any other kind of (.) thing to do with (.)
 7   gender(.)sexual violence(.)or(.)or anything related(.)whereas(.)as I
 8   said a minute ago it’s 99% of the time(.)something bad(.)that a male
 9   does to a female (.)and I would think that(.) that I would think
10   probably the way it transpires(.)most of the time(.)in a bad
11   way(.)is of a boy saying to a girl come on(.)send me er what do they
12   call them a dick pic (.)or whatever(.)you know like(.)what are you
13   frigid or something(.)I wouldn’t(.)I didn’t know (.)the language
14   goes on(.)and then(.)and then the result is probably negative 99% of
15   the time(.)and it’s probably mostly negative for the girl
16   involved(.)and it’s probably a bit of a laugh for the boy or
17   something(.)and and probably affects the girl(.)more
18   emotionally(.)afterwards(.)if there is any fallout for that boy
19   probably doesn’t really care that much(.)you know I sent her a
20   picture of my bits(.)so(.)who cares(.)I don’t really care (.) you
21   know who cares(.)whatever(.)that’s just what I think I think it
22   mostly it’s(.)it’s(.)that kind of transaction a negative thing which
23   happens(.)initiated by a male to a female who feels pressure to do
24   that might or might not comply(.)and you know maybe 1%(.)1% of the
25   time(.)it might be empowering or fun or something but it’s probably
26   bad (.)most of the time(.)done by males against females(.)as like
27   anything else
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In Hubert's constructions above, one can observe the traditional gender norms of sexual violence, where girls are the victims and boys are the perpetrators (Ringrose, Regehr, and Whitehead 2021). Whilst the interviewer's question allows for the possibility of non-cisgender representations, participants (including Hubert above) routinely reference binary discourses of gender. Huberts' repetition of ‘girls’ (line 4) followed by ‘absolutely’, emphasises his response. The interviewer's question sets up Hubert up as a pseudo-scientist (Potter and Hepburn 2005), and it is evident through his use of ‘I don't know (.) but I just think’ that this assessment is a hypothesis, but one that he ‘thinks’ is valid. Hubert follows this assessment by aligning sexting with ‘any other kinds of things to do with gender (.) sexual violence (.) or (.) anything related’ reflecting the socio-cultural history of gender in relation to sexual violence. Following this, Hubert positions boys as sexually aggressive (lines 8–14), through the assessment of boys as doing ‘something bad’ (line 8). He employs the extreme case formulation ‘99% of the time’ (Pomerantz 1986) to work up the prevalence of such social injustices. The construction ‘male does to female’ (lines 8–9) paints the script of power/agency imbalance between boys and girls, holding boys accountable. The pressure that boys exercise upon girls is worked up via active voicing (line 11), which produces a vivid narrative of the power imbalance of the type of pressure that might be delivered by boys to girls. The hypothetical boy appears to actively perpetrate coercion and exert power by pressure to send ‘dick picks’ and using the word ‘frigid’, which is ideologically charged due to historical/cultural representations. Hubert distances himself from that vocabulary (lines 11–12) via the phrase ‘what do they call them’.

Hubert contrasts the binary experiences of girls and boys. Boys are positioned as engaging in sexting for amusement, while girls face societal scrutiny for their behaviour, which is heavily shaped by negative social constructs as described in the introduction. This juxtaposition is additionally carved in the consequences of sexting: the girl is positioned as probably being emotionally affected, whereas the boy as probably not caring. In Hubert's construction, girls are worked up as the ones having challenging sexting experiences. This is a strong juxtaposition, with Hubert's framing of boys as carefree regarding sexting contrasting with the gravity attached to acts of sexting coercion.

Sexting is framed as transactional via the sharing of images, yet Hubert employs active voicing to illustrate how boys may respond to the sharing of ‘my bits’. What is left unsaid is that girls may be more concerned (lines 17–18). Another contrasting construction is the transaction, framed as initiated by boys to girls who may feel pressure (or not) to comply (lines 21–24). Hubert employs a minimisation (Pomerantz 1986) that only 1% of sexting could be positive to emphasise his point. The negative consequences girls deal with are confessed as a problematic, yet universally accepted and a normalised script.

