



# Social Media

## Adolescents and Social Media: The Results of the JIM Study 2018

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## The Research Project “Human”

The Development of Recommendations for Action for Teaching Practitioners Involved in Professional Interactions with Sexualized Violence Using Digital Media

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### Presuppositions and Goals of the Research Project

Children and adolescents today use online portals and communication services so fluidly and to such an extent that digital media have become relevant means of socialization in the world of young people (FEIDERABEND/PLANCKENHORN/RATHGEB 2016, 2018). Because of the sheer unlimited ways in which such interactions can take place, the digital media have also taken a prominent role in the context of the sexualization of childhood and adolescence and sexualized violence. According to a new evaluation of the MiKADO Study data, one-third of the young people interviewed reported having experienced at least one undesired sexualized approach over the course of the past year (NEUTZE/SKLENAROVA 2018). The spectrum of such digitally perpetrated or accompanied violations is large, ranging from ritualized provocations (e.g., disseminating pornographic memes<sup>1</sup> in groups as “jokes”) to massive, criminally relevant sexual exploitation. Principally, however, one may assume that the experience of assaults committed online leads to the same stress responses as actual “hands-on” delicts (JONSSON/SVEDIN 2017). And because of the repeated loss of control due to the spread of abusive images or the frequent correlation between offline and online violence, one must in fact reckon with an increase in such responses stemming from digital media use.

On the other hand, professionals who are tasked with protecting children and adolescents experience cases of sexualized violence via digital media as particularly complex (DEKKER/KOOPS/

BRIKEN 2016; VOBBE/KÄRGEL 2019). Beyond pointing out the importance of developing medial competence and the right to one’s own image, the recommendations for action in existing prevention concepts only rarely reflect the role digitally based violence now plays. And guidelines on how to proceed with respective interventions are missing completely. The goal of the research project “Human,” which is sponsored by the “Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung” (MNBF; German Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany), is to fill that gap between primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention such that specialized expert knowledge on dealing with sexualized violence from digital media sources is empirically systematized and made available to a broader specialist public. To this end, valuable process and interpretive knowledge based on concrete case examples is to be prepared. The later dissemination of these recommendations for action will be supported by the “Human” project team of the SRH University Heidelberg through strategic partners, such as Innocence in Danger, the “Bundeskoordination Spezialisierter Fachberatung gegen sexualisierte Gewalt in Kindheit und Jugend” (BKSF; Federal Coordination Office for Specialized Counseling Against Sexualized Violence in Childhood and Adolescence), the “Bundesverband der Frauenberatungsstellen und Frauennotrufe in Deutschland” (bff, German Federal Association of Rape Crisis Centres and Women’s Counselling Centres), the “Deutsche Gesellschaft für Prävention und Intervention bei Kindesmisshandlung, -vernachlässigung und sexualisierter Gewalt e.V.” (DGfPI; German Society for the Prevention and Intervention in Child Abuse, Neglect and Sexualized Violence), and the “Deutsche Sportjugend” (dsj; German Sports Youth).

### Procedures and Research Design

In cooperation with specialist units that work on the theme of sexualized violence in childhood and adolescence, the first step is to create anonymized documentations concerning cases of sexualized violence from digital media sources. These case documentations contain descriptions of the various means of assault, the social context in which the violence took place, information that eventually led to exposing the violent act, reactions from the social environment as well as descriptions

of the professional interventions and assistance that followed.

Based on the documentations, the project team then qualitatively and empirically reconstructs between eight and ten prototypical case scenarios, which consist respectively of the most significant details from several original cases. This prevents any conclusions from being traced to the original cases. Further, the prototypical cases comprise so-called key situations, that is, according to Tov/KUNZ/STÄMPFLIS (2016), generalizable characteristics that have particular relevance for professionally handling the case example in question.

In a second step, the key situations are discussed by focus groups recruited from experts who work with or do research on sexualized violence from digital media sources. These experts debate how best to evaluate the generic case examples and how best to deal with such cases. They must justify their professional stances and illustrate the principles behind their concrete assessments. The discussions and arguments of these experts on the key situations then form the basis for recommendations for action.

