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‘Digital gender-sexual violations and social marketing campaigns’

For Palgrave Encyclopedia of Sexuality Education

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Introduction

This entry addresses sexuality education about the intersection of sexuality and gendered violence, with a focus on men’s violence against women which is the dominant pattern of interpersonal violence. The field of anti-violence work by both activists and official agents (such as criminal justice systems, education systems, and public health) is vast. Here we are concerned with two aspects: anti-violence work conducted via social marketing campaigns, as a form of public education; and the growing problem of digital gender-sexual violations (DGSV) (Hall *et al.*, 2023). DGSV refers to the use, typically but not only, by men and boys of digital technologies to perpetrate gender-based violence (GBV) and so violate known and/or unknown victim-survivors, typically, but not only, women and girls. DGSV has major negative effects on the health, well-being and freedom of victim-survivors, and accordingly, we use the same term ‘perpetrators’ for those who perpetrate DGSV, as is used for those who perpetrate offline physical, sexual and related violences. DGSV amongst lesbian, gay and bisexual people is also a significant issue (see Dietzel, 2021) that warrants further examination but is beyond the remit of this paper.

Digital gender-sexual violations and young people

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A significant and growing body of research about DGSV reveals that such violations are a ubiquitous feature of contemporary life, particularly for young people. For example, several surveys (e.g., Amnesty International, 2017; Plan International, 2023a, van der Wilk, 2021; Vogels, 2021) report prevalence rates between 20-58% and elevated rates for those who are marginalised in any way (e.g. racially, sexually, and through disability). DGSV includes cyberflashing, upskirting, non-consensual image or video sharing, sexualised deepfakes, sextortion, sexualised defamation, sexualised slander, doxing, sexualised and gender-based trolling, flaming (Ging and Siapera, 2018; Hall, Hearn & Lewis, 2022; van der Wilk, 2021).

DGSV is perpetrated by people *known* to the victim-survivors – particularly, partners and ex-partners, as well as friends, acquaintances, colleagues and class-mates – as well as people *unknown* to the victim-survivor. It is increasingly a feature of various forms of GBV, such as intimate partner violence (also known as domestic violence), in the form of, for example, cyberstalking, image-based sexual abuse, and so-called ‘revenge porn’ (Hall and Hearn, 2017; Refuge, 2020; Women’s Aid, 2020). DGSV may be perpetrated against a current or ex-partner, someone whom the perpetrator believes themselves to be in a relationship with (regardless of the other party’s view), or someone with whom the perpetrator desires to be in a relationship with. Not all of these behaviours are manifestly sexual, but they may be practiced in the context of norms and beliefs about intimate relationships and sexual practices. In relationships that might or might not be characterised by abuse, images may be shared consensually but the image may be disseminated without the consent of the person depicted in it. There has been particular concern about sexting, popular as a form of sexual expression amongst younger people (Barrense-Dias *et al.*, 2017), and the scope for images to be shared non-consensually (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021). Images are circulated amongst relatively small groups, such as friendship circles, as well as amongst infinite numbers of consumers through dedicated websites (Hall and Hearn, 2017).

DGSV is also perpetrated by people *unknown* to the victim-survivor who might not know that they have been victimised. Victims of abusive practices such as upskirting – the nonconsensual capture and dissemination of images taken up a girl’s or woman’s skirt – might never know the images have been taken, unless she – or someone else – catches the perpetrator in the act. Perpetrators may take the images for their own consumption and/or to share with others. Dedicated websites for upskirting – such as The Candid Zone – provide a forum for homosocial exchanges and even sharing of ‘skills’ between men (Hall *et al.*, 2021), where the images of women are the currency for men’s attempts to achieve kudos from other (like-minded) men.

Women and girls whose images are used in deepfakes – typically whereby the image of one person’s face is added to the image of another person’s body – might similarly not know, or not know for some time, that their images have been exploited in this way. Typically, sexualised deepfakes are created using an image of a woman or girl’s face, often stolen from social media sites such as Facebook, to depict her apparently engaging in sexual activities. The deepfake image is then disseminated on social media, on dedicated deepfake websites (e.g. MrDeepFakes) or, less commonly, on mainstream pornographic websites (Aider *et al.*, 2019). Pornographic deepfake creators have tended to target celebrities but increasingly they have also targeted non-celebrity women. Ajder *et al.* (2019) found nearly 15,000 pornographic deepfakes which have been viewed around 134 million times. Ninety six percent of these were pornographic, and 100% of the images edited into these deepfakes were of women, leading Ajder *et al.* (2019, p. 2) to note “[d]eepfake pornography is a phenomenon that exclusively targets and harms women.”