Teachers constructed sexting as an outcome of the pressure girls experience from boys or the societal norms promoting their sexualisation. In contrast, boys were positioned as benefiting from engaging in sexting without facing the scrutiny that girls do. Furthermore, boys were regularly positioned as coercive and pressuring girls to obtain sexting messages. However, there were alternative positioning of girls as illustrated in the section below.

12.1 | Subject Position: Girls as the Validation-Seeking Other

In addition to the positioning of girls as victims and boys as oppressors outlined above, teachers simultaneously positioned girls as *The validation-seeking Other*, a position carrying ideological tensions. Girls were framed as sexting to acquire the approval/interest of boys who could be their potential partners.

Int 22-Simone, F, SEND safeguarding lead, 44 years old.

```
1 A  (…)why do you think that some of adolescents sort of engage in sext
2    and others don’t?

3 S  um (.) I don’t know um(2) I think we(.)from again(.)from
4    experience(.)it seems to be(.)we have more gir::ls that send them um
5    I don’t know if that’s because they’re slightly more easily
6    persuaded(.)or I think there’s lots of reasons I think some might
7    need to get validation(.)and to have the compliment(.)and to have
8    the attention or they think well if I send it this boy is definitely
9    gonna like me(.)um again there’s(.) the not very nice(.)bit’s where
10   they’ve been groomed into it (.) or bullied into it or pressured
11   into it(.)or they think(.) if everyone’s doing I’ll do that their
12   that friend said that they did it so I’ll do it(.)or they just don’t
13   really think at all (laughs) and just do it because that’s(.)what
14   that’s(.)that’s kind of what they do
```

The interviewer's question is gender neutral, yet Simone responds tentatively, ‘I think’, testifying to her experience as a teacher, and using the generic ‘we’ (her school) to construct ‘we have more girls that send them’. The question posed by the interviewer entailed a binary (adolescents who sext and those who do not). Whilst the question did not include gender-specific language, it elicited a response related to gender. This could perhaps be attributed to the heavily gender-oriented hegemonic discourses associated with sexting (Gavey et al. 2024). Simone then addresses the ‘why’ part of the interviewer's question but in a comprehensive way that invokes several hypotheses based upon her membership category of ‘teacher’. First, girls are tentatively constructed as ‘slightly more easily persuaded’. Next, multiple reasons are oriented to: validation, compliments, attention. This three-part list (Jefferson 1990) is employed to paint an emphatic case regarding why girls engage in sexting. Another hypothesis follows, that the goal of a girl sexting is to secure a boy's attraction. The employment of ‘definitely’ here may indicate how culturally commonplace this construction is. After this more agentic positioning of girls, Simone returns to a coercive three-part list (Jefferson 1990) of groomed, bullied or pressured, which generalises a negative hypothesis. Final suggestions are related to peer conformity and the routine nature of sexting (lines 12–14).

Thus, while many of the hypotheses outlined by Simone position girls as victims or subject to gendered sexual scripts, this is juxtaposed with the position we have called *The validation seeking Other*. This affords girls some agency in contrast to girls as victims, yet this sense of agency is problematised. When girls are constructed as agentic sexters, they are not constructed as desiring subjects. Instead, they are worked up as sexting to acquire the approval/interest of boys who could be their potential partners, which then is formulated as being easily persuaded, thus denying girls any form of agency.

13 | Three Interpretative Repertoires of Consent

Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) suggest that interpretative repertoires are characterised by high variability. In our dataset, three different IRs were oriented to in relation to consent, and we outline these below.

13.1 | IR: Consent as an Oxymoron in Relation to Non-consensual Distribution

Teachers often resisted the possibility of consent in regard to sexting, due to the non-consensual dissemination of sexting visual content. Whilst before, the discursive terrain was underpinned by discussions regarding the general concept of sexting as a threat, this repertoire goes more in depth and refers specifically to the consent element of sexting. The repertoire is evident in the excerpt below, where Isla discusses consent:

