

Trade? - Discourses of Peer-on-Peer Online Sexual Harassment

A 2021 report by Estyn revealed that around half of children and young people (CYP) across 35 schools in Wales have experienced some form of peer-on-peer sexual harassment. While this phenomenon can occur in face-to-face settings, it increasingly occurs online and after school (Estyn, 2021). Despite the prevalence of this behaviour, CYP tend not to disclose any instances of it. This is in part due to the fact that peer-on-peer sexual harassment has become a normalised part of their lives. This presentation reports and discusses some of the results of Project C2CHAT (Child-2-CH Abuse Talk), which addresses this growing social challenge by investigating the discourse of and about online peer-on-peer sexual harassment. The focus is on CYP's discursive negotiation of particularly severe manifestations of the challenge: the trading of child sexual abuse material (CSAM). The data comprises 18 chatlogs (27,941 words) between CYP, either one-to-one or group conversations, shared by UK law enforcement for research analysis purposes. The data was examined using Herring's (2004; 2013) digital discourse analysis framework, with a focus on its meaning (speech acts), interaction (co-constructed topic development) and social behaviour (negotiation, face management) domains. Speech act and facework analyses respectively drew upon request (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) and im/politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1989; Culpeper, 2014) taxonomies. This analysis revealed a delicate negotiation taking place around requests for CSAM, whereby impoliteness (e.g., commands) and positive politeness (e.g., common ground assertions) were respectively deployed in the request head acts and their surrounding co-text. The use of explicit, unmitigated request head acts points towards the discursive normalisation of illegal behaviour. For its part, the predominance of in-group building positive politeness in the requests' surrounding co-text suggests that CYP seek to further normalise the illegality of the behaviours being negotiated through fostering a sense of camaraderie between them. The findings from this study will be synergised with those from the project's analysis of discourses about online, peer-on-peer sexual harassment (derived from consultation workshops with CYP and child safeguarding adults) to inform the development of prevention-oriented interventions.

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