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Digital Sexuality and Digital Sexualized Violence in Childhood and Youths: Evidence from Three Biographical Case Studies

Sexualidade Digital e Violência Sexualizada Digital na Infância e Juventude: Evidências a partir de Três Estudos de Caso Biográficos

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Abstract

This article examines children's digital sexuality and the associated risks of digital sexualized violence through three biographical case studies. Drawing on the theoretical notion of the childhood gaze, it investigates how young people, in biographical interviews, construct digital spaces as arenas of sexual agency that are largely hidden from adult control. Against the backdrop of insufficient child protection measures online, these experiences include digital sexualized violence, which the interviewed young people primarily attempted to address through peer-supported coping strategies. In conclusion, the article highlights young people's struggles with a generational gap in digital literacy that leaves parents and educators ill-equipped to effectively safeguard children against digital sexualized violence.

Keywords: Childhood, children's gaze, digital sexuality, digital sexual violence

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Resumo

Este artigo examina a sexualidade digital das crianças e os riscos associados à violência sexualizada digital através de três estudos de caso biográficos. Com base na noção teórica do olhar infantil, investiga como os jovens, em entrevistas biográficas, constroem os espaços digitais como arenas de agência sexual, em grande parte ocultas ao controlo adulto. No contexto de medidas insuficientes de proteção infantil *online*, estas experiências incluem violência sexualizada digital, que os jovens entrevistados procuraram enfrentar principalmente através de estratégias de *coping* apoiadas pelos pares. Em conclusão, o artigo evidencia as dificuldades dos jovens perante uma lacuna geracional em literacia digital, que deixa pais e educadores despreparados para protegerem eficazmente as crianças contra a violência sexualizada digital.

Palavras-chave: Infância, olhar das crianças, sexualidade digital, violência sexual digital

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Introduction

The internet can be understood as a translocal public space that forms digital communities across geographical locations and demonstrates significantly higher engagement from young people compared to other spheres of public life (Burton 2019, p. 3). Globally, about one in three internet users is a minor (Wright & Rotino, 2020, p. 6). However, formal and informal child protection standards established in the offline world are often not implemented or are ineffective online. It is not just on the darknet where brutal violence in various sexist, racist, and ableist forms can be consumed. A significant amount of child abuse material is created and transmitted between children and adults, as well as among peers, on diverse online platforms and apps on the clearnet, such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter (World Vision, 2023, p. 7). As the middle generations (i.e. parents, professionals and researchers) tend to use the internet differently from young people, often drawing a distinction between online and 'the real world', they often fail to recognise the online-offline nexus that characterises the digitality of the younger generation. Thus, when it comes to developing policies and practices that enable young people to use the internet more safely, we must primarily rely on their experience with digitality – their 'gaze' – to "produce the kind of knowledge which would have the capacity […] for crafting alternative futures for children" (Spyrou 2023, p. 14) that tackle the consequences of the indelibility of personal information and the resulting social inequality.

This article explores the question of the 'children's gaze' on digital sexuality and digital sexualised violence. The latter refers to the online transmission of abusive material involving minors that contains a sexual component and/or is used to satisfy the sexual needs of the perpetrator or consumer (ECPAT International, 2016, p. 14). Reliable statistics on the extent of sexualised violence on the internet are lacking due to measurement difficulties. However, it is widely believed that this phenomenon has been increasing, especially since the COVID-19 lockdowns and the resultant push toward digitalised childhoods (World Vision, 2023, p. 23). A significant portion of children's sexual abuse material on the internet is self-generated content (Internet Watch Foundation, 2023). To understand why and how children take intimate pictures and videos of themselves and share them online, it is essential to investigate how digitalisation has become an integral element of socialisation.

After discussing theoretical perspectives on the role of digitalisation in the sexual development of young people as well as methodological implications of the 'children's gaze', this article will present an empirical in-depth analysis of previously

unpublished biographical data of three individual cases. These cases were collected in a research project by World Vision Germany (2023), in collaboration with World Vision partners in India, Thailand, and the Philippines, which explored different forms of digital sexualised violence. With the help of Schütze's (1981) methodological procedure to analyse process structures of the life course, this study will investigate how the regular online practices of young people lead to experiences of digital sexualised violence and how victims react to these experiences, referencing various support structures in their online and offline lifeworlds.