Int 28-Isla, F, Hospital education teacher, 42 years old.

```
1 A  and when we talk about sex(.)we refer to consent(.)how do you think
2    this concept applies to sexting

3 I  (sighs) it is really difficult(.)isn’t it(.)consent when its sexting
4    I think (.)em consent is(2)it’s hard(.)if it’s between somebody and
5    they’re in a relationship(.)if it’s between a pair of people and
6    they are in a relationship(.)then the consent it should still be
7    asked (.) but the other thing I think is that(.)where would that
8    picture go(.)where would that be seen if you consented to send that
9    picture or you consented for that other person to see it(.)if you
10   consented for them to show somebody else(.)you know because(.)it’s
11   difficult to consent to that image being just that single person(.)I
12   think that’s difficult to(.)to manage(.)how(.)I don’t know how
13   consent would be policed(.)for sexting
```

The interviewer initially links consent to physical sex, however, with ‘how do you think this concept applies to sexting’, the floor is opened to consider if that version of consent is applicable to sexting. It may also be interpreted as leading participants to consider this as an un-straightforward task (or else why ask?). Indeed, Isla's response to the interviewer's question comes in the form of a conceptual evaluation of how consent relates to sexting. Initially, Isla constructs the task as ‘really difficult’ and ‘hard’, perhaps implying it is more complex compared to physical consent.

Isla repairs her first attempt to situate sexting in a relationship from ‘somebody’ to ‘a pair of people’. She employs a relationship script formulation to show that consent should not always be taken for granted; even in such a normative context, it should still be sought. Script formulations are used to frame behaviours as ordinary and even expected (Edwards 1994). This is juxtaposed with a discourse marker ‘but’; ‘where would that picture go’ presents this as a by-product of sexting, actively personified, taking on traits of an individual and nullifying the sender's agency. There is an agent-subject distinction, as it is afterwards described as ‘being seen’ in a passive voice, implying that once the picture is ‘out there’ its proliferation renders it a mass-consumed medium, no longer in its sender's control. There appears to be a progressive three-tiered list of consent being oriented to—first, the consent to send an image, then consent for it to be viewed by the intended recipient, then for that recipient to show others. Consent is thus presented as difficult to manage.

Across the data set, the viewing of the picture by individuals other than the original recipient is formed as a frequent phenomenon. Isla resists the notion of sexting consent, presenting it as an oxymoron. It is implied that consent requires monitoring to ensure no further dissemination, perhaps marking a de jure/de facto distinction, that is consent can exist but needs policing due to its nature.

13.2 | IR: Consent as Illegal

In the second IR, sexting consent was constructed as a legal oxymoron, characterised by the impossibility to exist because of the illegality of sexting amongst adolescents. As such, consent is formulated as biopolitical in the Foucauldian sense, with law regulating the discursive strategies employed to explicate what constitutes consent/coercion (Cohen 2018; Whatcott 2018). This is achieved via a de jure/de facto differentiation. Contrary to the previous IRs, the present repertoire adopts a purely legal approach to sexting consent, by highlighting its legal implications.

Here, the interviewer's question prompts the interviewee to think about consent, which has elicited a response based on legislation. This could be due to the lack of affordances regarding sexting consent, given that the most prevalent discussions regarding sexting and consent/coercion revolve around the non-consensual dissemination of images (Thorburn et al. 2021). Therefore, because there is a lack of precedent on discussions regarding consent prior to engaging in sexting, the participant here employs legal concepts. Sharon's argument draws upon the legal age of consent to resist the notion of consensual adolescent sexting. She uses the word ‘can't’ (line 3), insinuating a lack of agency due to legislation, invoking legality thereafter. The invocation of legislation renders the argument as factual (Tuori 1989), perhaps echoing the collectivist societal sentiment that often the law indicates/symbolises. Here, consent is framed as a biopolitical issue, followed by a tentative construction delegitimising adolescent agency. Adolescents' evaluation of whether they want to engage in sexting is glossed tentatively through ‘might’, ‘feel’ and ‘wanting’ (lines 5–6). This is then accompanied by the conflicting repetition of their inability to consent. Said inability is framed as a socio-biological factor (age) instead of the decision to either engage or abstain from sexting. Theoretically, adolescents may desire sexting, but cannot engage due to age/legal factors, creating a de jure/de facto argument. Sharon alludes to her membership category as a teacher (‘when I teach,’ line 6), to further legitimise her claim in relation to the age of her students.

