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CHILDREN’S SEXUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL MEDIA

Sexualisation, Sexting, and Experiences with Sexual Content in a Research Perspective

Liza Tsaliki and Despina Chronaki

Introduction

Social concerns about young people’s encounters with sexual content or sexual communication have been following every new medium. In the past 20 years these concerns have been exacerbated further because of the broad diffusion of digital culture and online media. Effects and mass communication research have been feeding the public discourse with claims about the potential risks that experiences with sexual content or sexual communication might pose for childhood; especially since the incorporation of online media in young people’s lifestyles and everyday communication routines, policy-making, legislation, and political initiatives have been focusing on parental monitoring practices of young people’s use of online media. In effect, this becomes an attempt to regulate as much as possible their ‘inner’ desire to explore representations of sexuality and access or communicate sexual information (Tsaliki, 2016). This chapter provides a critical reading of available research on childhood, sexuality, and digital culture to offer a social constructionist understanding of pertinent theoretical conceptualisations to date. The critical reading positions itself at a safe distance both from alarming voices about children’s sexualisation and the pornification of culture, as well as from celebratory voices about children’s sexual autonomy and agentic sexual expression. Instead, the chapter argues that a historical and cultural conceptualisation of children’s sexuality would provide a more effective analytical framework at both research and policy-making levels (e.g., sex educators, policymakers). In what follows, issues about the sexualisation of childhood as well as young people’s engagement with sexting and encounters with sexual content are first discussed within two dominant paradigms, namely the effects research tradition and the ‘communication risk’ approach (Chronaki, 2014). Then follows a discussion about how these topics are contextualised within constructionist, feminist, and materialist perspectives, where researchers offer more inclusive conceptualisations of childhood and sexuality and less technology-driven accounts. An alternative epistemological framework is then proposed, endorsed by a significant majority of cultural studies researchers since the late 1990s. Given that all three issues entail an exhaustive investigation and regulation of childhood, the topics are discussed through different paradigms,
as reflections of social anxieties about childhood sexuality overall; in effect, the discussion is built to underscore the need to contextualise children’s sexuality further in contemporary research.

**Discourses about Risk and Effects: Assumptions about Children’s Problematic or Risky Experiences Online**

Experts have been trying to prove a causal relationship between (what was perceived as) sexualised culture and young users’ behaviour, attitudes, or development, in pretty much similar ways as they did with mainstream media and adult populations (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). As a result, a long list of studies, coming mostly from the US, has informed public and policy agendas for some time now, while also attracting constant funding, something which serves to reiterate claims about the existence of effects of sexuality-related information or communication on young people (Chronaki, 2014). In Europe, Peter and Valkenburg’s work (2008) or Horvath et al.’s (2013) policy-driven evidence review have fuelled already established concerns about online pornography and children. In Australia, Flood’s work (e.g., 2009) has also been consistent in trying to prove that online pornography is harmful to minors, alongside Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak’s work in the US (2003, 2007). In research of this kind, sexual content online (the ‘catch-all’ notion of pornography) is assumed to possibly impact upon young people’s attitudes towards women or sex. It is also assumed to potentially lead to unsolicited sexual practices, or early engagement with sex. Not least, there are assumptions that consumption of such content provides sexualising or objectifying representations of the male or female body (e.g., Flood, 2009), and in many cases is examined as an addictive practice (e.g., Tsitsika et al., 2009). In the majority of such studies, usually conducted with college students, participants are assumed to hold individual attitudes towards life, sexuality, and gender, which exposure to online porn changes or distorts. Their cultural, ideological, or life background and experiences do not seem to be of interest for researchers, while the meaning of the vague term ‘pornography’ or ‘sexual content’ is taken for granted, as is participants’ understanding of (and even perceptions about) ‘romance’ and ‘intimacy’ (Chronaki, 2013). The ‘otherness’ of the young porn consumer (McKee, 2013), as well as the absence of their voice, is evident in the assumptions, phrasing, and results of such studies, leading to an assertion that research takes place about them but without them (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004).