Sexuality development in digitalized lifeworlds

In a highly polarized world structured by social inequality, digitalization seems to offer many opportunities for the participation and networking of young people beyond socioeconomic classes, national borders, and specific conditions of their local lifeworlds. Consequently, all young people are vulnerable to the risks associated with the internet, as both international and national regulations and protective measures struggle to keep pace with technological advancements (Levine et al., 2021, p. 3). This issue is further compounded by the fact that modern parenting practices predominantly focus on identifying security threats to children as originating outside the home, often emphasizing the notion of 'stranger danger'. Over the past three decades, this approach has resulted in a significant decrease in children's autonomy and an increase in parental monitoring of their activities in the physical world beyond their homes (Felice, 2017, pp. 577-578). This shift, which increasingly confines children's liberties to the perceived safety of their homes (Felice, 2017, p. 578), aligns with young people seeking new forms of freedom online. Although the use of the internet is part of a long history of "moral panic" concerning mass media consumption in childhood (Garlen & Hembruff, 2021, p. 79), parents and professionals often feel overwhelmed by the security issues associated with digitality and are, in part, dismissive of the topic (cf. Zumbrängel, 2020, p. 37).

Over recent years, the internet has become a routine and significant space for young people to explore and construct their identities, often unnoticed by older generations. Many of their recreational activities now take place in digital spaces, such as engaging with platforms like TikTok and YouTube (Fleer, 2016), while social network profiles on sites like Instagram serve as crucial components in shaping their identity. The digital world provides a wealth of learning opportunities outside of adult oversight, including addressing sensitive subjects like sexuality and queer identities, and supports youth self-organization through tools like WhatsApp groups (Zumbrängel, 2020; Felice, 2017; Levine et al., 2021, p. 3).

In the context of digitalized youth experiences, the internet is not only a source of information about sexual topics but also a medium for engaging in sexual interactions such as online flirting, chatting, and dating. Elements like sexual self-

presentation on social media profiles and sharing sexual photos or videos are increasingly seen as consensual forms of sexual interaction (Delisle, 2015, p. 29; Doyle et al., 2021). Contrary to widespread societal perceptions, psychosexual development begins in early childhood and is intrinsically linked to children's emotional growth (Ribeiro, 2019, p. 3; Delisle, 2015, p. 25). This process includes exploring their own bodies, learning to set boundaries, and discovering sexual preferences (Delisle, 2015, p. 2, 4). While discussions about sexuality between parents and children can be hindered by feelings of shame, peers play an essential role in sexual socialisation. Additionally, young people increasingly turn to the internet as a resource for sexual information (Delisle, 2015, p. 26).

Sexuality education in schools and within families typically focuses on the risks of sexuality, such as unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. However, these types of education, which emphasise the negative aspects of sexuality, do little to support the psychosexual development of young people, who need to build up a self-determined sexual identity as part of their individual personality (Delisle, 2015, p. 27). During psychosexual development, young people need to achieve "sexual self-efficacy […] as the knowledge, skills, and comfort" (Addatu-Cambri, 2023, p. 680) to carry out protection strategies that guarantee physical and emotional well-being about sexual interactions. While current education already falls short in supporting children to develop these strategies for offline sexuality, online sexuality is hardly ever discussed.

Methodological approaches of the 'children's gaze' on digital sexuality and violence

In social research, childhood is understood as a social construction shaped by the practices of both children and adults, within the framework of adultistic power structures. Research on children is challenged by what I term the 'childhood gaze'. The concept of the "gaze" can be traced back to Foucault's elaboration on the "medical gaze" in his book "The Birth of the Clinic" (1976). Gazing from a position of power creates an object (Foucault, 1976, p. 83) upon which it produces knowledge as the "master of its truth" (Foucault, 1976, p. 81). Gazing is an "act of seeing" (Foucault, 1976, p. ix) that informs administrative and disciplinary measures, which can be found in various formal and informal institutions of childhood, most notably the school and the family. Based on Foucault's concept, I argue that the 'childhood gaze' occurs in all spheres of institutionalised childhood, including childhood research. Through the 'childhood gaze', children are scrutinised for any deviations from the normative ideal of childhood, prompting interventions (cp Foucault's elaborations on the medical gaze, 1976, p. 89). The social construction of childhood is biopolitical (in the sense of Foucault), as children – at least in Western contexts – are perceived "as important primarily for their future contributions to society" (Garlen/Hembruff 2021, p. 79). Same as in the case of other minority groups in society "moral regulation projects […] problematise the conduct,