New forms of DGSV, for example, sexual spycamming, cyber flashing, and sexual ‘happy slapping’ (see Hall *et al.*, 2022) are emerging and will continue to emerge, and are likely to be ubiquitous aspects of the sexual landscape for young people as well as adults.

DGSV informs and shapes sexual practices and discourses in several important ways. Firstly, they generate harm for the victim-survivors, most of whom are young women aged 18-30 years (van der Wilk, 2021; Vogels, 2021). Secondly, DGSV overwhelmingly (re)produces heterosexual gender norms and forms of domination, including norms about men as sexual aggressors and women as victim-survivors. This feeds into and generates discourses of domination that perpetuate a sense of men's entitlement to sexual access to women, as well as discourses of victimisation that depict women and girls as always at risk of men's abusive practices. These discourses and practices perpetuate the objectification of women and the shaming (by both men and women) of women who engage in or are depicted as engaging in sexual activity (Hall and Hearn, 2017; Naezer and van Oosterhout, 2021; Ringrose and Harvey, 2015).

Social media platforms' responses to online DGSV have been found wanting. For example, recent examination of nearly 1 million text-based messages about women (Glitch, 2023) found high levels (around 20%) of "highly toxic" messages about women, especially black women. As well as revealing the failure of social media platforms to take down such posts, this finding also shows the importance of acknowledging the intersections of sexism and race hatred. The authors recommend "an awareness raising public health campaign around misogyny, racism and misogynoir⁴ to educate people across society, not just those still in formal education" (p. 15). We examine some campaigns below.

Women's and girls' own responses to DGSV vary, as do the impacts and implications for women's sense of safety and of self. Victim-survivors report devastating and life-altering effects; an Amnesty International survey (2017) found 55 per cent of victim-survivors reported experiencing anxiety, stress, panic attacks, loss of self-esteem, apprehension about

⁴ Misogynoir refers to the combination of anti-Black racism and misogyny directed towards Black women.

using social media, and a sense of powerlessness. For some, the impacts are so extreme they lead to suicide (see, for e.g. Ng and Odeen-Isbister, 2022, p.1).

There is some indication that younger women, especially those who are digital natives, are confident that they can manage the risks of DGSV. Honkatukia *et al.*'s (2022) Finnish study of sexual harassment amongst 15-19 year-olds found that young women “highlighted their own resourcefulness and knowledge in understanding the phenomenon [of digital sexual harassment] as well as their skills in managing unwanted approaches” (p. 1396). However, both Ringrose *et al.* (2021) and Honkatukia *et al.* (2022) found that, while teenage women might be confident about managing unsolicited sexual harassment from anonymous *strangers*, they are less confident about managing the complex dynamics, impacts and consequences of receiving ‘dick pics’, and sexual harassment from boys in their peer groups.

Some of the features and impacts of DGSV can be considered ‘limitless’ (Hall *et al.*, under review). For example, digital technologies provide limitless opportunities for men’s surveillance of women which creates the “digital panopticon” (Katyal and Jung, 2021). The space and time in which DGSV occurs can also feel ‘limitless’. With connectivity and a device, a perpetrator can do harm from almost anywhere, at any time, and the text or images can remain in the digital sphere *ad infinitum*. Given that the digital sphere is already extensively embedded in human life, and this embeddedness is increasing in various aspects and dimensions, the potential perpetrators of abuse – people who view, distribute, and comment upon non-consensual, harmful, sexualized depictions of women and girls – can also seem limitless. The limitlessness also extends to the ways in which women and their bodies are violated. With the use of AI and other technologies, images of women’s bodies can now be undressed, altered (e.g., skin tone, body hair, body parts), made to perform a range of

sexual acts that may or may not resemble physical world capabilities and have embodied experiences driven by the desires of perpetrators (e.g., enjoyment, pain) (De Ruiter, 2021).

