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From *behaviours* to *interactions*: reframing conceptualisations of the nature and causes of sexual harm among young people

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how educators, police and children's service providers, alongside young people, conceptualise the nature and causes of sexual harm among young people. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in southeast England, we identify four themes: sexual harm as learned behaviour rooted in personal and familial risk factors; normalisation of harmful experiences among girls; neglect and minimisation of boys' victimisation; and evolving digital terrains of harm. While some participants engaged with structural and cultural explanations, many framed sexual harm through an individualised, risk-focused behaviourist lens. We suggest the emphasis on *behaviour* within the prevailing use of the term "harmful sexual behaviour" reinforces reductionist perspectives and overlooks interactional, institutional, and socio-cultural dynamics shaping young people's experiences. Drawing on sexual script theory and post-digital sexual citizenship, we expand the conceptual terrain, advocating for a holistic and inclusive approach situating sexual harm within broader relational and institutional contexts, requiring nuanced, context-sensitive responses.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

We advocate shifting focus from individualised and pathologising approaches to "harmful sexual behaviour" toward addressing broader cultural, relational and institutional dynamics shaping sexual harm among young people. By reframing the discourse to emphasise social and institutional contexts, we encourage policies and practices that promote a nuanced understanding of the cultural and structural factors influencing sexual harm, enabling more supportive and inclusive interventions.

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Introduction

Since Hackett's (2010) original formulation of the continuum of sexual behaviour, the term "Harmful Sexual Behaviour" (HSB) has gained prominence in describing a broad spectrum of sexually inappropriate or abusive behaviours among children and young

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people, including in school contexts (Allardyce & Yates, 2018; Erooga & Masson, 2006; Fritz & Firmin, 2016; Hackett et al., 2016). While Hackett's continuum of sexual behaviour acknowledges the contextual specificities shaping understandings of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, its emphasis on "behaviour" may conceptually narrow attention to individual actions, potentially overlooking broader social, cultural, and institutional dynamics underpinning what Lloyd and Bradbury (2023) term, "sexual harm."

Building on this critique, this paper critically examines findings from a study conducted in southeast England, exploring professionals' and adolescents' perspectives on the causes and nature of HSB. This study explored how police, schools and other service providers conceptualise and respond to HSB, and how their understandings shape institutional practice. In particular, we sought to examine the frameworks participants bring to the task of managing HSB and how these inform and constrain their responses. Drawing on sexual script theory (Jackson & Scott, 2010), we argue for a shift from behaviourist paradigms to a framework situating sexual harm within social, cultural, and institutional ecologies, including in school settings where peer and youth-adult interactions shape young people's experiences of sexual harm. Rather than focusing solely on individualised contact offences, this perspective recognises how norms, peer dynamics and digital cultures contribute to sexual harassment, coercion, and image-based sexual abuse. We advocate for a post-digital sexual citizenship framework (Setty et al., 2024), which expands the understanding of and response to sexual harm through a contextualised and holistic approach addressing its structural and relational dimensions.

Literature review

Evolution and terminological challenges of "harmful sexual behaviour"

According to Hackett (2010), children and young people's sexual behaviour exists along a continuum of sexually appropriate, inappropriate and abusive behaviours. This continuum ranges from consensual, developmentally typical sexual exploration (for example, masturbation in private, kissing and touching, and having intimate relationships with same-age peers), through to inappropriate genital touching, to serious cases of peer-on-peer sexual abuse. While Hackett's continuum initially captured "normal" to highly deviant sexual behaviours presented by children and young people, its use has expanded, particularly in light of movements like *Everyone's Invited*, which exposed widespread sexual harassment and violence in schools (Setty et al., 2024). The terminology HSB is now broadly applied in policy and practice as a catch-all for behaviours encompassing physical sexual violence, verbal harassment, and online acts of abuse including non-consensual sexual image sharing (Fritz & Firmin, 2016; Lloyd, 2019).

The terminology used to describe sexual behaviours among young people has implications for understanding and addressing their actions. Despite widespread uptake, the term HSB is not without limitations. Its broad application can obsure important distinctions between behaviours of varying severity and consensual and coercive actions. A scoping review identified substantial differences in how HSB is defined and conceptualised across contexts, resulting in potential confusion, inconsistent responses and a loss of nuance (Hunt et al., 2024). For example, consensual exploratory behaviours between

peers may be pathologised, while more harmful actions may not receive the focused attention they warrant (Lloyd & Bradbury, 2023).

Terminology has evolved to address the complexity of young people's behaviours and experiences, for example terms such as "peer-on-peer" sexual abuse and "sexual harm". "Peer-on-peer" sexual abuse has, however, been critiqued for obscuring nuances in age, developmental stage and consent, conflating interactions between children of a similar age with cases involving older teenagers and young children, where power dynamics and coercion may be more pronounced, thus downplaying the seriousness of some cases (Allardyce & Yates, 2018). Nevertheless, the term may, if used critically and in specific contexts, help highlight the horizontal, age-proximate nature of much of the abuse described by our participants. Substituting "child sexual abuse" in these cases may inadvertently imply adult-perpetrator dynamics and obscure the peer-based, relational features that are central to our analysis.

"Sexual harm", intended to capture actions and consequences within and beyond individual incidents and actions (Lloyd & Bradbury, 2023), has been criticised by survivors for potentially minimising abuse. Efforts to avoid labelling children as perpetrators, and instead emphasising broader systemic contexts may inadvertently divert attention from immediate harms experienced by victims, potentially underplaying the severity of cases, notwithstanding the objective of providing effective, holistic remedial responses. In a restorative justice context, the emphasis on restoring harm may result in reduced perceptions of seriousness and distract from any potentially coercive dynamcs (Sardina & Ackerman, 2022).

