REF2021

Institution: **University of Suffolk**

Unit of Assessment: **UoA 20 Social Work and Social Policy**

Title of case study: **Sharing intimate images online – effectively responding to online sexual abuse and improving support for child victims**

Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: **2007 - 2020**

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Emma Bond	Professor of Socio-Technical Research	2002 - present
Cristian Dogaru	Associate Professor	2014 - present
Vanessa Rawlings	Lecturer	2013 - 2019
Katie Tyrrell	Research Associate	2017 - present

Period when the claimed impact occurred: **2014 - 2020**

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? **N**

1. Summary of the impact

Sharing intimate images online can put children at risk of significant harm. The Online Harms agenda is now a key priority for UK government policy. The University of Suffolk pioneered the early research on risk in relation to mobile technologies and children. Their work advanced understanding of the sexting phenomenon, image-based abuse and grooming to help analysts categorise images, improve child protection and safeguarding online in the UK and abroad. The research underpins educational resources, awareness-raising initiatives and training for thousands of professionals. It advanced protectionist discourses alongside academic and policy understandings of online risks, to adopt an evidenced-based approach to 'what works'. The research has improved support for child victims, evidenced better service delivery, informed how best to safeguard children after online sexual abuse and challenged UK policy which criminalises children for sharing intimate images.

2. Underpinning research

The emergence of risks resulting from sharing intimate images has attracted significant national and international policy attention. Under UK law, it is a criminal offence to create or share explicit images of a child, even when it is the child themselves that is doing so. Research at the University of Suffolk shaped understanding and established evidence on how best to respond to online harms, especially the risks associated with the sharing of intimate images online. Investigating children's perceptions of risk and mobile technologies, the research was one of the first ever studies to explore the phenomenon of sexting and how young people use mobile technologies in developing and maintaining their intimate, romantic relationships [3.1; 3.2; 3.4].

The work has informed debate and discourse on children's rights to online protection, and children's rights to participation, highlighting that children can be both victims and perpetrators of online abuse [3.1; 3.2; 3.4; 3.6]. The research [3.1] resulted in the Marie Collins Foundation (MCF) commissioning Bond to investigate the training needs of education, health and social care professionals working with children who were victims of online sexual abuse. This national study, published in 2014, found that 70% of professionals in the UK had not received training in online risk assessment, over 80% had not received training in assisting children in their recovery from online sexual abuse, and over 95% stated that they would value such training.

The programme of online risk research was developed further by Bond, Tyrrell and Rawlings to focus on specific aspects of children's vulnerability online. Funded by the College of Policing, the team undertook an evidence assessment to identify factors influencing children's vulnerability online – including disability, LQBTQI+ and looked-after young people. The research included a multi-agency stakeholder analysis of professional practice to develop an in-depth review of 'what works' in effectively safeguarding children online [3.4].

This body of research [3.1; 3.2; 3.3; 3.4] was used to develop and evaluate a national training programme with MCF [3.4; 3.5]. The programme highlighted the importance of having children's voices at the heart of interventions and that adopting a multi-agency approach was essential

towards effectively responding to sexual abuse online. It underpins advice and guidance given by international helplines, shaped how analysts report and categorise child abuse imagery, created educational resources for Internet Matters to better inform parents of online risk, and informed the evaluation of the online safety hub funded by the Home Office in 2020.

Building on the growing body of research around legislative responses to intimate images, Bond, in collaboration with Phippen (University of Bournemouth) undertook the largest, most comprehensive study in the UK since Outcome21 police guidance was introduced in 2016 (which allows the police to record a crime but not take formal criminal justice action) [3.6]. The study found police responses to the production and sharing of intimate images to be *ad hoc*, raising serious concerns about the inconsistent application of legislation in the UK and the criminalisation of children who may be victims of abuse. The work highlighted the problem that currently children, rather than being protected by law in England and Wales, are being criminalised for possession of explicit images. This makes it difficult for young people to report if they are actually victims of online sexual abuse.

3. References to the research
[3.1] Bond, E. (2010). Managing mobile relationships: Children's perceptions of the impact of the mobile phone on relationships in their everyday lives. *Childhood* Vol. 17 no. 4, pp. 514-529. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568210364421

[3.2] Bond, E. (2011). The mobile phone = bike shed? Children, sex and mobile phones. *New Media & Society* Vol. 13 no. 4, pp. 587-604. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810377919

[3.3] Bond, E. (2014). Childhood, Mobile Technologies and Everyday Experiences Basingstoke: Palgrave. (Nominated for the British Sociological Society Philip Abrams Memorial Award for the best first and sole-authored book within the discipline of sociology.) ISBN 978-1-349-4509407

[3.4] Bond, E. & Rawlings, V. (2017). Virtual vulnerability – Safeguarding children in digital environments. In Dastbaz, M. Arabnia, H. & Aghkar, B. (Eds.) Technology and Smart Futures. London: Springer, drawn from Bond, E. and Rawlings, V. (2016). *Multi-agency E-safety Crime Prevention project report* University of Suffolk available online from: https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/assets/community-and-safety/staying-safe-online/MESCP-FinalReportDec2016.pdf

[3.5] Bond, E. & Dogaru, C. (2018). An Evaluation of an Inter-Disciplinary Training Programme for Professionals to Support Children and Their Families Who Have Been Sexually Abused Online. *British Journal Social Work, Vol. 49. No. 3, pp. 577-594.* https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy075

[3.6] Bond, E. & Phippen, A. (2020). Tackling Teen Sexting – Policing Challenges When Society and technology outpace Legislation. In Jahankhani, H., Akhgar, B., Cochrane, P. & Dastbaz, M. (Eds.) *Policing in the Era of AI and Smart Societies.* Springer, pp. 157-178.