Within the same conceptual framework, effects researchers examine sexual communication (i.e., sexting) as another potentially damaging practice of young people. The issue of sexting emerged as a problem of young people’s practices online in 2008, with the spread of a policy-driven report from the US-based National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (2008) (Hasinoff, 2012, 2015). While in this case, the adult population seems to be less at risk from the hazardous impact of sexting, researchers of this tradition highlight the potential impact of sexting upon young people’s initiation of sexual life. They also express concerns about effects upon girls’ sexual identity or self-perception and self-confidence (e.g., Garcia-Gomez, 2017; Subrahmanym et al., 2004) but also upon audiences’ attitudes towards female and (to a lesser degree) male bodies and sexualities. Especially in the Australian context, the issue of young people’s sexting has received extensive public and academic attention because of its legal conceptualisation as potential child pornography or molestation (McGovern et al., 2016). In this case, the discourse around sexting raised questions about legal consent as well as about who and under what circumstances are young people allowed to sext without being at risk of practising something illegal (see critical discussions from Albury, 2017; Albury & Byron, 2014; Angelides, 2013). According to Simpson (2013, p. 690), “‘sexting’ appears to be caught between debates on the sexual rights of children and the role of the state in protecting children from themselves”. As
expected, policy documents, the media, and public agendas draw upon alarming effects voices underscoring the potentially harmful effects of sexual communication on children. Most effects studies seem to be gender specific, either via victimising girls (Ringrose et al., 2013) or via abstracting masculinities and leaving them out of the picture (Hasinoff, 2015). Overall, this body of studies (not just in Australia but in Europe as well) assumes that children are predominantly heterosexual (see Albury & Byron, 2014; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013 for a critique on the matter), and unable to understand and cope with the paedophile danger that abounds.

Following the same theoretical, methodological, and reporting patterns as in research about online pornography or sexting, studies about the impact of the sexualisation of culture are also gender-specific (in that they mostly discuss girls) (e.g., Du Plooy et al., 2018) or focus on young children’s marketisation from consumer culture (Bailley, 2011). They mostly assume that the sexual forces underpinning contemporary mass and popular culture are effectively impacting on the ways young people understand sexuality, sexual life, family, intimacy, and romance, while they fall victim to the fake expectations that online technologies and the market forces create (Bragg & Buckingham, 2013; Tsaliki, 2016). Widely cited reports in the US, Australia, and the UK (see, for example, Bailey (2011) and Rush and La Nauze (2006)) on children’s sexualisation raised concerns about childhood innocence, fallen childhood, and the corrupting influence of private-turned-public sexual information, attracting critical responses from feminist, sociology of childhood, and cultural studies scholars. These critical scholars responded to such epistemologically flawed claims via empirical research in a feminist (Ringrose, 2011; Ringrose & Renold, 2012) or cultural feminist (e.g., Egan, 2013; Jackson & Vares, 2015) and cultural studies context (e.g., Tsaliki, 2016), or via contextualising theoretical accounts about the origins of ‘sexualisation of childhood’ discourses (Bragg & Buckingham, 2013; Egan & Hawkes, 2012; Faulkner, 2010; Lumby & Albury, 2010; Tsaliki, 2015; Vänskä, 2017).

Deriving from a more balanced perspective, one that does not take the figure of the child as the individual to be corrected (Egan & Hawkes, 2010), a mass communication approach is introduced by the extensive empirical and conceptual work of the EU Kids Online Network (EU Kids Online, 2018). Drawing upon an interdisciplinary approach to childhood, combining the work of a large number of researchers representing different fields in media studies and social sciences, this extensive research network established a less alarming way of thinking and talking about children’s experiences online, albeit in the context of a risk-averse culture (Buckingham & Chronaki, 2014; Tsaliki, 2016). The empirical and policy work of this network managed to inform policy, public, and academic agendas about children’s use of online media, children’s rights in the digital age, and to provide the body of research about children and the media with systematically collected rigorous data from 21 European countries (Livingstone et al., 2011). Its influential work led to the development of related country projects and sub-networks outside the EU, where research knowledge and expertise was transferred to researchers who adopted the EU Kids Online model of research to study children’s practices with online media (EU Kids Online, 2018).

The innovative epistemological and methodological stance of this network has been the classification of children’s experiences online into risks and opportunities (Haselbrink et al., 2009). In this context, sexuality and consequently sexual content online, sexting, and any type of sexuality-related information (except formal sources of sexual education) are considered a risk (Livingstone et al., 2011). Mentions of the risky nature of such experiences are found in most of the EU Kids Online reports, implying that any sexually related experience online is potentially a risk (though not necessarily harmful), unless it comes from a formal educational or regulatory source (Buckingham & Chronaki, 2014). The findings relating to sexual risks online could be summarised as follows (Rovolis & Tsaliki, 2012; Tsaliki et al., 2014):
1 It is mostly boys rather than girls who have such experiences, and older children rather than younger;
2 It is primarily girls and younger children who are likely to report being bothered by such experiences;
3 Girls’ and younger children’s experiences are mostly accidental in comparison with older children and boys;
4 Experiences with sexual content online are not significantly more than experiences with sexual content in mainstream media like TV;
5 The number of children who report having been bothered by such experiences overall is rather small (4% of the 23% who reported experiencing sexual content). Of the 25,000 children who were interviewed, 5,750 reported experiences with sexual content; of those, 230 reported having been bothered by the experience;
6 Experiences with sexting range from 4% to 22% in different countries, with a tendency to decrease over time.

