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The mobile phone = bike shed? Children, sex and mobile phones

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Abstract

This article explores children's use of mobile phones in relation to their intimate, sexual relationships and in their development of gendered sexual identities in their everyday lives. Implications of risk and mobile phones are reflected in current media discourse and contemporary public discussions. While the concept of risk remains at the centre of current sociological debate, children have only recently been seen as active social actors within social science. Based on the accounts of 30 young people aged between 11 and 17, the article adopts a social constructivist perspective to explore 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.

Keywords

children, mobile phones, risk, self-identity, sexuality

Introduction

This article examines how a group of young people use mobile phones, often alongside other technologies, for sexual purposes in their everyday relationships. From the grounded theory analysis of focus group data, generated from a group of 30 11–17-year-olds, the mobile phone emerges as a space for their developing sexuality and intimate relationships and in relation to their construction of a gendered, sexual self-identity. The notion of the *bike shed* offers a conceptual metaphor in understanding the young people's use of space – virtual space – afforded by the mobile phone in their developing sexual and romantic relationships, just as 'behind-the-bike-shed' facilitated such explorative, albeit often fumbling, adventures into young people's developing relationships previously. 'Sex and its associations with "new" and "novel" inventions and technology is nothing

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new' but the relationship between sex and technology is fundamental to understanding complex everyday lives (Barber, 2004: 142). Previous approaches to understanding technological innovations, however, have often paid scant attention to the complex interactions between 'technology, personal consumption and the construction of identity' (Green, 2001: 174).

This research is part of a wider study exploring children's perceptions of risk and mobile phones in their everyday lives (Bond, 2008). It draws on Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990, 1991), who suggest that risk is not only national but also global, in relation to the impact on individuals' lives, and that the production of risk is unpredictable and affects everyone in the present and future generations. Jenks (1996: 105) suggests that while modernity aspired to utopias of freedom, equality, goodwill, peace and prosperity, all long recognized for their unattainability and their ideological content, the late-modern condition is one of avoidance or minimization of dystopias – now a 'pragmatic state of disenchantment'. Questions about risks and hazards feature increasingly in public discourse (Culpitt, 1999) and risk anxiety is central to the social construction of contemporary childhood (Scott et al., 1998). The concept of risk in childhood during the 20th century was dominated by developmental and welfare models of childhood (Hood et al., 1996). However, the more recent social studies of childhood, critical of such approaches, view childhood as a social construction and consider children to be the experts in understanding their everyday lives (Jenks, 1996; James et al., 1998). Viewing childhood as a social construction is also important in understanding how children and young people are constructed as both risky and 'at risk' through the dominant discourse of innocence and evil; the child is simultaneously constructed as both victim and threat. While childhood is constructed as a time of innocence, vulnerability and dependence (Jenks, 1996), risk anxiety, engendered by the desire to keep children safe, frequently has negative consequences for children themselves and curtails their activities in ways which may restrict their autonomy and their opportunities to develop the necessary skills to cope with the world (Scott et al., 1998). Prout (2000) suggests that in spite of the greater surveillance, control and regulation of children, there is an increasing tendency to recognize children as persons in their own right, as individuals with a capacity for self-realization (a notion embraced by modernity) and, within the limits of social interdependency, autonomous action.

This article considers children, mobile phones and sexuality within postmodernity to suggest that the mobile phone is central to understanding children's sexuality and reflexivity in their construction of self-identity. Contemporary young people establish 'complex emotional and sexual relationships with peers' (Teitler, 2002: 151). The importance of these relationships was reflected in the young people's talk of sexuality in relation to their use of mobile phones. Their constructions of self-identity were apparent in their conversations as sexual and gendered selves. Facilitated by the use of unstructured focus groups, detailed discussions of the use of mobile phones in their relationships and in the sharing of sexual material, both downloaded and user generated, took place.

The mobile phone has become an everyday technology. Longhurst (2007) contends that the concept of everyday life is sociologically significant and that there are complex interactions between living spaces and media lives which require research and understanding. This research explores children's perceptions of risk and mobile phones and endeavours to contribute to knowledge and understanding in the field of the sociology of childhood and of young people's sexual experiences in the late modern world.