Sharon then juxtaposes the impossibility of consent as a consequence of being under the legal age with conditions under which she considers sexting consensual (lines 8–11). The way this is framed is as if she is reporting the speech that she gives to her pupils, as evidenced by the use of ‘you’ and ‘you're’ (lines 9–11). Doing so could work up her teacher identity as a rational individual who considers all scenarios prior to denouncing sexting altogether. Indeed, afterwards, this adult notion of consent is again juxtaposed with adolescents', and the repetition of the phrase they ‘can't consent’. The emphatic—yet delicate—construction of consent as a legal matter could be due to the topic's controversial nature, or perhaps as a delegitimisation of adolescent experience, which can be a sensitive topic.

The challenges regarding the sexual agency of adolescents are discussed via a legislative prism. The interpellation of legislation is a claim of validity, and implies a form of ‘doing correctness in the discourse’, reflecting the moral aspects of validity claims

Int 12-Sharon, F, Assistant headteacher, wellbeing, 37 years old.

```
 1 A  so when we talk about sex(.)we refer to consent(.)how do you think
 2    this notion applies to sexting

 3 S  um I think that(.)again(.)when they are that age they can’t consent
 4    to it legally(.)so it’s like(.)there is no consent(.)even though
 5    they might feel that they want to do it(.)they can’t consent to
 6    it(.)when they(.)you know when I teach under 16s(.)you know(.)so
 7    none of those children can consent to that because it’s not they are
 8    not old enough to(.)um (.) I guess that’s why I’m saying like maybe
 9    when(.) when you are old enough to if that is what you want to
10    do(.)and you’re willing to take that(.)then(.)that’s your(.)you know
11    that you’re consenting to that(.)but when they’re youngsters(.)you
12    know(.)they(.)they can’t consent to it(.)so yeah I guess that‘s how
13    I see it(.)even if they really want to and they think i(.)its a good
14    idea because of their age(.)they(.)they can’t
```

(Tuori 1989). Law merges with power, influencing knowledge and societal rules, and as a result—through legality—we produce knowledge via which we govern life (Turkel 1990).

13.3 | IR: Coercion as a Power Imbalance

In the final repertoire, teachers worked up consent/coercion as subject to power dynamics. While this IR shares similarities with the IR *'Sexting as a threat'*, the present repertoire focuses on consent, and more specifically, consent prior to the sexting exchange. Whilst the IR *'Sexting as a threat'* talks about the implications of sexting in relation to power imbalances, which often take place after the exchange of sexts (e.g., non-consensual dissemination), this IR talks about the pressure that leads to sexting. More specifically, in this IR, coercive sexting was framed as a by-product of power imbalances, and peer/partner pressure. Here we see the juxtaposition of sending photos due to agency and self-determination with sending photos due to power imbalances.

Int 7- Eve, F, English Secondary Teacher, 24 years old.

1 **A** so when we talk about sex(.) we refer to consent(.)how do you think
2 this notion applies to sexting

3 **E** I think(.)there's not really that much around consent(.)I think it's
4 very much a thing(.)where (.) it doesn't have to just be males or
5 females(.)I feel when someone asks for(.)it they feel quite
6 pressured into doing it to um look cool or not looking cool(.)I
7 think it's very(.) it's a very hard situation because I don't feel
8 like they actually understand the fact that you can say no to
9 somebody(.)so I feel like they consent without realizing that this
10 is what they're consenting for

11 **A** mhm so do you think for example that they differ(.)sexual consent
12 and sexting consent

13 **E** oh:h (0.2) a little bit?(.)I don't feel like they should(.)but I
14 feel like they do(.)so like if you're in a relationship with(.)if it
15 you were with just somebody in person(.)em you kind of have the time
16 to sit down and say look(.) no or yes so (.) you're able to actually
17 consent to it verbally whereas over the phone like you might have a
18 bit of back and forth saying I don't feel comfortable sending this
19 picture or message(.)but then the pressure of the other party saying
20 oh well you're just you're not really a girl(.) you are not really a
21 boy you're like very childish(.)and I feel like they can get
22 pressured into doing it(.)so I feel like the consent is very like
23 back handed and not wanted obviously is not the same for all some
24 people will be very willing to do it(.)but I think sometimes it's
25 just the pressure of society is why they do it

While the IR *'Consent as an oxymoron in relation to non-consensual distribution'* focuses on the power dynamics regarding the potential of non-consensual sexting dissemination, the present excerpt and IR focus on what happens prior to exchanging sexts, with a strong emphasis on consent. Eve initially responds to the interviewer's question by constructing a lack of information regarding consent (Jozkowski and Peterson 2013). The researcher did not bring up the topic of gender, and Eve constructs her point as gender neutral 'they feel quite pressured into doing it to um look cool'. Sexting is identified as a generator of social capital for adolescents (looking 'cool'), and therefore containing the potential for peer pressure. Eve hypothesises that this could be due to a lack of understanding that adolescents can reject a request to sext, and that there is a lack of awareness of what it is they are consenting to (lines 6–9).