Of course, DGSV does not develop in a vacuum, separate from the online world. Indeed, for younger generations, and digital natives in particular, the online and offline intrinsically intersect and are “porous and blurry” (Honkatukia *et al.*, 2022, p. 1397). In both environments, ideas about gender, sexuality, gender roles and politics are changing. While we are seeing some forms of feminism flourish (see e.g., Plan International, 2023b) and unprecedented levels of attention to GBV, we are also witnessing high levels and ubiquity of misogyny on and offline. Social media figures such as Andrew Tate have a huge reach, particularly amongst young men, and deep concerns have been expressed about the impacts of their influence, highlighting the need for effective sexuality education. Indeed, research by the UK Crown Prosecution Service and ‘Equally Ours’ (2024) found that “overall, the public’s accurate understanding of rape is outweighed by false beliefs, misunderstanding, lack of knowledge, and underlying stereotypes”. Disturbingly, 18-24 year old respondents supported victim-blaming rape assumptions and misconceptions more than older respondents. However, this research also tested an alternative approach to challenging public support of ‘rape myths’. Refuting the ‘myth-busting’ approach which “can unwittingly amplify them and has been shown to reinforce them”, the research found that “‘reframing the rape narrative’ ... to ensure a suspect-centric approach and to recognise the complexity of victim responses ... both expanded knowledge and understanding of RASSO [rape and serious sexual offences] and shifted respondents’ thinking away from the common assumptions and misconceptions.” A suspect-centric approach focuses on the perpetrator of an offence instead of falling into victim-blaming by focusing on how the victim-survivor behaved and appeared. Reframing the narrative also involves rejecting simplistic ideas about how victim-survivors react to recognise the wide range of emotional reactions to sexual violence that typically change over

time for each victim-survivor; each victim-survivor responds differently. The research finding about changing the narrative suggests a shift to new approaches to educating publics about GBV. Some recent social marketing campaigns have also reframed the narrative. As we discuss below, this represents significant progress but, in focusing on offline behaviours, they have failed to reflect the lived realities and sexual practices of young people, in particular.

Social marketing campaigns about gender-based violence

Until recently, and with important exceptions (for example, the ‘Violence Against Women: It’s Against All the Rules’ campaign run in Australia in 2000, developed by the New South Wales Attorney General’s Department Violence Against Women Specialist Unit, (Hubert, 2002)), the target audience for major social marketing campaigns against GBV, (often run by (quasi-) statutory agencies) has typically been women and girls rather than men in general, or men who perpetrate GBV. This contrasts with various activist campaigns across the world (see, e.g., Jewkes *et al.* 2015; Flood, 2001, 2015). Whether addressing online or offline behaviours, official social marketing campaigns have tended to target girls and women by warning of the risks of GBV and cautioning them to change their behaviour to avoid it. For example, Zauner’s (2021) study of sexting campaigns found that they tended to dissuade girls and young women from sending sexualised images in the first place rather than focusing on what the receiver does with those images. Portraying GBV as an inevitable part of life, these campaigns have tended to responsabilise girls and women for their own victimisation and have rarely encouraged boys and men to refrain from or challenge abusive behaviours. Indeed, some relatively recent marketing campaigns such as WhatsApp’s ‘Don’t Overthink It! Just Send It’ may exacerbate some forms of DGSV such as cyberflashing (Natividad, 2021).

By contrast, some recent social marketing campaigns reflect a recognition that stopping abuse requires men to change their behaviours. Some directly target men who perpetrate abuse; others (also) target men who might not do so but who are part of the enabling environment, the passive bystanders who, through their lack of intervention, enable abusive practices to continue unchecked. For example, That Guy (<https://that-guy.co.uk/>) is a Police Scotland campaign that encourages men not to be ‘that guy’ who condones misogyny by being an inactive bystander. It “aims to reduce rape, serious sexual assault and harassment by having frank conversations with men about male sexual entitlement” (<https://that-guy.co.uk/about/>). Similarly, the ‘Wish I Said’ campaign by Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland (<https://rctn.org.uk/campaigns/wish-i-said/>) targets people, including men, who witness sexual harassment but struggle to know how to respond.