Children, childhood and sexuality

Livingstone (1998) stresses the importance of contextualising 'new' media in relation to the contexts of young people's lives, including pre-existing media, with both being informed by and informing the academic study of childhood. The media play a central role in everyday life in western societies (Süss et al., 2001) and contemporary media have become sexualized (Plummer, 1995; Carrabine, 2008). Analyses of the debates on social change, the media and sexuality suggest that a liberational discourse dominates everyday and media representations of sexuality (Jackson and Scott, 2004). The debate surrounding childhood, sexuality and media is fraught with contradictions and anxieties associated with protecting children's sexual innocence (Jackson and Scott, 2004) and few commentators see the increased sexualization of the media as a positive development for children (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004).

The development of the sociology of childhood, as a critique of the traditional developmental view of children, demonstrates the low status of children within society and the dominance of adult knowledges and the medicalization of childhood, is important in understanding the silencing of children's sexuality. To this end, cultural and social constructions of childhood are fundamental to understanding the contemporary debate on sexuality in childhood and examining the paradox between what Jackson and Scott (2004) depict as 'public openness' (associated with postmodernity) and 'private unease'.

The prominence of sex and sexuality in contemporary western culture illustrates how pervasive both are and how easily sexuality encroaches into areas previously considered non-sexual (Cover, 2003).

The impression of a sexually freer, more diverse society is reflected in representations of sexuality and intimate relations in popular culture and reinforced by the everyday knowledge gained from living in a social environment increasingly saturated with sexual imagery (Jackson and Scott, 2004: 234).

Attwood (2006) suggests that there is a preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities and a proliferation of sexual texts in contemporary society. The iconography of pornography is increasingly common (McNair, 1996) and 'post-modern culture arguably has enabled taboos to be transgressed through pleasing erotic imagery packaged as fashion not pornography' (Kent, 2005: 430). However, as Jackson and Scott (2004) point out, changes in societal attitudes simply cannot capture the complex and context-specific aspects of everyday thought and practice.

Risk, postmodernity and individualization

Lupton (2006) identifies the three major theoretical approaches to risk within sociology: (1) risk society (which has been highly influential, adopts a fairly realistic approach and is the approach relevant here); (2) cultural/symbolic and (3) governmentality, which is more concerned with the regulation of modern societies. There are various approaches to explanations, ranging from the cultural-theoretical perspective of Douglas (1992) (the exploration of how socio-moral environments react to risks, focusing on the explanation of resistance against social change) and more recent culture theory approaches (which develop beyond the structural-functionalist perspective and are influenced by a cultural or qualitative change in social sciences), to Foucault's perspective on governmentality

(that in individualized neoliberal morals of self-creation and self-responsibility, individual interests and desires link with governmental impositions; Zinn, 2007).

Previous research which has explored childhood and risk supports many aspects of Beck's (1992) *Risk Society* thesis. For example, Hood et al. (1996) suggest that parents and children conceptualize risk within public and private spheres; children are reflexive in their conceptualizations of risk (Harden, 2000) and through risk management or risk-taking behaviours achieve identity as individuals and as members of cultural groups (Green, 1997). Furlong and Cartmel (1997: 1) in their comprehensive examination of young people, risk and individualization, argue:

... young people today have to negotiate a set of risks which were largely unknown to their parents; this is true irrespective of social background or gender, moreover, as many of these changes have come about within a relatively short space of time, points of reference which previously helped smooth processes of social reproduction have become obscure. In turn, increased uncertainty can be seen as a source of stress and vulnerability.

Perceptions of risk connect individuals, communities and the social structure (Hart, 1997). The present study explores the unique viewpoints of contemporary young people in relation to the social changes associated with the rapid development of mobile phone use in their everyday lives. It draws on how the concept risk was defined, established and developed by Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990, 1991), and on notions of modernity, reflexivity and identity. The mobile phone has become embedded in children's social worlds in late modernity.

Beck (1992) argues that understanding risk is not just about scientific definitions of risk; it is also about the social definitions or consequences of risk that impact on everyday understandings. Technological developments associated with postmodern conditions, which Turner (1990) outlines as disorganized capitalism, consumer society and mass cultural production, are viewed as having changed children's and young people's lives. This rapid technological change is partly accountable for the perception of the demise of childhood, a viewpoint voiced early in the debate by Postman (1983), who sees technology as putting children at risk and destroying childhood itself. However, 'the framing of children, adults and technology within these deterministic discourses tends to hide the key shaping actors, the values and power relations behind the increasing use of ICT in society' (Selwyn, 2003: 368). Buckingham (2000: 45) argues that both current discourse and academic debate on children and technology are dominated by technological determinism.