It is notable how Eve invokes the potential of adolescents being unaware of their ability to decline. While this could reflect the script formulation (Edwards 1994) of adolescents being incapable of comprehending consent, it could also point to affordances regarding coercive sexting being extremely limited. Consent is constructed through de jure/de facto contrast; the ideal construction equating sexting and sexual consent ('they should,' line 13) being juxtaposed with the reality ('they do,' line 14). This juxtaposition adds to the factuality of the statement, while the speakers distance themselves from the ideological pragmatisms of the current cultural reality.

The script formulation (Edwards 1994) constructs sexual consent as more tangible than sexting due to two aspects: time and ability to discuss it. A relationship scenario is worked up, which will later be contrasted with an implied sexting exchange between strangers. Sexual consent is juxtaposed with sexting, which Eve frames via a script formulation; it is a struggle regarding communication (e.g., the indicative phrase back and forth). The scenario of vocal expression of lack of consent is met with further pressure from the other party. The coercion in this excerpt is framed as exerting pressure/power imbalance regardless of the pre-existing declaration of not wanting to sext. Young people face pressure to prove their adulthood, or they can be considered childish because of their unwillingness to engage in sexting. Using hypothetical reported speech, Eve provides a three-part list (Jefferson 1990) to indicate what the other party could mention to pressure the sender (lines 17–19), such as doubting the gender of the co-sexter or calling them childish. It is implied that to exert peer pressure, sexting is framed as an adult construct, as a passage to adulthood.

The excerpt ends with a show concession (Antaki and Wetherell 1999), with Eve stating that consent cannot be candid. Eve acknowledges an alternative scenario, which she works up as consent: the enthusiastic willingness to sext. However, she resumes to the original point via the concession reassertion, suggesting that sometimes adolescents experience pressure. It is noteworthy that despite the acknowledgement of power dynamics, sexting consent or lack thereof is still formulated as problematic, a construction that perhaps stems from the common negative discourses regarding sexting (Döring 2014).

14 | Conclusion

Oliver and Flicker (2023) suggested that many Canadian teachers engaged in blaming girls, highlighting the risks of sexting for them and generally advocated for abstinence when educating students about sexting. In contrast, teachers in our United Kingdom-based study did not construct an abstinence stance, yet similarly drew upon the risk that sexting posed with the IR *Sexting as a threat*. However, teachers constructed sexting as a societal problem, to which adolescents mostly passively contribute. The framing of sexting was negative, and worked up as the non-consensual distribution of images/videos or a form of bullying. This finding links to Maqsood and Chiasson (2021), where teachers indicated that adolescent sexting might result in reputational consequences, non-consensual dissemination and cyber-bullying. IRs tend to entail what is considered societal common sense, and our findings reflect the overall societal discursive terrain of adult responses to sexting. More specifically, Scarcelli (2020) argued that adult responses are based in media panics, and reproduce discourses regarding how to protect young people.

The novelty of our CDP approach is that it allowed us to examine the varying ways that adolescents were positioned by this repertoire, providing a nuanced understanding of gendered power dynamics. Specifically, our approach was useful in identifying routine yet flexible ways that teachers deploy cultural lines of arguments, such as pre-existing societal constructions about gender and consent regarding adolescent sexting. Teachers positioned girls as victims of patriarchal norms and boys as perpetrating coercion. This reflects the current socio-political discursive terrain, with participants acknowledging the socio-cultural pressures girls face and highlighting the lenience permitted by society to boys regarding sexual aggression (Ringrose, Regehr, and Whitehead 2021). Moreover, it reflects the concerns of girls, who report facing threats or pressure to sext (Gavey et al. 2024; Thorburn et al. 2021).

