

1. The Issues

Since 2001, MediaSmarts has been conducting a research project titled *Young Canadians in a Wired World* that periodically looks at Canadian students' experiences with networked technology. Most of the data I'll be sharing today comes from our most recent quantitative study, which was released in 2014 and surveyed more than 5,000 students from Grades 4 to 11 across Canada.

Our quantitative study found that girls are significantly more likely than boys feel that the Internet is an unsafe space for them, and significantly more girls than boys fear they could be hurt if they talk to someone they don't know online. More girls than boys also feel their parents are worried that they can get hurt online. Ironically, this may prevent girls from developing the ability to manage online risk: research from the UK suggests that more restrictive approaches based on the online safety model produce students who are less able to keep themselves safe online and are generally less confident and capable users of digital technology.¹

Another reason why girls may not feel safe is surely the frequent and often public attacks on women online. Some cases of this may be high profile, such as the attacks on critic Anita Sarkeesian after she launched an online campaign to fund a series of videos looking at sexism in video games:² American research has found a rise of online hate material specifically targeting women³, and like other forms of hate their rhetoric can influence the culture of more mainstream spaces.⁴ While online misogyny was not originally connected to what may be thought of as "traditional" hate groups (for example, white supremacist groups), both rely on the same

¹Ofsted, *The Safe Use of New Technologies* (Ofsted, 2010), <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/surveys-and-good-practice/t/The%20safe%20use%20of%20new%20technologies.pdf> (accessed November 11, 2014).

²Antonia Zerbisias, "Internet Trolls an Online Nightmare for Young Women," *The Toronto Star*, January 18, 2013, http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2013/01/18/internet_trolls_an_online_nightmare_for_young_women.htm.

³Southern Poverty Law Center, "Misogyny: The Sites," *Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Report*, Spring 2012, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2012/spring/misogyny-the-sites> (accessed November 11 2014).

⁴Phyllis B. Gerstenfeld, Diana R. Grant and Chau-Pu Chiang, "Hate Online: A Content Analysis Of Extremist Internet Sites," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 3, no 1 (2003): 29-44.

“ideologies” of hate,⁵ and appeal in a similar way to youth – particularly boys and young men – who feel alienated from society.⁶

Women who aren’t public figures attract online hostility as well: over a third of Canadian students in grades 7 to 11 encounter sexist or racist content online at least once a week.⁷ Girls are much more likely than boys to feel hurt when a racist or sexist joke is made at their expense while boys are much more likely to say they and their friends “don’t mean anything by it” when they say racist or sexist things online and to not speak up against such content because “most of the time, people are just joking around.” Overall, girls are somewhat more likely to experience online meanness and cruelty than boys, and more likely to say that it was a serious problem for them.

Sexting is one activity that is actually *less* gendered than might be expected: boys and girls are equally likely to send sexts, and there is only a very small difference in the number who forward sexts that were created by the sender. There is little evidence that *sending* sexts is by itself a risky act: for example, one study done with American university students found that many reported positive experiences,⁸ though Australian research suggests that girls are often sent sexts by boys as a form of harassment.⁹ Where harm is most likely to occur, though, is when sexts are shared or forwarded. Contrary to widespread perceptions that sharing of sexts is rampant, our research found that it is far from normal behaviour: of the 24 percent of students in grades 7-11 with cell phone access who have received a sext directly from the sender, just 15 percent – or four percent of all students in grades 7-11 with cell phone access – have forwarded one to someone else. Those sexts that are forwarded, however, reach a fairly wide audience: one in five students say that they have received a sext that was forwarded to them by a third party.¹⁰

⁵Robert C. Rowland and Kirsten Theye, “The Symbolic DNA of Terrorism,” *Communication Monographs* 75, no 1 (2008): 52 – 85

⁶Randy Blazak, “From White Boys to Terrorist Men: Target Recruitment of Nazi Skinheads,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 44, no 6 (2001): 982-1000.