From this perspective, technology is seen to emerge from a neutral process of scientific research and development, rather than from the interplay of complex social, economic and political forces – forces which play a crucial role in determining which technologies are developed and marketed in the first place. Technology is then seen to have effects that bring about social and psychological changes, irrespective of the ways in which it is used and of the social contexts and processes into which it enters.

Hughes and Hans (2001) propose that research that is based on a social constructivist approach and studies the actual ways people use technology is needed in order to provide a useful theoretical framework. This research is underpinned by the social

construction of technology; a sociology of risk and the new social studies of childhood. However, it is important to bear in mind that the theoretical framework presented within the literature cited here is one that developed from the study itself. This follows Strauss and Corbin (1998) in seeing the development of theory as a process based on an 'inter-play' between inductions from the data (theory building) and offering an explanation about phenomena.

Within the new paradigm of risk society there is a growing critique of modernization that influences public discussions, which argues that modernization must become reflexive in order for society to evolve (Beck, 1992). As reflexive modernization becomes increasingly individualized, this structural change results in further uncertainty and individuals reflexively constructing their own life biographies. Giddens is especially interested in the relationship between modernity and the individual's management of self-identity (Jary and Jary, 1995). He argues that globalizing tendencies of modern institutions are accompanied by a transformation in social life with profound implications for personal activities. Risk is 'a more or less ever-present exercise, of a partly imponderable character ... the risk climate of modernity is thus unsettling for everyone; no one escapes' (Giddens, 1991: 124). Self-identity, structured through the consideration of risk, becomes a reflexively organized behaviour in which individuals make choices about lifestyle and life plans. In his discussion of self-identity, Goffman (1971) discusses the role of the object as part of the self and how others identify and characterize the individual through sign vehicles in presenting the image of the self to others in everyday life.

Children, self-identity and mobile phones

The social meaning behind mobile telephone adoption may be part of children's development of a gendered self-identity (Ling, 2000). Research by Smoreda and Licoppe (2000) in France suggested that girls are more likely to speak to parents than boys both in frequency and variety of subjects, while Ling's (2000) study in Norway found that although boys were more likely to own a mobile telephone than girls, it was the latter, through borrowing a mobile telephone, who were the more frequent users. Non-ownership of a mobile telephone may limit children's experience and understanding of other communication technologies (Charlton et al., 2002) and may lead to social exclusion (Leung and Wei, 1999). Buckingham (2004a: 112) argues that 'we also need to locate children's uses of these media in relation to broader social, economic and political forces'. The 'digital divide' has gained the attention of politicians and philanthropists both in America (Attewell, 2001) and the UK (Buckingham, 2004b; Livingstone and Bober, 2004). This recognition, Attewell (2001: 257) argues 'is the latest effort to encourage our reluctant social and political leaders to ameliorate inequality and social exclusion'. Holloway and Valentine (2003) suggest that thinking about social exclusion in terms of access to ICTs highlights the importance of the way that technologies and people mutually develop.

Paradoxes appear elsewhere; while the mobile telephone is associated with privacy, freedom and security (Ling, 2000; Charlton et al., 2002), research has revealed complex aspects of the relationships between mobile phone technology, children and parents. While the mobile telephone allows parents to give their children more freedom (Crabtree and Nathan, 2003), Ling (2000), Yoon (2006) and Williams and Williams (2005), all

highlight the role of mobile technology in extending parental control and also in young people negotiating parental control.

Research questions

The study set out specifically to examine how children themselves view the nature and relationship of mobile phones and risk in their everyday lives. In order to achieve ecological validity the research did not have a set of specific questions. Instead, the importance of adopting a grounded theory approach was highlighted as the data that emerged relating to their developing sexuality and sexual identity produced one of the more unexpected themes; one which, it could be argued, would not have been possible through another method.