values, or culture of others and seek to impose regulations upon them" (Hunt 1999, p. 1). Thus, knowledge practices centred on children inform "policies and teaching programmes" (Holligan, 1999, p. 139) against possible or actual deviations, such as measures to prohibit, prevent or regulate the use of the internet for children.

Data for this article are derived from the World Vision research project "Sexual violence against children in the digital space" (World Vision, 2023) aimed at investigating the phenomenon in the partnering countries: Germany, India, the Philippines, and Thailand. Due to the risk of re-traumatizing minor victims in the interview and legal difficulties, the original project focused primarily on analysing expert interviews (for research results see World Vision et al, 2023). Herewith, this project largely follows the 'childhood gaze' reproducing an adult perspective on children's activities and consequent needs for public regulation and intervention.

In this article, I want to contrast the 'childhood gaze' with my notion of the 'children's gaze'. Here, I refer to a line of research that centres around methodologies aimed at collecting the perspectives of children on their lifeworlds. Often, this is done via interviews with children or by inviting them to take photos or videos of their lifeworlds. This research is guided by the commonly referred to paradigm that children are competent actors in their lifeworlds and actively express their interests and needs through their social practices (see Hengst/Zeiher, 2005; Wihstutz, 2019, p. 28). While research with children cannot be entirely freed from adultism, and even interactions among children occur within an adultistic society, the epistemic interest lies in exploring children's perspectives on their lifeworlds – their gaze, their understanding of power and regulation, and their agency. The original World Vision study included a sample of seven interviews with young people (two minors, and five emerging adults) who experienced digital sexualised violence during their childhood.

This study followed a restrictive ethical procedure to ensure the protection of all interviewees. Prior to the interviews, all interviewees were fully informed about the topics to be discussed and the sensitive nature of the research. Participants were clearly informed about the requirements of anonymity and confidentiality and were made aware that the interview was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw from the interview at any time without consequences. In the case of minor interviewees, informed consent was obtained from their parents or legal guardians in advance of the interviews.

The primary publication used only small portions of these interviews as supplementary data to illustrate the arguments of adult experts. For this article, three cases were selected for in-depth analysis based on contrasting life contexts, forms of violence experienced, and self-strategies employed to handle these experiences. Two of the three cases involve young adults by age, while only one is legally a child. As a result, these young people adopt a 'children's gaze' in retrospect.

The data were collected from autumn 2022 to spring 2023 using a methodological strategy of qualitative guided interviews, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted in the native languages of the interviewees by local researchers and later translated into English. The names of the interviewees were anonymized.

For the data analysis, the interviews were initially openly coded. During this process, it became evident that the interviewees outlined a biographical trajectory progressing from unawareness of digital risks to the crisis of experiencing violence and, ultimately, to coping with it. To further analyse this trajectory, Schütze's methodological concept of biographical process structures (Schütze, 1981) was employed. Schütze's concept helps to understand how a biographical crisis may emerge from normative biographical patterns and may be resolved at biographical turning points in an individual's life (Schütze, 1981, p. 67). In Schütze's understanding of this trajectory suffering is the central experience, so severe that it compromises the individual's identity and social relations. Individuals may overcome a biographical crisis by developing action schemes to control or escape the trajectory dynamics (Riemann/Schütze, 1991, p. 351). Either by themselves or with the help of others, "turning processes" (Schütze, 1981, p. 76) may be initiated, offering opportunities to cope with the crisis experience and regain control over one's life.