Mitigating these issues requires context-sensitive, precise language acknowledging experiences and contexts. Nothwithstanding the above critique, we adopt "sexual harm" in this paper to capture the broader social, cultural, and institutional dynamics shaping experiences of and responses to harmful sexual interactions, as emphasised by Lloyd and Bradbury (2023). Rather than downplaying these interactions, the term "sexual harm" situates them within relational and institutional processes. It provides a framework for recognising interactional dynamics – such as power, consent, and peer norms – as well as institutional contexts that shape how harm is perpetuated or addressed. This broader framing helps account for the socio-cultural and intersectional factors that influence, but are not reducible to, individual actions.

Our intention is not to reject the term "harmful sexual behaviour" entirely but to reposition it within a broader conceptualisation of "sexual harm". This framework captures specific behaviours, including those described as HSB, while also encompassing relational, institutional and cultural dynamics, including forms of harm that may not be reducible to discrete acts. This framing enables attention to specific actions where needed while simultaneously recognising the conditions shaping those actions and their consequences. "Sexual harm" shifts attention from merely identifying behaviours to understanding how behaviours are embedded within and influenced by broader cultural and relational ecologies. We use sexual scipt theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) to highlight individual, interpersonal, institutional, and societal factors shaping young people's sexual interactions and experiences, allowing for recognition of harm that may not align neatly with legal definitions or traditional categories of abuse but nonetheless carries social and emotional consequences. While acknowledging its contested nature, we suggest this broader scope offers opportunities to critically explore and address the complex, multi-layered nature of young people's experiences.

Limitations of individualised frameworks

Individualised, behaviourist frameworks emphasise categorisation over more contextualised approaches that address how behaviours emerge from broader socio-cultural contexts, including peer norms, gender dynamics and institutional processes (Dobson, 2019). Through focusing narrowly on behaviours, there is a risk of reinforcing binary understandings of "victims' and "perpetrators' (NSPCC, 2023), obscuring the complexities and fluidity of young people's experiences and positionalities.

Critical research highlights how institutional and cultural contexts shape not only the occurrence of harm, but also how it is interpreted and responded to. Firmin (2020), for example, identifies peer dynamics, school cultures, and neighbourhood contexts shaping the perpetration, experience, definition and response to sexual harm. Gender dynamics of sexual harm, whereby girls disproportionality experience harm enacted by boys, reflect norms positioning girls as passive recipients of sexual advances and boys as aggressive initiators (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Setty, 2022), which facilitate abusive behaviours and shape the recognition and response to such behaviours, particularly in institutional settings like schools. Boys' harmful actions, such as verbal or physical harassment, can be minimised as an inevitable part of masculine sexuality ("boys will be boys'), while boys' personal experiences of victimisation can be overlooked or triviliased (Abbott et al., 2021; Setty, 2022).

Digital technology and sexual harm

The increasing role of digital technology in shaping sexual harm adds another layer of complexity. Dominant perspectives on these developments often adopt a risk-averse, protective stance, framing young people as vulnerable when negotiating digital spaces and affordances, with concerns relating to sexual image sharing and the influence of sexually explicit content (e.g. pornography) and social media on young people's attitudes and behaviours. These perspectives can neglect young people's agency and the socio-cultural dimensions of their online sexual engagements and experiences (Ringrose, Whitehead et al., 2021; Setty et al., 2024). Furthermore, it is difficult to establish whether there has been a rise in abuse, a change in the nature of abuse, or increased awareness of and attunement to the issues. For example, while sexual harassment of girls is not new, online platforms enable the digital mediation of abuse and there is now more evidence of incidents compared to allegations of physical or in-person abuse, making it a more visible problem.

Responding to sexual image sharing, frameworks such as "image-based sexual abuse" (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017); "technology-facilitated sexual violence" (Henry et al., 2018) and "image-based sexual harassment and abuse" (IBSHA) (Ringrose, Regehr et al., 2021) foreground the harms associated with non-consensual practices, while highlighting the role of bystanders, social norms and peer pressure in amplifying harm (e.g. Harder, 2021). For instance, harms arising from non-consensual distribution of images are often compounded by stigmatising of victims by the "audience" who becomes privy to the images (Setty et al., 2023). While terms such as "technology-assisted HSB" are commonly used in practitioner contexts, we opt for IBSA and IBSHA to reflect our broader analytical orientation. This terminology better captures the relational, cultural and gendered dynamics of harm and aligns with our shift away from behaviourist framings embedded in the language of HSB.

These frameworks underscore that digital sexual harm is not merely a function of technology but is embedded in broader cultural and social dynamics (Ringrose, Whitehead et al., 2021). Online abuse is not distinct from offline harm, but rather extends, amplifies and reconfigures existing patterns of gendered power, peer influence and institutional responses, necessitating a conceptual approach that moves beyond risk-based narratives to account for the evolving terrains of harm, agency and ethical negotiation in young people's digital interactions.

Applying sexual script theory

Sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) provides a framework for understanding the socio-cultural dimensions of sexual harm. It delineates multiple layers of context – personal, interpersonal, cultural, and structural – through which sexual interactions are negotiated. Sexual scripts, shaped by gender norms and cultural expectations, influence behaviours and their interpretation (Jackson & Scott, 2010). Applied to young people's experiences of sexual harm, this framework reveals how institutional and cultural contexts (e.g. schools, peer groups, digital platforms) shape interactions (Setty et al., 2024). It complicates binary distinctions between acceptable and harmful behaviours, through recognising the ambiguities and pressures inherent in navigating consent, coercion and peer norms (see Gilbert, 2018; Setty, 2022). It also enables recognition of personal and demographic factors and circumstances statistically associated with incidents identified and recorded by adult authorities (Malvaso et al., 2020), while acknowledging institutional processes and biases shaping the risk and need profiles that come to the attention of and are acted upon by these authorities (Lloyd, 2019).