Research methodology

Teitler (2002) observes that most knowledge about young people's sexual behaviour has previously been gained from retrospective studies based on questionnaires to adults about early sexual experiences. However, experience is about interpretation (Greene and Hogan, 2005), and this study adopts a social constructivist approach seeking to collect subjective accounts and young people's perceptions in order to understand their experiences and constructions of their everyday lives (see Sikes, 2004). Jenks (1996: 51) argues that 'children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concern of adults'. Developments in standpoint feminism, recent advances in undertaking research with children associated with the new social studies of childhood and the influence of individualization as 'the tendency for contemporary children to be seen as having a voice in determining their lives and shaping their identity' (Christensen and Prout, 2005: 53) were influential in the methodological framework which underpinned the research.

The study adopted a grounded theory approach derived from qualitative focus group data systematically gathered and analysed through the research process (see Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Unstructured focus group interviews were used as part of a multi-method approach with 30 young people (all of whom volunteered) aged between 11 and 17 years. Mindful of ethical considerations, written information about the research, its aims, design and process were given to both the participants and their parents. The fieldwork took place between April and July 2007 in Suffolk.

A non-probability sample was generated through snowballing via young people's social networks, created self-selecting small groups comprising 3–4 young people already familiar with each other and comfortable in each other's company. A total of 16 girls and 14 boys attending three different secondary schools took part and the focus groups were of varying ages and gender mixes.

While people are not generally comfortable talking about sex (Frith, 2000), the young people in this research volunteered the information, unprompted by the researcher, and discussed the role of their mobile phone in sexual relationships and the sexual nature of material shared through mobile phone use among themselves. Grounded narratives exemplify lived experience (Epstein, 2000). Plummer (1995: 16) draws on a sociological

framework derived from symbolic interactionist theory to advocate sexual stories, which have been seen as routes to understanding culture in anthropology, to argue that they are 'socially produced in social contexts by embodied concrete people experiencing thoughts and feelings of everyday life'.

Findings and discussion

Intimate relationships

The children's talk often referred to using the mobile phone related to sexual or intimate purposes, from initiating contact with someone and '*asking them out*' to '*dumping*' someone. 'The pure relationship', increasingly sought in late modernity (Jamieson, 1999) characterizes Giddens' (1992) notion of the transformation of intimacy that emotional communication replaces traditional ties in late modernity and that sexual love and relationships are transformed. The analysis of the data illustrates how mobile phones are simultaneously viewed as both supportive but also potentially damaging, thus exemplifying the double-edged sword of modernity discussed by Giddens (1990) and Ling's (2004) assertion that the mobile phone is associated with both constructive and potentially harmful implications. This paradox was often illustrated in children's talk, which frequently highlighted both the positive and negative aspects of mobile phone use in their relationships.

This subjective experience of uncertainty, a symptom of individualization in late modernity, appears alongside the positive contribution that the mobile phone has made to security, reassurance and increased cohesion in relationships. Becky (aged 14), for example, describes how using a mobile phone is important for maintaining friendships but can also incite anxiety:

Becky [aged 14]: Because you can use mobile phones to like ... it's like they can ruin friendships because if you don't text back or if someone doesn't like text you back that really annoys me.

FG5

Not receiving texts or calls was associated with uncertainty and feelings of isolation and loneliness; the notion of 'perpetual contact' (see Katz and Aakhus, 2002) is significant, as the children discussed not wanting to miss a call or a text and the desire to be in what Agar (2003) describes as 'constant touch'. Technologies are a powerful factor in shaping postmodern identities and the ongoing construction of subjectivity (Barns, 1999).

Self-identity

Goffman's (1959) analysis of the girl's dormitory and his eloquent account of how girls would arrange for calls to be made in order to give the impression that they were popular is visible in the boy's discussion here in presenting themselves as well-liked. Shaun (aged 14) spoke of pretending that a girl had called him when in truth it was a sales call. This scenario relies on a complex network of actants (see Latour, 1999) including the

person sending the text or making the call (even if it was your mother or service provider) and not just the technology. What is particularly interesting here is that the commercialization of mobile phone services and consumption practices (nuisance calls in another context) are also used by the children reflexively in their formation of self-identity:

Shaun [aged 14]: Yeah or when you get like calls from them trying to sell you something and you're like 'I got a call! and then people go 'who was it?' and you go 'Oh some really attractive girl called!'