Roh's case

Roh is a nonbinary young adult from India who is studying psychology. At the time of the interview, they are 23 years old and come from an urban upper middle-class background. Roh's interview shows that young people (at least in their peer group) experience digital sexuality as an integral part of their general social media use (cp. Delisle, 2015, p. 29). Roh explains that at the age of 13, it was common among friends to "exchang[ing] pictures and digital sexual interactions […] like occasional sexting and all". With regard to Schütze's concept, digital sexual interaction can be interpreted as a regular biographical experience for Roh and their peers, and it may also contain a normative component related to participating in peer behaviour. Roh elaborates that through communication with friends, they also learned about the risks of digital sexuality: "so my friends did say that you know sometimes people who take screenshots of their chats and send it to their friends who would again, send it to their friends." Hence, intimate data could spread through the translocal network of the internet and become uncontrollable. This information was not covered in Roh's formal education, and Roh never had any conversations about digital risks with their parents, despite using their parents' devices. Thus, this narrative shows a 'digital gap' between the child and parents, as the latter do not know what Roh was doing online and what the associated risks were.

Roh explains that when they started using Facebook at the age of 13 or 14, they accepted every online friendship request, regardless of whether they knew the person offline. Herewith, young people like Roh interact in a digital translocal community that consists of people they know from their offline locality and strangers who live all around the world. However, Roh did not experience sexual violence from a stranger but from a person they knew from offline life. Approximately at the age of 15 a male peer, who attended Roh's school, used Facebook to harass Roh and extort them.

> "I wasn't interested in him so because I was already like questioning my sexual orientation and stuff, so I kind of ignored him […] so he like threatened me on Facebook and what he did was he took my face and edited it into pictures of naked woman and was like if you don't talk to me if you don't you know respond to me and continue ignoring me I will spread these pictures and yeah so that's how it began"

This case reveals several issues related to sexuality development and relationship dynamics among young people. The perpetrator is unable to cope with Roh's rejection, fails to understand mutual consent in starting a relationship, and forces Roh into interacting with him online. This type of online blackmailing with the help of sexualised data is named "sextortion" (cp also case of Riona below for a different variant).

Moreover, the case illustrates the drastic intermingling of offline and online lifeworlds, which is crucial for understanding the crisis experiences of young people: While Roh is abused online, the sharing of (fake) nude pictures with peers who know Roh offline connects both dimensions of their life. Hence, the global dimension of the internet at this moment reconnects to a very specific locality.

Even though the nude pictures were visibly fake, Roh experienced significant emotional suffering during the sextortion by the perpetrator. In terms of Schütze (1981, p. 67), this led to a biographical crisis.

> "I was scared [.....] I knew that the although these pictures have my face in it, everybody can tell that it is an edited picture. So although it does kind of bring my face into focus, people would realize that you know these are not […] something that I sent to that other person"

Part of the difficulty for Roh was that they lacked the concepts to understand why the sextortion involving visibly fake nudes had such a profound impact on them. This underscores that both formal and informal education on sexualised violence must not only focus on actual physical attacks but also inform young people about the potential harms of misusing personal data in sexualised content. Roh's case illustrates that using their face to create a fake nude was an attempt to

overstep personal boundaries and exert power over the digital representation of their body and digital identity.

The sextortion continued for about three months, and Roh increasingly struggled to cope with offline life, especially at school. This reiterates that for young people, the offline and online spheres may become inseparable dimensions of their lifeworlds, in which the online sphere serves as a translocal reference structure for the offline sphere. "[..] it got to a point where I also did not go to school for a few days to like avoid seeing him there." (Roh) Commonly, it is argued by members of older generations that young people who face cybermobbing should leave the internet, but Roh's case shows that this is not a suitable solution of the problem (cp also Levine et al, 2021) as data spreads online whether Roh participates the internet or not.

With regard to Schütze's understanding of a biographical crisis Roh finds themselves in a situation where they have entered into the feeling of "loss of control over one's life circumstances" (Riemann/Schütze, 1991, p. 337), which compromised their identity and social relations to the point where Roh cannot participate school anymore. After this period of increasing suffering a turning point in the sense of Schütze (1981, p. 76) was initiated when Roh decided to involve their older brother. This again points to the relevance of intragenerational support structures to solve problems with sexualised violence on the internet probably because generation members better understand digitality and have fewer taboos to discuss sexuality (compare Delisle, 2015, p. 26).