4. Details of the impact
Impact 1: Changing professional practice and improving awareness of sexting
Using Bond's research on sexting, the University of Suffolk has annually hosted Safer Internet Day (organised by the joint Insafe-INHOPE network, with the support of the European Commission). Bond is a trained NCA CEOP ambassador, and to date has delivered training to over 1,600 children's workforce professionals, including police officers, on the nature and impact of online sexual offending against children and how to respond effectively to incidents of nude image sharing [5.1].

The follow-up survey from the training found 98% reported having a better understanding of how children and young people use the internet and social media; 93% reported increased knowledge of the nature and impact of online sexual offending against children and young people; and 94% reported that they were responding more effectively to incidents of nude image sharing as a result of the training. The National Police Chiefs Council Lead for Child Protection in England and Wales [5.2] said:

> "*Emma's work has assisted in a change of culture in policing over the last six years which has rightly seen children being placed first by the professionals involved in Child Protection. This sets us on the correct path to raise awareness, plan and conduct child-centred investigations and drives further positive outcomes for all involved*".

Since 2015, Bond's research has underpinned evidence to inform educational resources by the UK Safer Internet Centre, BBC Own It and Internet Matters (the leading not-for-profit organisation informing parental knowledge on online safeguarding). She was appointed to the advisory board for Internet Matters in 2017. To date, three million families have heard of Internet Matters, with 82% of parents reporting that they felt better prepared to handle online issues with their child in the future after visiting the website [5.1]. Working with Tyrrell, Bond conducted an evaluation of the Home Office funded Inclusive Online Safety hub in 2020, which had nearly 12,000 views within the first month of its launch. 80% professionals working with vulnerable children who visited the website stated finding the resources useful in practice [5.3].

Impact 2: Improving how helplines support professionals and victims
The number of children contacting the NSPCC's Childline following online sexual abuse is increasing. The role of helplines in supporting victims of online sexual abuse should not be underestimated. As an established helpline for children already exists in the UK, the Professionals Online Safety Helpline is unique within the European network of centres in that it supports professionals rather than children. Bond's research on sexting has been used by the helpline to provide professionals with advice on how best to respond to incidents of nude image sharing. Over the last four years, the helpline has supported over 3,300 professionals on how best to protect children from online harms [5.3]. The Helpline manager stated [5.4]:

> *"At the time, I was overseeing the Professionals Online Safety Helpline where we received many calls regarding teenagers involved in sexting, sometimes consensual between two young people, but being deemed as harmful by schools, and criminal by law enforcement. Following this [Bond's] work, there was a greater understanding of the actual scale of the issue (rather that the moral panic led by the UK media) but also an understanding that for some it was seen as "normal", and not harmful. The research certainly helped inform education messaging for young people, and for parents, who felt out of depth with this topic. In terms of impact for helplines, it was critical that we could help schools rewrite policy and risk assessments to ensure that children at risk or who were being exploited received the right support immediately, but that a proportionate response was made in consensual relationships. In particular, in deciding when police involvement was required''.*

The impact of Bond's work on improving the advice given by helplines extends beyond the UK. Insafe and INHOPE are a global network of 47 member hotlines and national awareness centres focusing on raising awareness and understanding of safer internet issues and emerging trends. And Bond's research informed Insafe-INHOPE's training for helplines across Europe, which took place in Vilnius, Lithuania in 2014. Bond provided training to 140 international practitioners actively engaged in advising and supporting children, their families, and other professionals [5.1; 5.4]. Approximately 8% of calls to Insafe helplines are related to sexting, and in the year following the training, the helplines from 31 European countries received just under 40,000 contacts [5.5].

> *"The training informed good practice across all services, whether supporting young people directly or their parents, caregivers or educators. It enabled some standardised language and approaches which are still in place today, as well as the creation of teen friendly, sexting resources"* [5.4].