Another key finding is that when girls are permitted agency within teachers' discursive constructions, this agency is constructed negatively. For example, a novel finding in our dataset was that teachers also positioned girls as *The validation-seeking Other*. Girls are thus constructed as having agency to engage in sexting, but this agency is paradoxically troubled, as girls are positioned as sexting to appeal to the male gaze and accrue social capital to enhance their self-esteem or gain boys' interest. This latter positioning of girls thus downplays their agency, reframing it as illusionary or as a ploy to secure (hetero)sexual interest; such rhetoric is a form of policing girlhood, girls' agency, and regulating their sexual desire by suggesting that it revolves only around the male gaze. This is not the case with boys; while boys' sexting engagement is framed negatively, they are not framed as validation-seeking or sexting to please girls, and thus are afforded agency.

In our research, girls are constructed as victims whose agency is limited and contingent upon performing culturally acceptable modes of representation; thus, the discursive terrain is denying them constructions regarding their own sexual desire and agency. Simone De Beauvoir (1953) indicated that women are often constructed as the Other to men. Masculinity is the societal norm on which our ideas of agency and desire are discursively based, since those in power decide our affordances (what can be said; Frye 1978). Our findings reflect concerns that other scholars have raised regarding the sexting gendered double standards, which are either constructing girls as passive victims and/or victim blaming them when boys are sexually aggressive (Setty 2019; Thorburn et al. 2021), Girls' agency should be imagined without discourses of their desire being negated by patriarchal affordances (Tong 1984). Such patriarchal constructions are so hegemonic that in Thornburn et al. (2023), girls reported navigating dilemmatic terrains where they often experienced pressure to engage with sexting, yet the same participants also worked up girls as wanting to please boys.

This links to a consideration of the discursive terrain. To unpack this point, affordances are the discursive resources which indicate what discursive capacities and limitations exist; from a Foucauldian approach, what is or is not 'sayable' (Michael and Still 1992). As Tolman (2012) suggests, there is a 'missing discourse' on girls' desire and sexual agency. Moreover, we are also lacking both positions that construct boys as 'curious' sexters who are allowed agency to sext just to explore their sexuality in a healthy and consensual way, and also positions related to boys' potential victimisation due to the patriarchal, traditional ideas about what it means to be heterosexual and masculine (e.g., always willing to engage in sexual acts).

Also absent are non-cisgender affordances. The prevalence of cisgender assumptions in gendered positioning could be attributed to the unfamiliarity with—and novelty of—gender politics on the limited discursive resources available for teachers to talk about non-cisgender youth. It is thus important to achieve emancipatory future discursive terrains that move towards agency and self-determination. The ability to imagine and construct new positions framed around adolescent agency and self-determination means we can challenge existing oppressive structures, subverting the current hegemonic constructions (Althusser 2014).

Our findings illustrate the need for teachers to challenge the positions available in relation to gender. However, it is important to note that the teachers in our study were treated as pseudo-scientists (Potter and Hepburn 2005) and were often cautious to present their constructions as tentative and couched as hypotheses. Arguably, they were aware of the contentious nature of the topic, and wanted to present themselves in a reasonable way. Even so, our findings could inform gender-related, context-sensitive sexting education for both adolescents and teachers. Due to the gendered nature of sexting and the worldwide popularity of various types of applications and media (Manca, Bocconi, and Gleason 2021), our findings can have international impact.

The second set of findings in our research pertain to consent and coercion regarding sexting. Adolescent consent in the context of sexting has emerged as a recent academic topic, yet this has not previously been explored from the perspective of teachers who are often assigned the responsibility to safeguard, teach or discuss sexting with adolescents. Due to the novelty of sexting and its moral panics, negative or conflicting constructions can be expected. For teachers, this may impact how they respond and educate about sexting in schools.