Apart from the taboo surrounding sexuality, Roh also argues that they were afraid of losing access to the internet if they involved their parents: "they would just be like why are you using social media and they would make me stop using Facebook so I in a way I did not want to stop my social media usage". Hence, Roh ultimately decided to confide in their brother, who came to their aid: "my brother went and spoke to the guy and asked him to step back and then he stopped." Here again, online and offline lives intersect as Roh's brother personally met the perpetrator and asked him (and possibly threatened him) to stop abusing Roh. Roh's case illustrates that prevention and support against digital sexualised violence often come from peers who inform each other about potential harms and may step in to protect each other from digital attacks. Consequently, when asked about what remedies should be established to combat digital sexualised violence, Roh reports that parents need to be educated to bridge the digital gap with their children, for example, by understanding the dynamics and practices of young people's digital lives:

> "my parents if I told them they would not understand and they would just scold me […] there is a sort of a disconnect between parents and their children […] because the parents have a different idea and the children have a different idea and their experiences are also very different."

Most importantly, Roh emphasises that parents need to understand that digital sexualised violence occurs regularly and that "it can make anyone vulnerable." The 'children's gaze' as articulated by Roh calls for a form of enlightenment among parents - encouraging them to educate themselves about digital spaces and become more aware of children's online vulnerabilities. This requirement reflects digital literacy and the experiential advantage of children, which is typically attributed to adults in other areas. However, it is significant that, despite the parents' lack of digital skills, Roh still views them as the most important institution for the protection and care of children.

Ace's case

At the time of the interview, Ace is a 19-year-old young man from the Philippines who lives with his mother and two younger siblings in an urban working-class area. Previously, he lived with various other members of his maternal family while his mother worked abroad. During his childhood, Ace was diagnosed with a "confidential health problem" that is life-threatening and known only to his mother. In addition to concealing his health issue, Ace discusses in his interview how he has struggled with his gender and sexual identity since he was about 14 years old.

> "I'm alone. I'm the lone gay or homosexual in the family. It's happy, but at the same time difficult task to take because they're not that open to homosexuals. I was really struggling with my identity."

Regularly, his family criticised him for appearing too feminine and being "too soft". As a result, Ace grew up with frequent negative comments about his body, which he endured silently. In addition to the stigmatisation of his sexual and gender identity, Ace felt unsupported in his daily struggles: "When I had problems, I would actually solve them myself. I couldn't open up to anyone." In the 'children's gaze' deployed here, Ace reports on "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 106) employed by adult family members to control his identity. Shaming is used as a form of disciplining by them, and Ace copes with it by silently enduring and relying on himself to find solutions to his problem.

Against the backdrop of his family's taboo on homosexuality, Ace used the internet to explore his sexuality. A male peer, a few years older than Ace, introduced him to the app "Grindr" which provides opportunities for local offline but also translocal online interactions with usually a strong focus on sexuality. Ace explains that he learned on the app that some users exchange photos or videos with sexual content and/or arrange to meet in person or online for sexual activities. Using this app, he also learned about the commodification of sexuality when he saw that some users offered services as "massage therapists" for a fee, though he never considered

pursuing such activities himself. Ace reports that he was asked several times to send photos of himself but declined because he was not interested in the men he was chatting with, describing them as “really old gays” from several different countries. He also never arranged to meet anyone in person. This section of his interview shows that, despite interacting digitally with much older men who might have been strategically acting, Ace was able to maintain his boundaries and use the app autonomously to explore his curiosity about meeting other homosexual men online and potentially finding someone he was interested in.

Similar to Roh's case, in Ace's experience, the digital exchange of sexual content, especially when consensual and mutual, appears to be a regular aspect of establishing sexual or romantic relationships. In the sense of Schütze (1981, p. 67) digital sexuality can be seen as a regular biographical pattern of members of this generation. Interestingly, in Ace's case, access to potentially harmful digital spaces did not cause his vulnerability, as he initially used the app according to his own needs and boundaries in developing his sexuality. Rather, an offline contact with a peer led to the sexual abuse of Ace.