Sexual script theory permits a critique of individualised, behaviourist frameworks through foregrounding relational, institutional and structural dynamics within gendered and digitally mediated contexts of sexual harm and situating behaviours within broader cultural landscapes. For example, while Hackett's framework might categorise non-consensual image-sharing as sexual abuse, sexual script theory examines layered dynamics, including peer pressure, gendered expectations and digital affordances. Rather than focusing solely on the act, sexual script theory considers how gender norms and cultures, institutional responses and bystander complicitly collectively create conditions for such harm. It also allows for critical interrogation of the framing of pornography or social media as primary causal factors. While these influences are undoubtedly significant, sexual script theory emphasises their interaction with relational and systemic contexts (Hunt et al., 2024).

The present paper

This paper critically examines professional and adolescent perspectives on the nature and causes of HSB, challenging individualised framings and engaging with cultural, institutional, and relational dynamics and systemic and cultural contexts of sexual harm.

Methodology

Research question

This study was guided by the following research question: How do professionals and adolescents conceptualise harmful sexual behaviour, and how do these conceptualisations

shape institutional responses in education, policing, and safeguarding services? The study explored the management of HSB in schools and, specifically, the relationship between schools and police in preventing and responding to HSB. It aimed to:

1. Examine professional and adolescent conceptualisations of the nature and causes of HSB.
2. Investigate challenges faced by police, schools, and service providers in responding to HSB.
3. Explore institutional and social contexts shaping responses to and understandings of HSB.

This study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its initiative to support police-academic partnerships addressing violence against women and girls. The research was conducted in collaboration with a police force in southeast England. We framed the study using the language of HSB, in alignment with its widespread familiarity among professionals in policy and practice, enabling participants to engage with the study using terminology embedded in their contexts. Interview schedules included open-ended prompts such as: "What does the term harmful sexual behaviour mean to you?", "Can you describe any recent incidents or examples?", and "What kinds of support or responses do you think are effective?" These questions were designed to elicit not only participants' definitions but also their underlying assumptions and institutional framing of the problem. During analysis, we adopted the term "sexual harm" to reflect our broader conceptual framing, developed in response to the findings.

Epistemological and theoretical framework

We adopt a constructivist epistemological framework, recognising that participants' perspectives are shaped by their experiences and institutional roles. We employ sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) to examine personal, interpersonal and cultural domains of sexual harm, critically interrogating participants' perspectives through highlighting interplays between individual behaviours and broader socio-cultural contexts. Our engagement with post-digital sexual citizenship (Setty et al., 2024) aligns with rights-based perspectives emphasising young people's agency, participation and entitlement to protection (Lundy, 2007). By reframing sexual harm within a contextual and systemic lens, we recognise structural and institutional conditions shaping young people's ability to exercise sexual rights, seek justice, and navigate consent and harm.

Sampling

Professional participants comprised police, schools, and other children's service professionals, recruited using purposive and snowball sampling.

Police participants were recruited through a senior officer from the force's evidence-based policing team, who identified and informed relevant teams and individuals about the study. Police participants included four Youth Engagement Officers (YEO); four officers working in the High Harm Perpetrator Unit (HHPU); and an officer specialising

in online sexual crimes. These officers dealt with sexual offences and had previous and current experiences working with young people.

Schools were recruited via a mail-out to schools within the local education authority, with staff within the two participating schools volunteering for interviews. Participants included a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and Headteacher from one school, and a DSL, Deputy Head, Head of Personal, Social, Health, and Economic (PSHE) education, Head of Pastoral Care, and a receptionist from the second school. The inclusion of the school receptionist resulted from this participant's experience as an oftentimes first point-of-contact for safeguarding disclosures within the school and thus possessing a relevant perspective.

Children's service providers were identified and recruited via our existing stakeholder networks and snowball sampling, whereby participants recommended further relevant organisations and individuals for us to contact. Participants spanned statutory and non-statutory services, including Children's Social Care, Local Education Authority, Targeted Youth Support, an adolescent forensic service, an online safety service, and third-sector organisations providing domestic violence and children protection services and interventions.

We also recruited nine young people, including seven adolescent girls from a healthy relationships programme and two Domestic Abuse Ambassadors (one boy and one girl) in one of the schools.

Data collection

We conducted one-to-one interviews with professionals. Interviews with police and service providers were held on MS Teams, while interviews with school staff were held in-person. We explored participants' perspectives on and experiences of preventing and responding to HSB; definitions and understandings of HSB; risk factors for experiencing and enacting HSB; examples of incidents; and challenges in prevention and response.

We conducted a paired/joint interview and group interview with adolescents. The paired/joint interview was conducted with two Domestic Abuse Ambassadors in one school, with these young people participating together. They played a role in educating and supporting their peers about domestic violence and abuse based on their lived experiences. A group interview was held with seven adolescent girls from this school who had completed a school-based healthy relationships programme because they had been identified as at risk of or having experienced HSB and/or relationship abuse. These interviews explored perspectives on HSB, prevention and response to HSB within schools, and wider social contexts.

Each interview was co-conducted by the lead author and one of the other two authors. They were audio-recorded and auto-transcribed (via Otter.ai), with a post-graduate assistant verifying the transcripts against the recordings for accuracy.

Data analysis

Reflective notes and continuous debriefing were part of our iterative data collection process, allowing us to probe and refine our emerging insights. During analysis, we employed Braun and Clarke's (2021) phased approach to reflexive thematic analysis.

We compared and contrasted between and within participants to highlight the multifaceted dimensions of their perspectives. For this paper, we focused on conceptualisations and experiences of sexual harm, identifying tensions between individual, incident-level interpretations and broader social and cultural contexts. We examined prominent factors, and those marginalised or absent, within the accounts.

Ethics

We adhered to professional ethical standards, including informed consent, participant anonymity and safeguarding. Ethics approval was granted by our respective institutional ethics committees. While personal identifying details are not shared, participants were informed that the partnership with the local police service would be publicly disclosed and their occupational roles and places of work may be indirectly identified. This transparency was part of obtaining informed consent.