FG8

This not only applies to self-identity in public; the mobile phone is also fundamental to children's construction of self-identity in private. The risk, for Sarah, was actually associated with trust; not just the violation of privacy if her boyfriend read her text messages, but one of misinterpretation and of him misunderstanding messages (in this case, from other boys). The importance of context in understanding the children's perceptions of risk and mobile phones is emphasized, but it is important to note Derrida's claim that contexts are never stable and are open to interpretation (Cover, 2003). Texts are embedded with signs by the writer and the reader in light of particular contexts, experiences or wishes (Brewis, 2005). From Sarah's account, she clearly differentiates between her relationship with her boyfriend and her relationships with other boys. She was keen to discuss and demonstrate her understanding of her boyfriend's feelings about the other relationships in her life as a factor in her reflexive landscape of risk.

Sarah [aged 14]: I know what you mean 'cos like if [name of boyfriend] reads my phone and I've got texts from like guys just other guys who are just like 'ok speak to you later love you bye' he'll be like alright then.

Sally [aged 15]: Yeah and be like a bit off you.

Sarah [aged 14]: Yeah like 'oh you've got another on the go' and it's just like 'no it's just like communicating with your friends' ... it's just like I say to you when we get off the phone and that 'love you bye' and you always say it back and stuff and everyone does it now but it can be read so differently from like other people's point of view.

FG9

Sexual identities

There was evidence from both the boys and the girls that their constructions of sexual selves in intimate relationships were portrayed and illustrated within the group dynamics. From their discussions they often actively constructed their identity within the group as part of a couple or as single, but talked about previous relationships and sexual experiences. The discussions that the children had which were based on sexual talk are presented

here, although it is important to remember that not all the children discussed this topic and the sample size itself is relatively small. Charles (2000) observes that in theorizing institutionalized heterosexuality, heterosexual relations are institutionalized within marriage and the family, within education, and within the wider society, whereas homosexuality is not. Butler's (1990) work on constructionist theories and her notion of gender performativity is important to understanding the data presented and the consideration given to the context of the wider heterosexual ideologies in relation to the children's performativity.

Thus the social construction of individuals' perceptions of risk is associated with different types of behaviour influenced by the norms and experiences of social groups (Adams, 1995). Home, school and peers are all fundamental factors in forming sociocultural conceptions of female sexuality (Rapoport, 1992). Some of the girls in the study were keen to establish their identity as being part of a relationship by talking about their boyfriends and describing the importance of their mobile phones in their relationship.

In the following excerpt the boys discussed a recent incident when Josh had called Kev on his mobile phone. Again, the importance of context was highlighted. Kev had just had sex and the boys' discourse emphasizes the significance of the geography and context of use. Josh stresses that this was one time for Kev not to have his mobile switched on. 'People tell sexual stories to assemble a sense of self and self identity' (Plummer, 1995: 72). What is important to observe here is that the boys talk demonstrates Kev's construction of self-identity as a (hetero)sexual, gendered being and the acceptability of having sex (under the legal age), combined with the unacceptability of having your mobile phone switched on highlighting the associated social norms.

Josh [aged 15]: Yeah disgusting child! See that's when you switch your phone off!

Kev [aged 15]: Yeah I did but I turned it back on just to see what time it was.

Josh [aged 15]: What half way through?

Kev [aged 15]: No it wasn't half way through that was the thing it was like ... after

FG6

Mobile content, either downloaded or user generated, was also frequently the topic of conversation. What was very apparent from the data was the blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private. What could be perceived as being private – the naked body or the sexual act – is transformed into being public by the technology. It is then shared (usually within the context of an intimate relationship) and then made more widely public through the use of Bluetooth to a wider audience and consequently being perceived more in terms of risk.

Although children experience conversations of a sexual nature online, the extent of cyberflirting or cybersex is unclear (O'Connell et al., 2004). Megan discussed a girl who had sent intimate pictures of herself to her boyfriend (private). However, when the context of the relationship changed, the images had been shared (public) and the public/private boundaries blurred:

Megan [aged 17]: A girl was taking pictures of herself, revealing pictures shall I say? And sent them to her boyfriend – they like split up and he sent them to like everyone and everyone found out who it was and that and everyone knew so.