In addition, the experiences of persons who have been subjected to sexualized violence during childhood or adolescence are gathered by means of qualitative interviews carried out either by personnel from specialized services schooled in dealing with violence to ensure subsequent counseling is available if necessary; or the persons being interviewed belong to so-called special interests organizations and are well trained in dealing with issues of violence because of their sociopolitical commitment. The participation of experienced experts is important for the later development of recommendations of action that demand that assistance account for the perspectives of the target group(s).

### Current Status

The anonymized case-study documentations are now available in full to the project team and are being evaluated in accordance with the “reflexive grounded theory” (BREUER 2010). The first assessments of the documentations show that the present data are much more diverse than had been expected. The challenge lies less in the variability of the violence dynamics than the forms of presentation themselves. Although all of the professional services are working with the same documentation

<sup>1</sup> “Memes” are generally edited photos or videos accompanied by ironic text passages which are shared with numerous people at once and thus broadly reproduced and further disseminated.

forms, in light of the level of concrete information, the extent of the descriptions, the choice of language, and the volume of the professional assessments and interpretations the content design could hardly be more diverse. Thus, the case documentations must consistently be seen as interpretations reflecting above all the professional reality of those doing the documenting and their interactions with the reflective understanding of the project team. This allows some paradoxes and dilemmas to come to the forefront which emerged from the professional assessments of the specialists. Typological characteristics such as the age and sex of the violence perpetrators or the categorization of violent acts by number of perpetrators, victim, type and extent of digital media use are delegated to the secondary level of analysis. Focusing on paradoxes and dilemmas, however, it is necessary because of the overall goal of the project, since they point to the challenges for which no immediate solution is available and for which the proper recommendations for action must be further developed.

#### Problematic Areas in This Context

The strategies of digital perpetrators, the (self-)sexualization of childhood and adolescence as well as the tendency of children and adolescents toward experimentation all tend to facilitate experiences of victimization. Educational assessments of the observed risk behavior of young people in this context flow seamlessly into victim blaming. The resulting reactions from the victim's social environment (i.e., accusations of peers and adults directed toward the online behavior of the victim) are added to the existing burden of the original violent acts and may produce as much stress as the violent acts themselves. Adults in turn try to regain control over the situation by issuing media bans, while also blaming themselves for the events.

The situation surrounding the online interactions of adolescents often creates conflicts between the self-assessment of the adolescents and that of the adults in their environment. Adults see the acts as invasive events that are labeled by the presumed victims as consensual. In individual cases it remains unclear to what extent the conflict runs parallel to an internalization of the grooming dynamics on the part of the adolescents or the revocation of adolescent sexual self-

determination on the part of the adults. Since the problem can only rarely be solved by resorting to criminal law, this leads to a revision of the discussion of the sexual self-determination of young people. The necessity results primarily from the ongoing shift of parts of sexual development to the digital media as well as the divergent understanding in the different generations about what "digital intimacy" means.

When sexualized peer violence is perpetrated in a group situation using digital media, the exact circle of witnesses is often difficult to ascertain, making the rehabilitation of those affected by such violence complex. In some cases, it may be nearly impossible to differentiate between the roles of perpetrator, reinforcer, defender, victim, witness, etc. The motives of young people who forward humiliating depictions of abuse or violence seem rather diffuse; depending on one's vantage point they range from displacement behavior, just having "fun," exercising revenge or vengeance, to the reenactment of hegemonic gender stereotypes, to the experience of power. This makes it difficult to prioritize group-related systemic principles of crisis intervention and secondary prevention that go beyond the simple act of protecting the victim. Present intervention strategies against sexualized violence from digital media sources were apparently loaned from strategies against violence without digital media sources. To date, there are no systematic strategies available to deal with the increased loss of control when abusive situations are recorded and disseminated. The largest common denominator is present when dealing with behavioral forms that conform to the principles of rational-emotive behavioral therapeutic approaches. Above all, one works with the evaluations of those affected by violence, reframing the violent acts or inquiring about the purpose of disseminating the abusive images in order to counter negative attributions.

#### Contact

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