Findings

Participants' conceptualisations of sexual harm involved interplays between individual, familial, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. While some participants highlighted broader structural and contextual explanations, there was strong emphasis on behavioural risk factors, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and digital technology as primary causes. Several participants described peer cultures, gendered expectations and institutional responses as significant. Variation between participants likely reflects the professional diversity of the sample, with roles and institutional mandates influencing the cases they encounter and their exposure to different aspects of harm.

For example, teachers and school staff may be more exposed to a broad spectrum of behaviours, through witnessing peer interactions and lower-level incidents that may not reach statutory thresholds. Police officers and those in statutory enforcement may be more involved in cases escalating to the level of criminality, while those in therapeutic roles may be engaging with deeper socio-cultural and relational dimensions of harm. Despite these differences, participants consistently identified digital technology as a significant factor in shaping young people's sexual interactions and experiences.

Four key themes were generated from the data: (1) framing sexual harm as learned behaviour, particularly linked to personal and familial risk factors; (2) normalisation of harmful sexual experiences among girls and an expectation they manage risk; (3) neglect and minimisation of boys' victimisation, reinforcing gendered silences around their experiences of harm; and (4) evolving terrains of digital harm, where online spaces are positioned as a cause of harm rather than an extension of offline peer cultures and norms.

Sexual harm as learned behaviour rooted in personal and familial risk factors

A recurring theme in several professionals' accounts was the framing of HSB as learned behaviour, often linked to adverse personal and familial circumstances. Participants emphasised that young people exposed to trauma, neglect, or coercive environments may internalise and normalise harmful dynamics, shaping their interactions and

relationships. For example, reflecting their work with young people identified as involved in or at risk enacting sexual harm, a Senior Therapeutic Practitioner described the role of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs):

> " … some form of neglect [in the family] is the most common thing … emotional neglect, physical neglect … sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse … there's some exposure to something sexual along the way … pornography or … witnessing something."

Similarly, a Youth Engagement Officer (YEO1) highlighted how familial trauma perpetuates cycles of harm and compromises young people's ability to recognise harm:

> " … a lot of kids that are from traumatic families and have ACEs … when they then start having relationships, it then follows through with them … if a young girl is in a relationship with a boy for the first time and … she has got ACEs, she's then in a relationship with a young man who has come from a family full of ACEs, and has witnessed coercive controlling behaviour … she … is then going to think that that is a normal relationship and the boy is then going to continue controlling that female."

Indicating that socio-economic and family circumstances may factor in identifying and recording incidents among police, an officer in the High Harm Perpetrator Unit described it as common that young people have experienced:

> " … a domestic violence situation, where they've seen their dad be quite nasty to their mum … I've had people from very privileged backgrounds, but it's very rare … it's not ones that we become aware of … that we can, sort of, record … Typically, there is some kind of chaotic background … ". (HHPU1)

The officer suggested that incidents involving "privileged" young people – in terms of absence of any apparent family trauma or socio-economic disadvantage – are less common, although may, to a limited extent, arise from peer influence:

> "[It is possible that] … they [more privileged young people] will see something at school … or they're influenced by other people quite easily and are led down that path … that is more uncommon … [than] some form of offending or violence within the family setting."

Participants highlighted the vulnerability of young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN), noting their potential difficulty in recognising harmful behaviours or social cues. Referring to sexualised interactions online, the Online Safety Expert explained: "SEN young people … often felt it was consensual … usual … or normal." Others similarly indicated that SEN young people may be vulnerable to sexual harm online or offline due to a lack of awareness and understanding, rather than through volition or intent.

Participants highlighted socio-economic disadvantage and systemic vulnerabilities in shaping young people's risk and need profiles. A Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) recounted a case of a vulnerable girl who was financially compelled to produce and sell sexual images online:

> " … a year 11 girl who had mental health issues … difficulty engaging with school … came from a household of mental health … she had been left in the house on her own … she was being paid … [to] send [illicit images of herself and other young people] … to make money to pay for food."

The DSL expressed frustration with inadequate institutional responses, noting systemic failures to address the girl's vulnerability:

> " … police were doing nothing … taking no further action … you've got a situation where there was someone being paid to send indecent images and they weren't going to do anything further … it was up to the social worker to look at what support that young person was getting."

While legal frameworks criminalise young people who produce and share "indecent imagery of minors', this example illustrates an interplay of financial and familial insecurity, adult exploitation and the cultural landscape of digital sexual economies. Alongside adult-perpetrated child sexual exploitation (CSE) by those paying for the images, broader socio-economic structures, systemic neglect and digital affordances result in perceptions of self-generated sexual content as a viable financial solution, highlighting the structural inequalities, social vulnerabilities and shifting digital norms shaping young people's experiences of sexual harm.

Given the personal and familial vulnerabilities identified as significant factors, several participants emphasised the importance of supportive, rather than purely punitive, responses, including to incidents crossing a criminal threshold. An officer from the High Harm Perpetrator Unit (HHPU4) advocated addressing underlying vulnerabilities: " … if they've had like a really traumatic life event … [try to identify whether] there could be any work done around potentially GP signposting … school signposting … some sort of engagement with that person … "

Normalisation of sexual harm experiences among girls

Professionals highlighted gender disproportionalities in enactments and experiences of sexual harm, locating harm perpetrated by boys within a social context that expects and rewards sexual activity and accomplishment from boys. They were concerned that girls tolerate and underreport unwanted behaviours. For example, a teacher proclaimed: " … girls are still brushing off sexually violent, sexually aggressive language … " and " … [girls think] that's just the way it is … we get 'dick pics' all the time … it's just how it is.". The Online Safety Expert was concerned that "young women, young girls … [are] not coming forward early enough" and may not always recognise abuse because, while they may "know that stuff is inappropriate when it comes to physical touching. I think that it's a bit more blurry when we're talking about aggressive and violent language." This participant felt that girls may also under-report physical abuse because they do not "want to kick up a fuss" about behaviours like non-consensual touching of, for example "the breast … the bottom … but then those behaviours continue to start to escalate."