When Aces was 15 or 16 years old, the same male peer (five years older than Ace and named “the Captain” by Ace) who had introduced him to Grindr and who was the captain of his sports team, told Ace about the possibility of making money by selling photos online. For a long time, Ace did not agree to sell his photos. However, as he observed that other friends began doing so, he felt encouraged to try it himself mainly for economic reasons. “I would be able to buy things that I want. I was a teenager, the things that I see with others, I'd love to have them too, so why not?”

The Captain showed Ace photos of other kids with their faces covered. Finally, Ace agreed that the Captain would take his photo with his phone and sell it online. The Captain took control over Ace’s photos and exploited him by keeping the income that was generated. In order to regain agency, Ace took new photos with his own phone and began selling them on the app. Retrospectively, this can be interpreted as the beginning of a trajectory into a crisis situation (Schütze, 1981, p. 67), as Ace was pressured by the Captain into engaging in activities he had never previously considered. After some time, he was approached by the Captain again, who suggested that Ace would meet a “foreigner” offline, who the Captain had met online and “just be sweet and sweet with that foreigner. Then afterwards you get money and then it's really up to you what you want to allow or permit to do with that foreigner.” The Captain and Ace went to meet a Chinese man, and, surprisingly to Ace, the Captain left them alone. Ace says, that he did not know what to do, but “since I was already there, I had no choice but to go with it.” The ‘children’s gaze’ deployed here shows an absence of choice when subjected to adults’ needs in offline settings. At this part of the interview, it remains unclear whether this was the first offline sexual contact of Ace or if he had had offline sex before. However, it is crucial - potentially linked to Ace’s family socialisation of enduring violence -

that he felt he had “no choice” but to comply with the perpetrator's expectations. This points to the need for sexuality education that helps young people to understand the importance of consent and withdrawal from sexual practices that they do not want to participate in.

After some time, the Captain asked Ace to go to a "party" with him. While driving to the meeting place in a cab, another young person and a girl, whom Ace identified as a “hooker”, joined them. The Captain took them to meet an older man, who was later convicted of abusing minors. After having received 500 Pesos, the Captain left Ace and the other victim with the perpetrator. Ace was “shocked” as he learned that they had to do a “threesome”, which he had not done before. The perpetrator was “coaching me while I was shocked hearing all these things, some things that I couldn't really actually understand.” Indicating that Ace was highly dependent on and subdued by the Captain, he says: “I couldn't back out because my friend [the Captain, CRA] no longer there.” In the interview of Ace this situation of being trapped in a car with three other people and being forced to have sex practices with them that are not consensual and not even known to Ace marks the outmost biographical crisis situation. With Schütze’s concept, Ace’s “suffering” is characterised by what he perceives as “conditional chains of events that one cannot avoid without high costs” (Riemann/Schütze, 1991, p. 337). However, at that moment, a turning point in his life occurred, which Schütze describes as an opportunity, initiated by oneself or others, to regain control over one’s life (Schütze, 1981, p. 76).

When the perpetrator began to touch Ace, “the police came with all the guns and all. I was shocked. Then a shawl covered my face, and that was my rescue.” After the police raid, Ace spent about a year in a youth shelter, where his confidential health issue was treated and he received psychotherapy. Upon returning home, his family did not talk much about the abuse, but Ace felt positively about their welcome. He reflects, “gradually, I think they've accepted it, but now I think they're proud of me somehow. They've accepted who I am.” In this narrative, it becomes visible that Ace’s gaze notices a change in the attitudes and relations of the family members towards him. Similar to the other cases, it deploys a perspective that requires adults to change, taking better care of their young family members.

When asked for advice on establishing prevention against sexualised violence on the internet, Ace emphasises the role of the family. Thus, in the ‘children’s gaze’, the family presents as the social institution responsible for caring for and protecting children, which also includes disciplining them when it comes to harmful behaviours. He suggests that families need to provide “guidance” and ensure that children adhere to safety protocols for which adults need to be better informed about children’s use of the internet. Ace reflects on his own experience, noting that his family did not offer him any direction on how to handle the internet:

"They were just letting me do the things that I wanted during that time because they had - I don't know if they were just letting me be or if they were just trusting me, but they couldn't - they were not attentive to - they didn't know that I was actually doing the wrong things already."