It is notable that illegal or abusive activities like sexual harassment and sexual abuse (‘grooming’) also fall within the range of sexual risks online and are invariably blended with experiences like sexual content and sexting and attributed to the ‘child as perpetrator’ (Livingstone et al., 2011, p. 135). In effect, children’s active engagement with sexual communication is by default considered not just problematic, but almost having legal implications. This understanding of children’s sexual agency and the construction of their experiences as in need of censoring, regulation, and guidance reflect – as argued later – the anxieties that frame childhood as a status of innocence and as an uncontrolled, monstrous period in one’s life (Egan & Hawkes, 2010). As scholars argue, such constructions reflect further anxieties about societies’ current state and future (Egan & Hawkes, 2012; Tsaliki, 2016).

Although robust, systematic, representative, and recent, the EU Kids Online methodological and analytical framework points at a polarised understanding of how online experiences are articulated by children out of the binary context of risk and opportunity. The researchers argue that they bring children’s voices to research, which is true; nevertheless, in asking children to position themselves towards predetermined and adult-defined categories of practices, EU Kids Online limits children’s agency to define what is risky for them online and discursively construct it in ways they choose.

As derived from the data, children have not had so many experiences with sexual content as moralistic, alarming voices have been arguing thus far (Rovolis & Tsaliki, 2012). Yet, by adopting a mass communication approach, the EU Kids Online research reads children’s voices within the dominant, hegemonic approach where children are seen facing a variety of risks. For a detailed critique of the EU Kids Online conceptual framework, see Tsaliki (2016) Chapters 3 and 4.

Overall, dominant discourses about childhood and sexuality in academia are overwhelmingly about the sexual risks or effects to which children are exposed in the context of digital culture and about their incapacity to cope or filter them effectively. In this context there are calls about the need for children to be regulated, monitored, and guided by adults, but also the need for their sexual conduct to be governed in some sort of censorious and adult-driven way (Chronaki, 2013). In discussing such research critically, it should be mentioned that the authors do not argue that online experiences are risk-free, nor that there are no children who have probably been harmed or influenced in their online use. However, as discussed later in this chapter, it is the dominant understandings of sexuality and childhood as well as their contemporary constructions (going back to nineteenth-century Europe) that render them epistemologically unstable and in need of further contextualisation.
Critical Approaches to Sexuality: Empowerment or Victimisation?

Partly as a response to increased concerns discussed above, scholars representing critical approaches to sexuality (feminist, materialist, and constructionist) have also discussed children’s experiences with sexual content online and sexuality more broadly. Studies within this context conceptualise children’s discussions further, offering less empirical data, but better-contextualised accounts. Most of the studies reviewed appear to be concerned with the issue of the sexualisation of culture, a little less with sexting, and even less with online sexual content. They seem to share some common understandings about culture and childhood, raising issues like children’s sexual agency, sexual rights, and ethics (Albury, 2017, 2018; Hasinoff, 2015); queer constructions of sexualities and the marginalisation of queer identities in a heteronormative context (Albury & Byron, 2014; De Ridder, 2015; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013); or even class and patriarchal pressures on children’s experiences and practices online (e.g., Renold & Ringrose, 2013; Ringrose, 2011). A significant contribution of studies situated within a feminist/postfeminist or materialist context is that in contextualising children’s sexuality in broader terms than merely arguing about the media’s damaging impact upon them, they make further claims about gender performance, and about gender constructions. In this way, such studies are situated more effectively within the policy discourse about sexuality education and children’s sexual rights (e.g., Fox & Bale, 2018). Nevertheless, in building almost political accounts about gender equality and freedom of sexual identity, they do not seem to take into account the cultural, historical, and political complexities of sexualisation as indicated by cultural thinkers (Attwood, 2006). Many studies in this context, especially those drawing upon feminism and postfeminism, attempt to prove either that effects do not exist, or that the prevalence of risk in young people’s experiences with mediated sexuality is overstated, and thus potential positive outcomes regarding literacy or agency are largely neglected (e.g., Ringrose et al., 2013). In effect, several feminist accounts engage with the same either/or polarity as studies from the previous paradigm, albeit from a subtly implied perspective or a risk/opportunity one (e.g., Renold & Ringrose, 2011; Ringrose & Barajas, 2011; Ringrose et al., 2013). Moreover, in many cases, the discussion revolves around young girls and public concerns about their sexualisation (‘the girl at risk’ or the ‘risky’ girl, Ringrose et al., 2013), while boys’ perceptions and voice are still missing.