Adults described girls tolerating or agreeing to unwanted experiences, including without direct force or pressure from their partner. For example, a teacher remarked:

> " … [girls] feel once they kiss somebody … they're expected [to do more], even though this person is not forcing them to do anything … because 'I can't say no … how do I stop him … I know the next step, otherwise I look stupid' … "

An officer in the High Harm Perptrator Unit (HHPU4) felt adolescence is a vulnerable time for girls, who may tolerate unwanted sexual experiences due to "wanting to fit in, wanting a boyfriend." This officer said online interactions further compromise girls' ability to set or have respected their personal boundaries or limits: " … the messages here and whoever's

on their Snapchat, oh, well, he was being nice to me. And I didn't want to block him because he'll think I'm horrible."

It may not, however, just be a matter of girls' perceived inability or unwillingness to identify and mitigate abuse. Adults' understandings and responses may be compromised by the need to categorise incidents as either consensual or non-consensual, despite the complexities and ambiguities often present in real-world situations. Several participants described cases where the interpretation of consent was shaped by contextual factors and institutional judgements. For example, a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) recounted an incident whereby a girl with Special Educational Needs (SEN) alleged she was raped by a boy in a park. The investigation revealed that while the girl had expressed willingness to engage in sexual activity, she did not consent to the specific location. The DSL concluded that "it wasn't rape" framing the incident as consensual despite the girl's lack of agreement to a key element of the interaction. From a legal and ethical standpoint, lack of consent to any aspect of a sexual encounter – such as location – can render it non-consensual; this suggests a troubling minimisation of harm.

Another DSL recounted a case where a girl disclosed that her partner hit her during sex and continued after she explicitly told him to stop. Despite the clear withdrawal of consent and this incident seeming to meet the threshold for abusive, non-consensual conduct, the DSL referred to the incident as a "grey area". These examples reflect not ambiguity in consent itself, but rather uncertainty or hesitancy on the part of professionals to categorise these incidents as rape or assault. We include them to illustrate how institutional frameworks and discomfort with naming harm can obscure clear breaches of consent.

Adolescent girls criticised the unequal standards stigmatising girls for sexual behaviour, normalising harm, and holding girls responsible for navigating and mitigating it, while undermining their ability to do so:

> " … if a boy did something [sexual] … all the boys will be like, oh, yeah, come on, well done … and all just call that girl names and stuff, will be horrible to her … apparently, women are supposed to be respectful for themselves, for their body and stuff."

They situated sexual harm, notably sexual harassment and assault, within a culture of misogyny, often enacted through gendered "banter". One girl vividly described:

> " … there [are] some boys in my year specifically, and I can picture exactly the group. They think that it's funny to like, play on the fact that … women should be at home, like, 'dishwasher,' like being called that … they think it's funny to say it … "

Girls described peer dynamics that facilitate harm, distinct from how boys might behave when alone with a girl, resulting in precarity when navigating social contexts:

> " … [when] just a boy and a girl, [boys] can be all, like, soft and stuff. But … in groups, they couldn't really speak or anything … or sometimes they even make fun of girls … they'd be like, 'oh, yeah, I did this to … I done this with this girl I'm dating,' she would be standing there … they would say something horrible, horrible about her … the boys think it is like hilarious. And it's just really not."

They also recounted public harassment by men and by boys attempting to "grab" girls in public places within and outside school. Vicarious experiences directly witnessed or read about online – e.g. " … when you're out, sometimes you might see something happen, or

you hear about it on social media on people's stories" – created a perceptual reality of constant risk of gender-based sexual violence.

The girls articulated a desire for support in identifying and addressing experiences of unhealthy relationship behaviours and dynamics, for example coercive interpersonal dynamics whereby boys place blame, expectation and obligation on girls to justify and mitigate boys' behaviours, including to subjugate their personal needs to protect boys.

> " … you, kind of, just think, oh, they're [boys engaging in coercive or abusive behaviours] probably just having a bad day … they, sort of, do, like, brainwash you into thinking that they're all good."

> "[they make you feel] scared that if you leave something will happen … I've heard, like, some boys, if you leave me, I'm going to get this girl to jump you or something like that, or I'm gonna kill myself if you leave me … that puts a lot of pressure on that person."

There arises an apparent contradiction in how sexual harm against girls is acknowledged and normalised. Adult participants recognised that girls face disproportionate harm, yet framed the issue primarily in terms of girls' tolerance of, or failure to report, harmful behaviours, placing responsibility on girls to identify and resist sexual harm, rather than the structural and cultural conditions that make these experiences so pervasive and difficult to challenge. Girls articulated a critical awareness of double standards and inequalities embedded within these experiences, being held accountable for preventing and mitigating harm and stigmatised when failing to do so. They explicitly recognised the unfairness of structural and peer norms and expectations, while struggling to reject them. This distinction is critical in understanding how sexual harm is sustained through intersecting cultural, relational and institutional processes.

Neglect and minimisation of boys' experiences

Participants generally felt that boys are less likely to be victims of sexual harm. Some were concerned, however, that boys' experiences are less visible and may be overlooked. A teacher, for example, noted that boys receive the same exposure to inappropriate sexual imagery as girls but are less likely to discuss it: " … the boys … [are] obviously having the same exposure to this kind of inappropriate imagery. But they don't they don't tend to talk about it, whereas the girls do."

This pattern is reinforced by institutional frameworks that primarily position boys as perpetrators or bystanders, rather than potential victims. The Online Safety Expert recalled a survey administered in a school, which asked girls whether they had been subjected to sexual harassment, but asked boys only whether they had witnessed such behaviour or believed it was acceptable. According to this participant, girls were asked:" … has anyone ever used sexually violent aggressive language towards you, for example, called you a bitch, a whore, slack, slut, anything like that?", while boys were asked if they had seen these behaviours happen or thought they were acceptable – there were no equivalent questions about their own experiences of sexually aggressive or shaming language.