⁷Valerie Steeves, *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Encountering Racist and Sexist Content Online* (MediaSmarts, 2014).

⁸Tara Culp-Ressler, “Study Finds That Sexting Doesn’t Actually Ruin Young Adults’ Lives,” *ThinkProgress*, September 10, 2013, <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2013/09/10/2599811/study-sexting-college/>.

⁹Plan International, 2016, Don’t send me that pic, Plan International, viewed 15 June 2016, <<http://apo.org.au/node/63841>>.

¹⁰Valerie Steeves, *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Sexuality and Romantic Relationships in the Digital Age* (MediaSmarts, 2014), http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/publication-report/full/YCWWIII_Sexuality_Romantic_Relationships_Digital_Age_FullReport.pdf

Having a sext of oneself forwarded is, of course, an event that has particular consequences for girls: though sexts sent by boys are actually more likely to be forwarded¹¹, there is undoubtedly more social disapproval of girls who send sexts.¹² This might explain why those who forward sexts don't appear to see it as an ethical issue: while we found in general a strong connection between household rules and student behaviour – and, in particular, that the presence of a household rule on treating others with respect online has a strong association with not engaging in cyberbullying¹³ – there is no relationship between the presence of such a rule and whether or not students forward sexts.¹⁴ It would seem, therefore, that those students who forward sexts do not see it as an ethical question, or that they do not see the authors of the sexts as deserving of respect: girls who send sexts are seen as having transgressed appropriate gender roles and, therefore, given up the right to expect that their images will not be shared or forwarded. Consent also appears to be an important factor in whether or not harm is done: one American study found that girls who had been pressured or coerced into sending sexts were three times more likely to report a negative outcome.¹⁵ Much of the harm that comes from sexting seems to be related to gender-related double standards that portray girls both as innocent guardians of their sexual innocence and, if they should stray from that role, as being responsible for any consequences they might suffer as a result of their actions.¹⁶ UK research has found that these stereotypes are found even in educational anti-sexting campaigns, showing how poorly considered interventions may cause more harm than good.¹⁷

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Jessica Ringrose, Laura Harvey, Rosalind Gill and Sonia Livingstone, "Teen Girls, Sexual Double Standards and 'Sexting': Gendered Value in Digital Image Exchange," *Feminist Theory* 14, no 3 (2013): 305-323

¹³Steeves, *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Cyberbullying*, *supra* note 17.

¹⁴Steeves, *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Sexuality and Romantic Relationships in the Digital Age*, *supra* note 33.

¹⁵Englander, Elizabeth. *Low Risk Associated With Most Teenage Sexting: A Study of 617 18-Year-Olds*. Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, 2012.

¹⁶Ringrose *et al.*, "Teen Girls, Sexual Double Standards and 'Sexting,'" *supra* note 12.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

2. Recommendations for Intervention

At MediaSmarts we support intervention strategies based on media and digital literacy. Briefly, this means teaching youth critical thinking and ethical decision-making skills, and educating them about their rights in both online and offline contexts. With specific reference to cyberviolence against women, our approach includes:

- Conducting research to ensure that all of our interventions reflect students' concerns and authentic experiences;
- Fostering empathy and teaching social-emotional learning skills in online contexts;
- Encouraging youth to think ethically about their online interactions, to respect their own and others' privacy and to recognize the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships;
- Teaching media literacy skills that enable students to recognize, decode and confront hate speech, including gender-based hatred, and to question the gender stereotypes that underlie online misogyny at both the individual and community level;
- Focusing on the ethical dimension of *sharing* sexts, rather than excusing those who share them by blaming the senders;
- Defining media literacy, digital literacy and digital citizenship in holistic, comprehensive terms, in recognition of the connections between stereotyping, sexualization, healthy relationships, advocacy, ethics, and consent;
- Teaching students about their legal and human rights and how to exercise them, and
- Providing students with practical tools for digital citizenship and activism, both when they witness individual cyberbullying situations and in improving the culture of their online communities.