The ‘Maate’ campaign by the London Mayor (<https://www.london.gov.uk/maate>) encourages men to ‘call out’ their friends when they express misogyny. These campaigns use public posters, billboards, videos and, in some cases, a range of online resources, which use a variety of techniques and styles to influence men’s behaviour. In some, actors enact scenarios that have a ‘real-life’ style and are easy to relate to. For example, one of the Maate videos depicts an evening street scene of a group of high-spirited young men, one of whom approaches and persists in talking to a young woman who becomes visibly upset. The action is interspersed with images of one of the group of men talking to himself in front of a mirror, criticising his failure to challenge his friend. Eventually he speaks up and tells his friend “that’s enough”. The video ends with a voice-over saying these words, that also appear on screen: “Have a word with yourself. Then with your mates.” Similarly, one of the videos in the ‘Wish I Said’ campaign by Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland depicts a man whose male friend sexually harasses two young women; one of the young women challenges him but the man does not and is depicted regretfully thinking to himself “wish I said ‘shut

up”. The That Guy campaign (<https://that-guy.co.uk/about/>) has a variety of videos and other resources designed to help men find “better ways to be a man”. One video depicts men in a pub talking about the problem of friends who “go too far”; they agree on the need to challenge problematic behaviour and share techniques to do so which would avoid shaming the friend. The video finishes with the voice-over; “Have a word in his ear. Be a mate.” Other videos depict role models - such as vloggers, personal trainers and musicians - endorsing the That Guy campaign and academics talking about consent. Another video from the That Guy campaign depicts a number of young men talking straight to camera and asks the question “do you recognise yourself?” as the men describe increasingly problematic behaviour to or about women, from calling her “a doll” to pressuring her for sex.

The campaigns clearly target masculine norms – how young men talk, think and act in relation to women and to sexual relations with women. Masculinity is centred through references to football (for example, “Explained in football terms: How to intervene if a mate crosses the line”, <https://that-guy.co.uk/explained-in-football-terms-how-to-intervene-if-a-mate-is-out-of-line/>), drinking alcohol (some videos are set in pubs or include images of alcoholic drinks), and through depicting groups of men teasing each other and laughing together (while buying drinks or playing a video game). Masculine friendship is central; “having a quiet word” with a ‘mate’ is portrayed as a sign of friendship, a sign of “looking out for” a friend. Most of the videos target the ‘mate’ of the perpetrator and encourage him to step in and speak up; some more directly target the viewer (“do you recognise yourself?”). The young men depicted are ‘everyman’; they are ordinary, urban young men, of different ethnicities, likely to seem familiar to many audiences. In this way, masculinity is invoked as the solution to but not the cause of GBV. Instead, the men who “go too far” (<https://that-guy.co.uk/dont-be-that-guy-who-stands-by-and-says-nothing/>) are not portrayed as enacting problematic masculine norms which scaffold GBV, but as getting masculinity wrong; unlike

the other young men in the videos, they do not behave in acceptable masculine ways. While there is some emphasis on avoiding shaming men for their behaviour, there is an element of ‘othering’; the ‘good guys’ look uncomfortable as the ‘offender’ enacts his misogyny.

Masculine activities like sport have also been used as a focus of anti-violence campaigns directed at them, for example, those by Sonke Gender Justice Network and Grassroot Soccer in South Africa, Promundo/Equimundo in Brazil, New South Wales Attorney General’s Department in Australia (Hubert, 2002), and the Norwegian Football Association. Parallels can be drawn with anti-racist campaigns, such Kick It Out and Kick Racism Out Of Football.

Some campaigns use the metaphor of the mirror to encourage men’s self-reflection about their own behaviours. The That Guy campaign includes a video in which men are encouraged to look themselves in the mirror and which states sexual violence is “staring us right in the face”. These videos avoid ‘othering’ perpetrators of abuse and challenge male viewers to consider how their own behaviours contribute to a climate of misogyny.

The misogyny targeted in the videos is explicit in some and relatively understated in others. For example, the Wish I Said video depicts a man calling out “nice tits!”, while one of the That Guy videos refers to “problematic behaviour” without specifying the types of behaviour that are problematic. The notion of the continuum (Kelly, 1987) is implicitly evoked with statements like “sexual violence starts long before you think it does” (<https://that-guy.co.uk/do-you-recognise-yourself-in-our-60-second-film/>). Thus, some of the campaigns clearly draw on feminist understandings of GBV which connect acts from the mildly offensive – such as sexist jokes or terms – to “sledgehammer” (Stanko, 1985) acts such as rape and murder. Similarly, the campaigns and videos convey the feminist message that all men have a responsibility for stopping GBV even when they do not perpetrate it.

Emphasising men's role in ending GBV rather than responsabilising women and girls and (implicitly) encouraging them to engage in 'safety work' (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020) reflects a significantly improved educative approach. However, as we discuss below, the campaigns tend to address offline behaviour and neglect the extensive digital world which is strongly characterised by DGSV and which has a significant role in shaping people's sexual norms and practices.