This gendered framing risks excluding boys' victimisation from recognition and response. From the perspective of a manager in statutory children's services, the "adultification" of certain boys – particularly Black, Asian, and LGBTQ + boys – further entrenches

these inequalities. This participant described how some boys are perceived as older, more mature or less vulnerable than their peers, which may lead to overly punitive responses or failures to recognise their experiences of harm: " … a lot of young people … are 'adultified' because of their race and ethnicity … we miss Black and Asian young men … young men who may be gay or bisexual, or in that space, or non-binary."

The girls challenged the assumption that only boys enact harm, pointing to girls' harmful sexual behaviours that are often dismissed or overlooked. One participant described how physical harassment by girls toward boys is frequently minimised: " … you see … girls, like, grabbing onto boys or whatever … for attention, or something … people don't think it's … girls doing it … just that it's always the boys."Another girl highlighted verbal coercion, describing how some girls pressure boys into sexual activity: "I know people that are girls that have also pushed to, like, have sex … pressure them [boys] … or said stuff to them, to make them want to do it. I know it isn't always boys [enacting HSB]."

Girls also felt that masculinity norms may pressure boys into unwanted sexual experiences. They observed boys engaging in sexual activity to maintain social status, even when they were not entirely willing:" … try and be cool, maybe in front of their friends, because then they can go and say, oh, yeah, I did this with this girl … because some people [including boys] call each other like frigid or something like that." This was echoed by a school receptionist, who described working with a boy who felt pressured into a relationship he didn't want: " … he's got a girlfriend … she's quite dominating on him … demanding lots of him … and [he] initially said … 'I don't really want to do this … I don't really want a girlfriend … but it's the cool thing to do … '"

A Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) reflected on the peer dynamics shaping boys' engagement in harmful behaviours. They felt that while some boys participate in coercive peer cultures – for example, engaging in image-based sexual abuse as part of "banter" – this does not apply universally. For example, they recalled an incident in which a boy was socially sanctioned by friends for requesting sexual images from girls, rather than being rewarded for his actions: " … there are some groups [of boys] … that … have … banter … getting nudes out of girls … but this one boy was actually 'threatened' by his friends for sending and requesting sexual images from girls … they deemed it shameful and inappropriate."

This example suggests that masculinity norms do not always reinforce sexual pursuit among boys; rather, peer groups regulate and sanction certain behaviours as socially unacceptable rather than praiseworthy. This complexity challenges simplistic assumptions that boys are always rewarded for sexually harmful behaviours, highlighting the need for nuanced, context-sensitive understandings of how masculinity norms shape both perpetration and victimisation.

Digital causes of and terrains of HSB

Adult participants expressed concerns about the influence of digital technology, noting that it intensifies pressures on young people to conform to certain social and sexual norms. While social pressures are not unique to the digital era, participants perceived that online platforms have amplified and accelerated these dynamics. A teacher articulated this perspective in gendered terms, highlighting the impact of social media on self-presentation: " … [young people] follow so many people on social media … [girls]

trying to aspire to that, tanning to eyelashes, to nails. The boys with their hair, or aftershaves … this constant, constant pressure." Echoing longstanding shaming narratives surrounding girls' negotiations of social expectations, this teacher suggested that girls experience particular pressures because they "want attention", but risk receiving the "wrong attention" as a result.

Participants expressed particular concern about digital environments facilitating and normalising sexually explicit exchanges, with a Youth Engagement Officer (YEO1) noting: " … problems that we've seen in school, a lot of the stuff is sexual videos, so naked videos, and text messaging, asking, like, kids to do things, they do things, record it, then it ends up going on TikTok, Snapchat … ". Many adult participants believed young people underestimate the risks associated with digital sexual interactions, particularly image-sharing. Another Youth Engagement Officer (YEO4) described incidents where non-consensual filming of sexual activity had occurred, with little recognition of harm among peers: "We've had a few instances in our area where young people have engaged in activity and the others think it's okay to film that. And it's got sent round … it's a real issue because they do not see a problem with it."

This perspective was echoed by an officer specialising in online sexual imagery of children, who emphasised that young people often fail to appreciate the irreversible loss of control over their images:

> " … they don't understand … the implications of once they've sent and clicked and lost control over that image … it's not their fault that that image has been circulated throughout their school. They gave that image to somebody for a specific reason not to share it with everybody, but they don't think about that part."

Participants were also concerned about the role of pornography in shaping young people's sexual expectations and behaviours, particularly for boys. A teacher believed that increased access to pornography had changed the way boys view girls, creating problematic expectations: " … for boys … the use of social media for porn has increased hugely. Images and sharing something that's quite a problem. They can access it more readily … some of them, they may look at the girls in a different way."

An Online Safety Expert went further, arguing that both boys and girls are "learning" about sex through pornography, which normalises coercive sexual practices: " … both young females and young males watching porn, and sort of learning about sex and relationships through that medium … believing that was normal, usual behaviour … " An officer from the High Harm Perpetrator Unit (HHPU4) shared this concern, remarking that young people develop misconceptions about sexual relationships from pornography: " … they're watching porn … they've got a misinterpreted view. You have what … a loving sexual relationship should be … [porn] doesn't actually represent [that] … it's not in a loving way."

A Youth Engagement Officer (YEO2) elaborated on how pornography shapes young people's understandings of sexual violence, describing how physical aggression in porn may be internalised as "normal":

> "Someone's having sex from behind, and they smack a woman … then young people think that's the way they have to behave … because [the victim's] seen it on pornography sites, does she think that's how she should be treated? And that's the saddest part in all of this is that people are getting abused. And it's just normalised because they don't see it as being a victim."