Ace concludes that his abuse case was a learning process for him. Reflecting on his positive experiences in the youth shelter, he now aspires to become a psychologist to help other children who experience sexual abuse.

Riona's case

At the time of the interview, Riona is a 17-year-old female from India, belonging to an upper middle-class family. She recalls that at the age of 12, she attended a sexual education class at school that focused primarily on offline sexual violence and briefly mentioned the existence of "online perpetrators". However, the class provided only a cursory overview of how sexual violence might occur on the internet and obviously did not raise Riona's risk awareness. She thought "the internet was a very secure place that time". Pointing to her biographical learning process, Riona notes: "I have much more knowledge on that because I also personally went through something that happened to me with my privacy".

Riona explains that when she was in the 6th grade (around 11 to 12 years old), she started using Instagram and was active on the internet without being aware of the risks associated with certain apps. She describes feeling pressure in her offline life to always present her "best self", while the internet provided her with a space where she could "be whoever I wanted, even if it wasn't completely true online". Similar to Roh, Riona used the internet as a space for personal development, that through translocality offers her contacts and opportunities that were limited in her offline life.

When being in the 8th class (age 14 to 15) she had started to exchange intimate photos with a male peer two years older than her. Living in the same neighbourhood they had already flirted offline. The initiation of a sexual relationship occurred in the digital space and increasingly intensified. After about one year they started to exchange photos and videos of each other "not wearing complete clothes" and "touching ourselves" as a regular, re-occurring relationship practice that did not seem uncommon or risky to Riona. She explains that the content was sent via "disappearing messages", which could only be viewed once, could not be saved, and included a warning if screenshots were taken. The boy asked if he could take screenshots. Despite her refusal, he secretly used another device to photograph the screen.

Riona's crisis began two months later when she started receiving anonymous messages containing the very photos she had shared. Peers informed her that these photos were circulating among male students at her school and two nearby schools highlighting the importance of locality in the online space. Although the photos did

not show her face, the background of her room made her easily identifiable to people who knew her in offline life. Soon, Riona received messages from several anonymous accounts that made it clear they knew her identity and blackmailed her, demanding more intimate content or threatening to expose her. This type of digital sexualised violence, known as sextortion, continued for about 10 months, during which she felt increasingly overwhelmed by the crisis.

Riona says that she "couldn't study properly". She felt judged in school, because her peers might have seen the pictures online, and had lost many friends offline and online "because they wouldn't want their reputation to have been spoiled" if they were connected to her. This again reiterates the significance of online spaces as common reference structures of young people, which older generations do not have access to and are therefore blind to the violence that takes place.

Finding herself in these "conditional chains of events" (Riemann/Schütze, 1991, p. 337) that she thought she could not escape, Riona at first sent the requested intimate pictures of her with her face and background covered. Even though she was immensely suffering, Riona tried to regain control over the situation by sending pictures that she found on the internet and that showed another young woman unknown to Riona who had a similar body to her. Depending on the origin of these pictures and local laws she potentially committed a criminal offence by doing this or victimised another child or adult. When Riona had her final exams in the 8th grade she was very stressed of the sextortion as "people kept on asking for more and more".

> "I checked my phone I would see that the people have messaged me and say like if you delay the sending it and longer, I'm going to go to your school or your teachers […] and that I could not find out a secret way to continue using my phone"

Similar to Roh's case, Riona's experience illustrates the severe pressure that online sexual violence can exert. The combination of frequent and intense hostile contacts, blackmail, and the perceived control over the victim's online identity - even with the use of fake images - creates a complex and difficult-to-escape trajectory. This situation intertwines the potential to shame the victim both offline and online, compounding the difficulty of escaping the crisis.

Riona increasingly suffered under these conditions, feeling trapped with no apparent way to change her situation. In line with Schütze's concept of a turning point, the intervention happened when her father, who lived in another city, came to visit her. "[…] he could see why I was checking my phone again and again, instead of studying so that was the time when [...] I told him about what happened and I told him not to tell my mom about it."