Social marketing and digital gender sexual violations

Most of the campaign materials we have discussed depict behaviours in offline environments. The Maate campaign features one video in which a group of friends are playing a video game, and the 'problematic' friend refers to sending a 'dick pic', but this is the only explicit reference to online abuse. The focus on offline behaviour fails to acknowledge the very fluid intersections of offline and online environments for most young people. Nor does it acknowledge the ways in which online and offline GBV intersect, overlap and merge (Hearn and Hall, 2022; Faith, 2022; Lewis *et al.*, 2017). While (the fear and) experience of GBV might be a feature of both offline and online worlds, responses and implications can be felt and can vary in different environments (as discussed above, in terms of 'limitlessness').

Social marketing campaigns about GBV and misogyny need to reflect these intersections between online and offline environments so that they better reflect the ways attitudes, beliefs, and practices about sex and gender are (re)produced. Such an ambition is not without its challenges, particularly given the increasingly divisive, hostile, and conflictual nature of many public discourses about these topics; but this only makes the ambition more pressing. Moreover communicating, especially visually, about GBV without depicting it is

challenging. This challenge around the appropriate mode and manner for talking about and representing violence – without reproducing it in some sense – is a central question not only for social marketing, but also for public and social media more generally, policy development, organisational and managerial actors, and researchers (Hearn *et al.*, 2021, 2023). Effective public education aims to reframe the narrative rather than reproducing or reinforcing problematic beliefs (CPS and Equally Ours, 2024).

To be effective, social marketing campaigns need to be based on an understanding of how men, particularly young men, position themselves in relation to GBV, including DGSV, and in relation to initiatives to address it. Given the myriad problematic social influences about masculinities, women, sex, and gender (see, e.g., Solea and Sugiura, 2023) how do young men make sense of themselves, their sexuality and their sexual practices? What are their understandings and beliefs about GBV and how do they negotiate social messages, including social marketing campaigns, about it? Results from empirical research about men's reactions to anti-GBV campaigns are not very promising. Burrell (2021) shows young men respond defensively, naturalise men's violence as inevitable and disassociate themselves from the problem, while Carline *et al.* (2018) report that they re-signify rape as consensual sex, responsabilise women, and 'other' the perpetrators. Given that "disrupting and challenging masculinity, particularly hegemonic masculinity, is an exceptionally difficult process" (Carline *et al.*, 2018, p.317), any campaign aiming to address GBV on and offline needs to operate in conjunction with other interventions, operating at multiple levels and targeting different ecosystems. On their own, there is a risk that these highly visible social marketing campaigns are performative rather than impactful and, because by their nature they do not generate rich, deep engagements with men, could contribute to backlash thinking that depicts men as the 'victims' of feminism.

Concluding thoughts

In this contribution, we have approached the field of sexuality education through a focus, first, on DGSV as one form of GBV, and secondly, social marketing campaigns. While social marketing campaigns can frame GBV as a matter of gender norms, attitudes and beliefs – for which the way forward is greater awareness, knowledge and understanding - such an emphasis can obscure the significance of structural gender inequalities (e.g., unequal paid and unpaid labour, wages and wealth) which also contribute to and exacerbate GBV and make women more vulnerable to it. Salter (2016) argues that this has led to a one-dimensional focus on gender norms, rather than a two-dimensional approach which sees prevailing ideologies and structures as historically contingent and open to change. Interventions therefore need to address structural inequality as well as gender norms to avoid “becoming a purely theoretical heuristic without the practical purchase to effect behavioural or social change” (Salter, 2016 p.471).

Moreover, on their own, social marketing campaigns, whether or not they include a focus on both digital and offline environments, are likely to have limited impacts. In their review of work with men and boys to prevent violence against women and girls, Jewkes *et al.* (2015) note the importance of interventions at multiple levels “which work at different ecological levels and target different risk factors to achieve a reduction in violence” (p. 1586). They conclude that “communication campaigns have an important role to provoke conversation” and contribute to processes of change across multiple levels but “do not change behaviour in the short-term” or in isolation (p. 1586).

These critical questions around anti-violence, social marketing and sexuality education are growing in significance, not only through increasing online activity in social marketing and social media, but also through growing evidence of the close interplay, and

even blurring, of direct physical and sexual violence offline and DGSV online. The (re)production of sexual identities, norms and practices is increasingly shaped by the digital world and so any campaigns to educate and influence these processes must address the intersections of offline and digital contexts in contemporary lived realities.

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