Within our dataset three IRs regarding consent and coercion exist simultaneously. In the first IR, *Consent as an oxymoron in relation to non-consensual distribution sexting* is constructed as inherently dangerous due to non-consensual dissemination, reflecting dominant media discourse (Buiten 2020). The second IR, *Consent as illegal*, entailed a de jure/de facto construction, where sexting consent was constructed as a biopolitical legal oxymoron that cannot exist due to the illegality of sexting. Whilst consent could exist in theory, the legislation around sexting constitutes consent as unable to exist. This reflects the hegemonic discursive constructions prevalent in consent education and campaigns, which often begin by discussing the legal framework and implications of sexting (Whittington 2019). Indeed, research by Jenkins and Stamp (2018) analysing comments under online news and stories regarding sexting showcased that often the stories online negotiated the legality of sexting. Agency regarding consent is acknowledged, albeit resisted through the employment of the legislative framework. Finally, the third IR, *Coercion as a power imbalance*, formulated coercion as pressure and power imbalance. Our results reflect the broader context surrounding sexting, such as Jenkins and Stamp (2018) who suggested that the dominant discourses around sexting highlight that young people can be talked into it, and thus it can be coercive.

One of the challenges evidenced in our study is that sexting is framed as a crime not due to the absence of consent, but due to inherent illegality and institutional prohibition. However, the potential implications of the legislation-related constructions can hinder constructions of adolescents' agency. By categorising coercive and consensual sexting together, the negative impact that adolescents experience when they are coerced can be undermined (Englander 2015). The victim of coercion is designated a discursive and legislative status which does not differentiate them from the perpetrator. When discussing the biopolitical constructions of the rape legislation, Miller (2007) suggests that 'rape is a crime not because there is an absence of consent, but because sex is an assault on politically defined biological boundaries' (Miller 2007, p. 114). Similar constructions of sexting consent and coercion are presented here, with sexting being evaluated as a crime based on pre-defined age-related legal boundaries, regardless of the absence or presence of consent.

Our study has limitations. For example, while the researcher asked questions regarding non-cisheteronormativity, these questions might have been interpreted differently by participants. For example, while the researcher asked questions which could be perceived as including more than cisgender constructions (e.g., references more than binary gender—of boys, girls, gender non-binary or trans), participants' discourses revolved around cis-gender constructions, and thus insight into a more inclusive discursive terrain is needed. Moreover, the paper lacks an intersectional understanding of sexting that could potentially combine issues pertaining to class, race and gender. Another limitation was that our participants all identified as cisgender, and thus we lack diverse conceptualisations of the discursive terrain such as how non-binary teachers conceptualise issues pertaining to agency and gender. Future research could investigate the constructions of LGBTQ sexting via naturally occurring data, such as observations of educational fora or sexting education, to explore constructions of sexting and consent.

Author Contributions

Anastasia Rousaki: conceptualization (lead), data curation (lead), formal analysis (lead), investigation (lead), methodology (lead), project administration (lead), resources, writing – original draft preparation. **Sarah Seymour-Smith:** supervision (lead), conceptualization (support), methodology (support), analysis (support), writing – review and editing (lead). **Rosie Kitson-Boyce and Mike Marriott:** supervision (support), conceptualization (support), project administration (support), analysis (support), writing – review and editing (support).

Ethics Statement

The research has been approved by the BLSS Research Ethics Committee at Nottingham Trent University (reference number: 2021/297).

Consent

The study has been designed with reference to the British Psychological Societys code of ethics and informed consent has been obtained.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset used for this study is held in archive at the Nottingham Trent University Data Archive (Rousaki 2024). Due to the range of sensitive ethical issues covered in the interviews, many participants did not provide consent for the full transcripts to be shared in a full open access manner, therefore restricted access to anonymised transcripts by bona fide researchers can be considered upon request.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Appendix A

Transcription Symbols

TABLE A1 | The notation used in the present thesis is a simple version of what is known as Jefferson transcription, as introduced by Gail Jefferson. For a more detailed guide the reader can visit the Atkinson and Heritage (1984) version.

Jefferson transcription table	
Symbol	**Meaning**
(.)	Pause
(0.4), (2.6)	Timed, often prolonged, pause
↑word, ↓word	Rise or fall of pitch
word [word [word	Overlapping talk, the [symbol can be used to indicate whether the overlap stops, however that depends on the transcriber's preference
.hh	Exhaling
(h)	Laughter
wo:rd	Stretching of the preceding sound.
(word)	Unclear word or sentence
word, WORD	Underlined words suggest emphasis, capital words suggest shouting
word= =word	No pause between two speakers' speech or, in case of one speaker, the sound between two words runs together