At first, Riona's father was angry and wanted to go to the police, but Riona asked him not to do so, as it would mean her mother would find out. Her example shows that Riona needs her father as a representation of adult power to carry out her agency, but she does not rely on him to solve the problem. Riona and her father decided to confront the boy directly. Backed-up by her father, Riona managed to compel the boy to record a video in which he admitted to saving and leaking her photos without her consent. This video was posted on both the boy's and Riona's Instagram accounts. Additionally, Riona posted a video of herself stating that anyone attempting to blackmail her again would be reported to the police. This decisive action effectively ended the sextortion. The agency shown by Riona is characteristic of the children's gaze on digitality because the resolution of the problem takes place within the same space where the violence occurred to reach the relevant audience.

Characteristic of the adult-centric discourse on digital safety for young people, Riona places herself in the position of being fully responsible for the experience of sextortion, rather than criticizing the lack of protection and prevention offered to her by adults. "I was very naive that time I did not think that someone would take another device and put it on top of the first device to take a photo".

When she thinks about prevention, Riona does not envision adults explaining the risks of the internet to her; instead, she frames it primarily as a form of peer education: "if I would have had a proper talk with some friends of my age or seniors or any professional would have told that the different ways [of saving pictures]". Finally, she also mentions that parents need education about digital sexual violence. She argues that they cannot offer adequate protection to their children, whether they give them uncontrolled access to the internet or completely ban it, because young people will find ways to go online regardless.

Conclusion

This article aims to reveal the 'children's gaze' on issues of digitalised sexuality and sexual violence. Digital sexuality appears to be a regular, common practice for young people, often occurring before offline sexuality between persons living within a locality or translocality. However, the absence of effective protection structures leads to risks, that are aggravated by translocality as different national laws and child protection measurements are included.

Even though this article is based only on three case studies, the analysed individual biographies exemplify living conditions that are paradigmatic for growing up in times of digitalization and can be verified with statistical data. Same as in the three analysed cases, many children are given (often full) access to the internet without being adequately prepared by adults in the family and the school for its risks, particularly regarding data security and their options for maintaining personal boundaries. The data reveals a 'generational gap of digitality', as older

generations - represented in children's interviews primarily by parents and secondarily by educators and professionals - do not engage with digitality in the same ways as young people. They are not integrated into their online spaces, and therefore, digital sexuality and sexual violence remain hidden from them. This can be regarded as a form of cultural violence in the sense of Galtung (1990, p. 291): children's sexuality, both offline and online, is tabooed, and experiences of digital sexualized violence are neither anticipated as possible, nor discussed, nor prevented (cf. Rohde-Abuba 2025). At present, this appears to be a worldwide phenomenon that cannot be reduced to so-called 'traditional societies'.

The key element of the generational gap is that children assume their parents might forbid them from going online, which impedes participation in their lifeworlds. Presumably, the "moral panic" associated with children's general media consumption - rooted in the construction of childhood as a phase of "innocence" (Garlen & Hembruff, 2021, referencing Garlen, 2019) - intersects with the taboo surrounding children's sexuality, which tends to result in the negation of the topic rather than in empowering education. At this point, it would be beneficial to have further research with parents to better understand their 'gaze' and their need for support in protecting their children.

However, only through interviews with children does it become clear that digitality is a reference structure of young people's lifeworlds (see also Burton 2019, p. 13), connecting relationships with people who share geographical locations and those living in other parts of the world. Even when offenders of digital sexual violence do not live in the same location as their victims, they may use lists of friends or followers to leak intimate data to persons of the victim's location, thereby establishing online/offline dynamics of violence. This blending of online and offline contexts amplifies the impact of the abuse, making it a pervasive and deeply distressing experience for the victim. Even if children completely leave the internet, the digital transmission of their data can still be used to harass them offline. As the cases at hand show, digital sexualised violence may lead to new forms of social inequality that are rarely discussed yet, but may affect young people of all socioeconomic classes. The indelibity of (intimate) data on the internet can impair the digital identity of young people for their entire lives, impacting future online and offline interaction. Even when data are deleted from specific apps or profiles, it cannot be guaranteed that a user has not downloaded the data and may upload it again later. However, young people, in their view of digitality, consider their well-being a private issue rather than a public one, which strengthens the call to empower them regarding their rights. They ask for a stronger responsibility of parents to understand their online participation and to educate them on risks and protection strategies.

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Bionote

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