FG4

Sometimes sexual images were produced and shared not in relation to a sexual relationship but to a developing gendered identity.

The socially symbolic nature of sex is well established. (Thorogood, 2000) and Began and Allison (2003: 321) claim that more ‘scholarly effort should be geared toward considering the possible positive effects of sexually explicit material on human social interaction’. Here Tilly, John and Sid discuss a boy masturbating in front of a webcam; the images were sent to girls that he knew at school. The girls had saved the images to their mobile phones and had subsequently Bluetoothed the images to others at school.

Sid [aged 16]: Oh yeah he has web cam on and he was wanking over the web cam.

Tilly [aged 16]: Oh yeah to these girls and they saved it on their phone and sent to everyone.

FG3

The girls also discussed their experiences of viewing sexual content produced by boys known to them:

Laura [aged 14]: Yeah like the boys flashing like their meat and two veg.

Pip [aged 14]: Yeah and they are like ‘show us your blah blah blah’.

Laura [aged 14]: Yeah and they are like oh! Oh! Mine are better than his – do you know what I mean? And it’s just like competition.

FG5

It is worth noting that, similar to the group of older girls in the previous quotation (who were unknown to this group), such behaviour was associated with sexual frustration and being younger and the talk resonated with notions of (ir)responsibility. It also outlined strategies and behaviours to keep themselves safe in the context of producing and sending sexual material.

For Josh, the mobile phone had been significant in a prolonged period of threats, menace and intimidation from an older boy who was the boyfriend of Josh’s female friend. The texting back and forth between the two boys is viewed not only in terms of a power struggle but in terms of a gendered power struggle. The performances of masculinities, constructed through everyday practices include emphasizing their toughness and the text messages received are seen by the boys concurrently both as a threatening and a lamentable behaviour, suggesting that ‘the ways in which boys act as masculine, and

their masculine identities, need to be seen as gendered practices which are relational, contradictory and multiple' (see Frosh et al., 2002: 119).

Josh [aged 15]: I have had some threatening text messages off our friend Hannah's boyfriend.

Kev [aged 15]: Ah yes our good friend the Dark Lord ...

Andy [aged 15]: So he threatens you with a text message?!!!!

Josh [aged 15]: I know it is pretty lame

Kev [aged 15]: Very threatening!

Josh [aged 15]: But then I ended up having a little text message dick-waving thing with [name of boy] like who can prove that they are hardest -- it was lame really.

FG6

The mobile phone increases insecurity and blurs the boundaries between adulthood and childhood, public and private. Tilly (aged 16) in her discussion of using technologies and mobile phones in everyday life, described how a friend of hers had been sent sexual images, by someone that she did not know, on her mobile phone. She had been sent the images by mistake, demonstrating the interoperability and the instability of the technologies. Tilly's account also highlights how the technology can make it difficult to control the risk, as you cannot see what the image is before you open it. She viewed this occurrence as becoming more common with advances in technologies and that it was not easy to prevent this from happening:

Tilly [aged 16]: Yeah and weird stuff. Like well you know [laughter] ... you know like that does happen and like with girls at school as well with the new 3G video calls.

Sid [aged 16]: Did she not know who it was?

Tilly [aged 16]: She only saw his penis!

Sid [aged 16]: She didn't recognize it then?

Tilly [aged 16]: No! I should hope not -- like apparently he was like talking to someone on a 3G chat site and they arranged to like call each other like you know ... doing stuff and then her number had come up instead of the other girl's.

Sid [aged 16]: What on the chat site? Was she on there?

Tilly [aged 16]: No she wasn't on there -- he called her by accident -- yeah -- having a wank.

FG3

Other groups in the study also discussed similar events and receiving unwanted texts or pictures, upholding Thomson's (2007) consideration of how the disenchantment dimension of individualization, sensed in series of moral panics related to mobile phone use and ranging from cancer scares to bullying, is evident. The talk on the children's sexuality and generating sexual material also details the widespread use of downloaded and shared sexual material. While they were careful in their focus group discussions about not openly admitting having pornographic content, they talked about viewing it, accessing it and sharing it a great deal:

Andy [aged 15]: There's no porn on my phone.

Kev [aged 15]: There's loads on other people's phones.