The lack of focus on boys’ sexualisation, both in terms of theoretical conceptualisation and empirical work, is highlighted by feminist (Clark & Duschinsky, 2018; Vänskä, 2017) and cultural studies researchers (Bragg & Buckingham, 2013; Tsaliki, 2016). Notable exceptions in this context are Albury’s work (2017, 2018) on children’s sexual rights via a cultural feminist critique of policy and public discourses about sexting panic, as well as Hasinoff’s (2012, 2015) account of young people’s agency while sexting. Non-heteronormative sexualities are to be found in a few cases, as in the work of Albury and Byron (2014) and Albury and Crawford (2013), or De Ridder (2015) and De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013), where LGBTQ youth and their sexting practices or sexual expression through social media is discussed through a cultural studies and queer studies lens. Not least, a focus on people from different racial backgrounds is scarce in the literature. In one of the few studies, Fischel (2016) discusses how black children are constructed in public discourses as deprived, with limited citizenship rights (including technology and sexuality) and therefore victimised within a sexualised culture. They are also seen as being in need of empowerment, reiterating discourses about a racialised and class-based childhood innocence (Bernstein, 2011; Tsaliki, 2016).

A significant number of studies contextualise their accounts and findings within the ethical, pedagogical, or feminist and postfeminist discourses through which children’s sexuality is performed and asserted in digital contexts (Albury, 2017; Albury & Crawford, 2013; De Ridder, 2015; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Nielsen et al., 2015). In this context they also take into
Children’s Sexuality in Historical Perspective: What Academic and Public Discourses Show About Our Understanding of Childhood and Sexuality

The authors’ aim in this chapter has been to review a representative sample of the available literature on children’s experiences with sexual content and sexual communication online. Although some thinkers distinguish between realist, materialist, and constructionist approaches in talking about children’s sexuality (e.g., Fox & Bale, 2018), provided here is a classification of risk/effects, critical, and constructionist/poststructuralist approaches. With this it is argued that researchers representing critical approaches need to go further from the political project of children’s sexual citizenship and talk more thoroughly about the whole range of cultural and life repertoires that young people deploy in talking about their experiences but also their sexuality more broadly. In so doing, researchers will be able to intervene more effectively in policy and public debates about sexual education and children’s sexual rights.

Most studies in this context situate their work by drawing upon historical, cultural, and political developments in late modernity to understand how and why young people discuss their experiences with sexuality (offline or online) in the way they do, and how these accounts are being perceived by adults, namely parents, experts, policymakers, and the media. In this context, Allen (2006) adopts a social constructionist approach to consider how sexuality and sex education are socially and culturally understood within the school context. Similarly, Bale (2012) uses a constructionist framework to discuss how young people perceive the impact of sexualised media on their sexual health, drawing on sociological theories of sexuality and risk. Monique Mulholland (2013) draws mainly upon a constructionist perspective and explores how young people engage with ‘pornification’ discourses through their understanding and engagement with key terms such as the ‘normal’, the ‘perverse’, and the ‘illicit’. Berg (2007) draws upon social constructionism to consider the ethical and cultural dimensions of girls’ accounts of their bodily reactions to pornography, and how girls discursively define the balance between real-life sex and arousal from pornography. Chronaki (2013) analyses the ethical, political, and cosmopolitan
dimensions of young people’s constructions of sexual content (not focussing on digital culture) and the articulation of porn literacies as indications of intimate citizenships, by putting them in the cultural-historical perspective of Michel Foucault’s notion of governmentality (1986/2012). In a similar vein, Tsaliki (2016) explores girls’ discursive constructions of sexualisation in digital contexts by focussing not just on gender performance but also on political and ethical articulations of taste, agency, and literacy; her empirical work is contextualised through historical accounts about the discursivity of sexuality and childhood and the question of leisure. Masanet and Buckingham (2015, p. 486) explore the pedagogical possibilities and limitations of online fan forums as a source of informal sex education, “arguing that the presentation of issues to do with sexuality sometimes challenges young people to engage in debate and to move beyond established discourses”. Last but not least, Bond (2010, p. 587) explores “the relationship between young people’s talk of sexuality and sexual acts in their discussions of mobile phone use, within the wider theoretical debates about risk and self-identity”, via a social constructivist perspective.