These concerns reflect broader debates on pornography's role in reinforcing sexual scripts that position dominance and aggression as normative features of heterosexual interactions (Vera-Gray et al., 2021). Some participants were concerned that there is a significant generational disconnect between adults and young people regarding what constitutes "normal" sexual behaviour and content consumption. An officer from the High Harm Perpetrator Unit (HHPU3) highlighted this divergence: " … porn, obviously, it's just so readily available … kids are very overly sexualised now, because of the content they can see … what's normal to us [adults] is completely different to what's normal now to a 13-year-old … ". This participant felt that disparities in sexual norms and practices contribute to misunderstandings between young people and professionals, potentially complicating safeguarding efforts.

Several police participants emphasised the role of parents and schools in managing young people's online activity, expressing concern that a lack of oversight increases risk. An officer in the High Harm Perpetrator Unit (HHPU2) remarked:"Parents are just completely unaware of what [young people] are doing online.". Another officer (HHPU3) acknowledged that schools play an important role but insisted that responsibility ultimately falls on parents: " … schools [can] … do a fantastic job [of educating about online risks] but … you need continuity once they're out of school and at home … the responsibility falls onto parents … sometimes it isn't monitored … a lot of parents don't know … ". A Youth Engagement Officer (YEO2) suggested parents should confiscate their child's phone if they are at risk, even though they recognised this could be difficult: "It can be very hard … to take that phone away … but sometimes they should, because you don't know what's on that phone."

Other participants questioned the effectiveness of punitive restrictions, suggesting that excessive monitoring may push risky behaviours further underground. An officer in the High Harm Perpetrator Unit (HHPU4) highlighted how strict parental controls could backfire, making young people more secretive and less willing to report harm: "A lot of these young people … have these conversations on Snapchat, and then it gets deleted immediately … we can't capture that evidentially … it's gonna be easier to hide stuff … for victims … if they want to keep stuff away from their parents."

Some participants, particularly those in therapeutic roles, were more sceptical about the extent to which digital media is uniquely harmful, framing adult concerns as moral panics. They challenged reductionist assumptions that factors like pornography alone causes harmful behaviours, highlighting the importance of broader socio-cultural influences. A senior therapeutic practitioner at a child protection charity noted:" … we always have moral panics about technology, don't we? You know … when I was growing up, it was video nasties … ". Similarly, a manager in statutory children's services suggested that concerns about digital media may overstate the prevalence of harm, arguing that increased awareness and reporting have made previously hidden behaviours more visible: " … people say sexual harm is worse now, but is it actually worse? Or are we just talking about it more? In previous generations, victims may have blamed themselves for things they now report … ".

Participants working in safeguarding and therapeutic roles emphasised the need for constructive approaches to digital risks, advocating for open conversations rather than prohibition. The officer specialising in online child sexual abuse imagery believed

young people require trusted spaces to discuss sexual content, rather than being shamed or punished:

> " … I don't think it's a good thing that young people are looking at pornography … but I completely accept that it is going on … they may well be looking at pornography for information … They need safe, secure spaces – whether that's parents or schools – to get that information before they find themselves down a rabbit hole and into all kinds of trouble."

These participants felt that approaches to digital risk should move beyond surveillance and restriction to instead focus on open dialogue, critical media literacy and ethical decision-making.

Discussion

Participants' perspectives on sexual harm involved an interplay of individual, familial, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. While several professionals emphasised personal and family-related risk factors – including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and socio-economic disadvantage – there was recognition of broader systemic, cultural, social and institutional processes shaping experiences and responses to harm. This diversity may relate to the professional lenses and interpretive frameworks informing participants' views, whereby understandings of sexual harm are affected by institutional contexts and professional orientations, rather than reflecting a singular unified perspective. It necessitates situating professional perspectives in context, reinforcing the importance of critically engaging with how risks are framed across different professional domains, as well as how institutional structures shape prioritisation of certain narratives over others. Our analysis highlights several implications for understanding and responding to sexual harm.

Although many participants acknowledged the influence of gendered cultures, peer dynamics and digital contexts, their professional responses often defaulted to frameworks focused on individual behaviour and risk management. This discrepancy between recognition and response led us to adopt the broader conceptual framing of "sexual harm" during analysis, as a means of capturing the tensions between participants' awareness of context and the institutional constraints shaping practice. The concept of sexual harm thus worked not as a pre-existing framework imposed on the data, but as an analytical tool that allowed us to make sense of the disjuncture between participants' discursive recognition of socio-cultural influences and the behaviourist logics embedded in safeguarding and legal systems.

Gendered norms and expectations were central to many participants' accounts, shaping both perceptions of vulnerability and responses to harm. Some professionals positioned girls as inherently vulnerable, expressing frustration at their perceived inability or unwillingness to identify and report harm. However, low reporting rates are not simply a matter of personal deficiencies among girls but instead reflect broader patterns of institutional distrust and the perceived ineffectiveness of safeguarding responses. Across society, girls and women face structural barriers and cultural biases that discourage disclosure, including stigma, victim-blaming, sexual double standards and institutional failures to act – all of which necessitate a systemic, contextualised response (Allardyce & Yates, 2018; Lloyd, 2019; Ringrose, Whitehead et al., 2021).

Several professionals and adolescent girls also expressed concern about the neglect and minimisation of boys' experiences of sexual harm. They perceived that stereotypical masculinity norms shape both boys' involvement in harm and their experiences as victims. However, while providing valuable insight into how masculinity practices are perceived and understood by professionals and girls, the study did not directly engage with boys' perspectives, highlighting a critical gap for future research to explore how boys themselves navigate gendered expectations, peer pressures and experiences of harm. A key example illustrating the potential complexities of boys' experiences was a case shared by a professional, in which a boy was shamed by his peers for requesting and sharing sexual images. While this peer challenge may suggest a rejection of harmful masculinity norms, it also demonstrates how stigma and social ostracism can impose new terrains of risk. Rather than prompting critical reflection on ethical sexual practices, boys may simply learn to avoid appearing "creepy" (Ravn et al., 2021) without engaging meaningfully with consent and sexual ethics (Setty, 2023).