Josh [aged 15]: There's some horrendous stuff on other people's phones.

FG6

The visual material of a sexual nature viewed and shared on the children's mobile phones was mostly discussed in the focus groups in a humorous vein by both the boys and the girls and appeared to play a role in their everyday lives in relieving boredom, generating humour and gaining popularity. This echoes Kehily's (1999) discussion of the role of teen magazines in demystifying sex and Peter and Valkenburg's (2006) research that suggests that males with younger friends are more likely to use sexual content with other media. Similarly, the findings indicate that the older children viewed sexual content on phones as something that '*younger kids*' did. This is an illustration of Bourdieu's (1991: 245) argument that 'social space is a multi-dimensional space, an open set of relatively autonomous fields, fields which are more or less strongly and directly subordinate, in their functioning and transformations.' It was the groups of 14–15-year-olds who discussed having sexual content on their phones either downloaded or user generated. Although seen as more popular with boys than with girls, both girls and boys in the focus groups talked of viewing sexual material via mobile phones (although not necessarily theirs). The ready availability of sexual material was apparent from all the groups, who mentioned obtaining sexual images with different technologies and various available media.

Conclusion

This study of children, risk and mobile phones is based on children's experiences and focuses on their everyday lives. It illustrates the importance of the mobile phone in their constructions of identity and reveals the centrality of risk in their everyday lives. In considering the risk society and contemporary academic approaches to the social construction of childhood, the research facilitates knowledge of children's own perspectives, using a participatory methodology to produce qualitative data from focus groups and a grounded theory approach in order to provide understanding of the complex interactions between the spaces of childhood and everyday technologies. In doing so, the research illustrates how abstract notions of risk come up against everyday realities. This is significant

in the light of Freudenburg's (1993) argument that traditional factors of risk-perception analysis, such as technical assessments of the actual risk posed or socio-demographic characteristics of the risk perceiver, are sterile debates as to whether perceptions of risk are rational or not. It also suggests that it may be more productive for researchers to look at how people perceive risk. What is especially significant in this research is that it is the young people's stories that are told here, presented in their own words and the methodological framework allows these narratives to be heard.

An important prop for presenting an image of oneself in everyday life, the mobile phone is important for the children to present the right image in public – popularity and acceptability within a friendship group and the mobile phone, therefore, provide a space for young people's everyday performances. Plummer (1995) argues that in the late modern period the media break down previously defined boundaries and enable people to both tell their own sexual stories and read those of others. The focus groups generated much discussion of sexuality and sexual acts in relation to the everyday use of mobile phones. Constructions of self-identity were apparent in the children's talk as sexual and gendered selves and detailed discussions of the use of mobile phones in their relationships and on sharing sexual material took place.

In a Korean case study, Yoon (2006) suggests that while work on youth and new technologies has recently flourished, little is known about how local young people are using individualizing technologies and that there remains a dearth of empirical data of ordinary young people's cultural practices in this field. The children's sexual talk, associated with the theme of self-identity presented here, was probably the most unanticipated theme to emerge from the grounded theory data analysis. The research contributes to understanding the role of the mobile phone in children's everyday lives in relation to their sexual behaviour. The mobile phone is imperative in the formation, maintenance and manipulation of close, intimate relationships; however, it is the sharing of sexual material, both downloaded from the internet and user generated, that illustrates how the technology provides an alternative space in human sensory experience. Likened to the 'private' space afforded by the bike shed (which for previous generations provided a physical space not only for direct physical sexual contact but for sharing sexual material, for example, printed pornography or the swapping of videos), this was one of the key themes to emerge from the research study. However, unlike the 'private' space afforded by the *bike shed*, the research reveals how the young people's use of mobile phones is more complex. The sharing of sexual content in the context of a private, trusting intimate relationship, for example, is in reality a highly risky activity in which young people are actively engaged in their everyday lives. The sharing of such material easily becomes public through the interoperability of associated technologies and once shared with other mobile phones, loaded onto the internet, sent via email or viewed on social networking sites, cannot ever be seen as 'private'. The traditional boundaries of what was previously traditionally understood as public/private; belonging/individualization and risk/trust are thereby blurred.