Through research of the kind mentioned in this section, one may understand the cultural trajectories that young people’s articulations of sexuality follow and how they construct childhood, agency, and citizenship outside the context of sexuality. For example, Albury (2018, p. 1331) usefully notes that “apps are not the only digital technologies to be associated with sexual risks. As smartphone ownership has become more widespread among young people, adult anxieties regarding young people’s sexual expression have crystallised around digital practices”. Along the same lines, De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013, p. 570) argue that digital literacy merely implies technical skills, “while young people should be trained as late modern ambassadors of intimacy, playing this out in networked publics, sharing openness and plurality, criticising racism, sexism and homophobia”. Such anxieties and concerns about children’s control or increasing ownership of technological capital reflect for some researchers the socially constructed problem of leisure. Children’s leisure in the nineteenth century and particularly the leisure of the working class was constructed as a problem, given that childhood had already been established as a state that needs to be appropriated and guided towards an ethical (self-governed) adulthood. As researchers note, “the notion of ‘unstructured leisure’ as a cause of juvenile deviance emerged during Victorian times, when the increase in the free time available for young people resulted in young people ‘with too much in their hands’, ending up intoxicated” (Blackman, 2011; Tsaliki, 2015, p. 503).

Anxieties about how childhood is negotiated by children and how it should be regulated and censored by adults (especially when it comes to the ‘masses’, or the working class) are one of the main issues upon which cultural scholars draw when talking about childhood and sexuality. Egan and Hawkes (2012, p. 271), among others, argue that the construction of the sexual child has emerged from social purity and hygiene anxieties in the nineteenth century. In talking about sexualisation specifically, they argue that the discourses through which it is articulated draw upon problematic assumptions about the child, reflecting middle-class attempts to secure the boundaries of class, race, and age distinctions. A well-established construction of nineteenth-century urban space as morally depraving, unstable in terms of race and class, enabled calls for specific (censorious, disciplinary, and regulatory) modes of parenting and child rearing that would ensure future self-governed and productive members of the broader social group (see Tsaliki (2016) for a more detailed discussion). As a result, the child figure became a central platform of purity reform and anything outside the context of a healthy, well-regulated, and properly guided childhood (namely the ‘morally infectious’ poor) posed a threat to white middle-class children (Egan & Hawkes, 2010).

The emergence of childhood into a distinct social category, begging for certain ways of management and carrying specific political, cultural, and ethical connotations, also signifies ‘innocence’ lost, or nostalgic moments of what an adult is not anymore (Faulkner, 2010). In effect, innocence is synonymised with preciousness and helplessness and is crystallised as the iconic,
desirable image of childhood that “potentially supplants concern for children. This sort of innocence tends to a ‘politics of the ban’” (Fischel, 2016, p. 207, emphasis in original). In the context of the ‘purification’ and ‘naturalness’ of the Romantics, sexuality takes from the eighteenth century onwards the form of a discursive construction; as something to be spoken of, cross-cutting and at the same time defining and establishing the boundaries between private and public (Foucault, 1986/2012). The emergence of technologies like medical sciences and confession within the context of Catholicism means that the human body is scrutinised and put in the discursive context of the private, the ‘appropriate’, and the ‘normal’ (Chronaki, 2013). The impact of such technologies takes place in the context of the further political and social organisation of modern Western societies, where the notion of citizenship becomes a matter of priority for the well-being of the social group and is articulated through the governing of both the body and the soul (see Rose, 1999 for a more detailed discussion). In effect, sexuality is removed from public space to one which is private, and it only becomes a matter to be spoken of once it asks for regulation, medical, or spiritual (religious) intervention. As a result, sexuality becomes a socially defined category and is constructed as a set of binaries (acceptable/unacceptable; appropriate/inappropriate; ethical/unethical; healthy/unhealthy; private/public) and soon the notion of ‘peripheral sexualities’ emerges, where – among other things – childhood and same-sex sexuality are included (Rose, 1999).

It is therefore in this historical and socio-cultural context that the authors’ work on children’s experiences with sexual content and sexual communication online is situated, providing an effective analytical framework within which researchers could possibly get past a polarised debate about the effects and risks (or absence) of anything relevant to sexuality and children. In this respect, Plummer’s (1995, p. 151) approach to intimate citizenship is followed, within which “new emerging rights and responsibilities come to the forefront in making decisions about controlling and accessing such intimate self-representations, but also making choices about how to give shape to eroticisms, sexual and gender identities in these specific mediated places”.

Hence, if children’s sexuality is considered from such perspectives, informed by historical and cultural accounts about childhood, sexuality, and technology, more accurate contributions to policy and public agendas can be made and possibly address public anxieties and panics more effectively.

References