Alongside extensive emphasis on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and socio-economic disadvantage, some participants acknowledged sexual harm occuring among more privileged young people. Institutional awareness and responses to these cases may, however, be hindered by dominant narratives associating sexual harm primarily with disadvantage, potentially obscuring the cultural dynamics shaping sexual harm across contexts as well as any hidden trauma among those who appear relatively privileged. One participant explicitly highlighted how adultification – the tendency to perceive certain young people as more mature and less vulnerable – contributes to inequities in recognition and response. These findings underscore the complex interplay between privilege and vulnerability, demonstrating how institutional and social biases shape both young people's experiences of harm and the likelihood and nature of professional recognition and intervention.

The need for a nuanced conceptualisation of sexual harm was evidenced by the example provided by a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) of a vulnerable girl coerced into producing illicit images, which demonstrated systemic failures to address the root causes that make young people vulnerable to Childhood Sexual Exploitation (CSE). Distinct from harmful sexual behaviour (HSB), such cases must be framed within institutional and structural contexts, rather than as issues of individual pathology or, in the case of "indecent imagery of minors', unlawful conduct on the part of the vulnerable young person. Conflating CSE with HSB risks obscuring the role of systemic inequalities, economic precarity and adult exploitation which, in this example, exacerbated vulnerability and harm.

Another conceptual limitation within some professional perspectives was the binary classification of sexual incidents as consensual or non-consensual, despite the complexities of relational and situational contexts. These cases underscore the risks of framing consent as a binary legal threshold, detached from the nuanced realities of young people's experiences. While professionals may recognise elements of coercion, withdrawal of consent, or non-consensual conditions, they may nonetheless hesitate to categorise such incidents as rape or assault. This reluctance may stem from institutional discomfort, lack of clarity in policy guidance, or fear of labelling young people as perpetrators. However, such minimisation can obscure harm and hinder appropriate

safeguarding responses. Our findings suggest that conceptualising sexual harm beyond rigid behavioural categories enables more accurate and ethically attuned recognition of harm, particularly in cases where relational and contextual factors are key to understanding how consent is undermined.

While unable to fully ascertain the precise framing each participant had in mind, the near-universal emphasis on digital technology in causing and reshaping sexual harm suggests a dominant contemporary narrative of concern about young people's evolving sexual development and experiences. While some professionals framed digital media as a primary cause of sexual harm, others – particularly in youth-focused or therapeutic roles – emphasised the interplay between online and offline interactions (Ringrose, Whitehead et al., 2021). These perspectives highlight the limitations of risk-focused narratives framing technology as inherently harmful, instead recognising how young people actively navigate and negotiate risk within digital environments and moving beyond surveillance and restriction toward interventions that support young people's ethical decision-making and relational agency.

Reframing HSB as sexual harm

The variability in participants' perspectives highlights a need to critically reflect on dominant terminology and conceptual frameworks seeking to address sexual harm. We propose that shifting from the language of "harmful sexual behaviour" to "sexual harm" – situated within a sexual script framework (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) – offers a more inclusive and systemic approach. This shift challenges reductionist, behaviourist framings that pathologise individual young people, re-orienting to relational, institutional and structural influences over experiences, recognition and responses to harm. Harm may not always be immediately visible, experienced or responded to as such, with this reframing offering a more fluid, contextually sensitive way of understanding young people's sexual interactions and experiences.

Following on, we suggest that sexual harm be addressed through supporting and enabling young people's "sexual citizenship" (York et al., 2021), which we expand to "post-digital sexual citizenship" in recognition of the fluid interplays between digital and non-digital contexts of sexual harm for young people (Setty et al., 2024). Sexual citizenship addresses harm beyond risk-oriented abstinence frameworks, including pertaining to online sexual experiences, and challenges binary categories of "harmful", "healthy", "victim", "perpetrator", "consensual", "non-consensual". It allows for nuanced approaches to consent, recognising that consent is not always a clear-cut yes/no transaction, but often shaped by power dynamics, social expectations, emotional ambivalence and situational pressures (Setty, 2022; Whittington, 2021). Such conditions may complicate young people's ability to articulate or withdraw consent, and can give rise to ethically problematic but legally ambiguous encounters. Post-digital sexual citizenship addresses broader issues of sexual ethics and healthy sexual conduct beyond legal frameworks and avoids shaming young people for normative sexual interest and exploration. It instead gives them tools to navigate sex and relationships safely and responsibly through supportive interventions (Setty et al., 2024), in recognition of how long-standing, systemic sexual harm is not unique to adolescence nor the contemporary time.

Conclusion

Recognising the diversity of professional and adolescent perspectives on sexual harm is, we argue, critical for developing interventions responsive to the complexities of young people's experiences. By adopting the language of sexual harm and framing it within a sexual script and post-digital sexual citizenship approach, we propose a more inclusive and relationally attuned conceptualisation. This shift challenges binary classifications of consent, rigid victim-perpetrator distinctions, and technology-focused reductionist narratives, advocating instead for frameworks that empower young people to navigate relationships and peer cultures with greater agency and support. Ultimately, addressing sexual harm requires critical reflexivity from professionals, recognising how normative contexts and institutional cultures shape perceptions of and responses to harm. It entails moving beyond individual behaviour management and identification of risk, focusing also on creating conditions for ethical, positive relationships and cultures that challenge systemic inequalities.

Limitations

This study was conducted within one county in southeast England, potentially limiting the applicability of the findings to other geographic, cultural or institutional contexts. The lack of participation by boys creates a gap in understanding of boys' experiences beyond the perceptual accounts shared by professionals and girls. Finally, while the inclusion of a school receptionist provides valuable insights into safeguarding from different organisational perspectives, the representation of this role is limited to a single participant, limiting the ability to generalise findings regarding the role of administrative staff in safeguarding practices.

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