Livingstone (2002) examines the complicated interplay between social change, children, public anxieties and new media. The children in this study discussed many different aspects of risk in relation to their use of mobile phones in their everyday lives. Contemporary media and public discourse highlight increasing concern over young people's use of new media technologies especially 'sexting' and uploading sexual or

semi-naked images onto social networking sites. The children viewed themselves as being responsible for keeping themselves safe and notions of responsibility were an important part of their construction of self-identity. They weighed up the perceived risks in their individualized situations and circumstances and responded with certain behaviours in order to manage the risk. Jackson and Scott (2004: 243) argue that sexual activity occurs behind closed doors but that the 'merging of boundaries associated with sexual intimacy produces fragility and renders us vulnerable to loss of self-confidence, self-esteem and indeed a loss of self when relationships end' and the fear associated with the thought that 'intimate knowledge has escaped the confines of the relationship' and is being shared with others. In the UK a quarter of 11–18-year-olds have received a 'sext' by phone or email, according to the charity Beatbullying (Reed, 2009). The Pew Research Centre carried out a study in September 2009 involving 800 teens in the USA and found that 30 per cent of 17-year-olds have received sexting photos or messages although only 8 per cent admitted that they had sent such images. According to Shiels (2009) the issue caught the attention of policymakers struggling with how to deal with this worrisome trend, which also resulted in at least two teen suicides in the previous 18 months.

In his discussion of sex and the internet, Agger (2004) draws on Marcuse and Freud to argue that the need for sex is natural and basic and should not be defined as taboo, and raises the question as to whether internet sex and sexualization is meeting the need for connection and gratification, which is more difficult to achieve as a result of capitalism and postmodern society. Similarities can, perhaps, be drawn between Plummer's (1995) argument on homosexuality and the development of the sociology of childhood, as a critique of the traditional developmental view of children, which demonstrates the low status of children within society and the dominance of adult knowledges and the medialization of childhood, especially in the early years, as important in understanding the silencing of children's sexuality. It is important to remember, though, that children's sexuality is both regulated and repressed and that both childhood and sexuality are socially constructed (Kehily and Montgomery, 2003).

While concerns may be raised over the small sample size of the research presented here ($n = 30$) from a positivistic perspective, such traditional positivistic methodologies have been heavily criticized for positioning children as objects within research (Barker and Weller, 2003). There has recently been an increase in demand for children's voices to be heard and their opinions sought in matters that affect their lives (Morrow and Richards, 1996) and children are regarded as experts on their own subjective experience (Grover, 2004). This research is underpinned by such principles. Children use mobile phones and a wide range of new media technologies in their everyday lives and in a variety of different contexts. Many young people lead media-saturated lives. There is a growing body of literature which examines current key debates on children, childhood and new media technologies; our knowledge and understanding of this topic area are increasing and attracting greater attention in the media, while service and content providers develop new products, services and content in line with changing patterns of use. This research forms part of a growing body of work that offers a strong empirical basis for the development of a more comprehensive, larger scale, study to determine how children and young people are using mobile phones to explore their sexuality and sexual relationships. While there is increasing visibility of the relationship between new media and young people's sexuality on social networking sites and Youtube, the role of the mobile phone remains more hidden

due to the more personal and private position that it holds in young people's everyday lives. Furthering knowledge and understanding of children, mobile phones and sexuality in relation to risk through ethnographic, child-centred research would be of great benefit in mitigating some of the potential risks, while promoting the participation of children in the information society in a responsible and ethical way.

Further qualitative research in this area would bring more to the contemporary debate on sexuality in childhood and contribute to the consideration of the social and cultural constructions of childhood. The experiences discussed in the focus groups resonate with notions of the pursuit of self and personal identity and the research findings suggest that, while the relationship between the mobile phone, young people and sexuality is complex, it is fundamentally important to understanding contemporary children's everyday lives and their construction of self and as gendered, sexual identities. While the data demonstrates notions of trust and intimacy in the young people's relationships, it offers a clear example of the double-edged sword of modernity (see Giddens, 1990), and highlights the central themes of trust versus risk, individualization and reflexivity that Giddens and Beck propose. The findings suggest that the mobile phone provides a new space in contemporary children's lives for developing their sexuality, the sharing of and exploration of sexual material and indeed each other's bodies, all factors still largely concealed from the adult world.

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