Impact 3: Helping analysts categorise online abuse imagery
"*Professor Bond's ground-breaking work on sexting acted as a catalyst in transforming how the sharing of intimate images was understood and responded to by the online community*" [5.1]. It also drew policy attention to the sexting phenomenon. Her work has improved support for victims, provided evidence to support better service delivery and informed both educational responses to online risk and how best to safeguard children after online sexual abuse. Bond's research on sexting changed the online safeguarding agenda and how the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF – the self-regulatory organisation providing an internet hotline for the public and IT professionals to report potentially criminal online content) understood self-generated sexual imagery [5.6]. The knowledge that analysts gained from this research is having a direct influence on how they approach the identification and removal of child sexual abuse imagery operationally [5.6]. In 2020, IWF analysts processed 299,600 reports, an increase of 15% on the previous year. Of these,

68,000 reports were tagged as including 'self-generated' child sexual abuse content – a 77% increase on 2019's total of 38,400 reports. The former CTO and Deputy CEO of the Internet Watch Foundation explained the significance of the impact of the research [5.6]:

> "[it] *enabled the online safeguarding professional community to have challenging conversations, to address sexting as a behaviour which was occurring online amongst children, when a lot of online safeguarding experts were in denial of its prevalence. Professor Bond's research around sexting was one of the first research studies of its kind, and in turn, changed the ways in which colleagues and I at the Internet Watch Foundation understood self-generated sexual imagery. While the primary remit of the IWF is to remove child sexual abuse imagery (including self-generated illegal sexual imagery) Professor Bond's work enabled us as an organisation to begin to think carefully about motivations behind the imagery, and operationally we were able to become more nuanced in how we reported and categorised imagery".*

Impact 4: Training professionals to support children after online sexual abuse

The prevalence of child victims of online sexual abuse is increasing. In 2018, for example, Scotland Yard's online child sexual abuse and exploitation team received 2,514 referrals, an increase of 139% from 2017. The impact of image-based abuse as a consequence of sexting is now well documented and acknowledged. Bond's research has gone further to examine 'what works' in supporting children to recover after online child sexual abuse. The most consistent and sustained example of the research's impact is the partnership between the researchers at UoS and the Marie Collins Foundation (MCF) – the UK's leading charity working nationally and globally to support children after online sexual abuse [5.7]. Based on her research around sexting [3.1; 3.2; 3.3], the MCF commissioned Bond to conduct a national survey with frontline children's services. Published January 2014, the survey evidence enabled the MCF to obtain funding from BT for a pilot of a new training programme, *Click: Path to Protection* [5.7]. The national pilot training programme was co-developed by MCF staff and Bond, informed by her research. The programme ran between 2014 and 2016 in five locations across the UK with 114 professionals and was evaluated by Bond and Dogaru [3.5].

The need for this training was further evidenced by the serious case review in Bradford in 2015 which stated: "*There needs to be a national response to provide the tools and information to prevent harm to children and deter and apprehend offenders*". The lack of knowledge, data and critical understanding of harm online has been highlighted by a number of high-profile reports over the last six years. Each one has recommended that more attention should be paid to addressing the needs of the child victims, while developing models of intervention that take account of the differential impacts of abuse via new technologies. The comprehensive training programme *Click: Path to Protection,* developed by MCF and informed by Bond's research, responds to this need.

The study undertaken by Bond and Dogaru evaluating the effectiveness of the pilot programme [3.3] resulted in significant further funding from BT (in excess of £650K) for a national training programme in the UK. Based on the evaluation and the importance of multi-agency training highlighted by the findings, the programme was launched in 2016. The evaluative work has continued alongside the training to provide both qualitative and quantitative data on the training's effectiveness since its launch, using an online survey, interview and observation data:

> "*Having attended the ACT: Path to Protection all-day training event, I will never again approach and interview child victims in the way I have done over the four years I have specialised in investigating cases of online abuse of children. My practice will change forever*" Police officer [5.7].

The ongoing evaluation by UoS has directly informed the development of the programme to include a new 'train the trainers' strand, delivered to 36 leading professionals who by 2020 had trained a further 403 professionals across the UK, and a new training module for managers was also introduced [5.7]. The CEO of the MCF [5.7] summarised Bond's central role to the work:

> "*Prof Bond's research at the University of Suffolk was instrumental to us securing funding and she has played a vital role in the success of the programme, such as providing underpinning research evidence, peer support, continual programme evaluation, and*

importantly, challenging perceptions about online abuse with policy makers and parliamentary committees."

Following the success of the national training based on Bond's research, the MCF obtained funding in 2019 which enabled the programme to be delivered internationally in priority countries, including to child protection teams in Canada (20 social workers and therapists trained) Ukraine (150 professionals trained) the Philippines (150 professionals trained) and Vietnam (400 professionals trained). In 2020 following the COVID crisis, the *Click: Path to Protection* training was moved online supported by Bond and her team [5.7]. The MCF CEO explained the influence of the work on child protection:

"More specifically, after the training, 91% reported the training had significantly improved their knowledge of online risk; 91% similarly reported higher confidence levels in assessing online risk, and 86% [said] they were better able to support children and their families after online sexual abuse. Given that the training has been delivered to over 7,000 professionals to date and the average number of children that professionals reported supporting is 27, we predict that as direct result of the training, approximately 189,000 children are potentially better safeguarded and supported towards recovery after online sexual abuse."

Impact 5: UK legislation – still criminalising children
More recently, reflecting concerns on the criminalisation of children who share intimate images, and following her research [3.6], Bond highlighted how current legislation in the UK potentially protects adults who are victims of intimate image abuse while potentially criminalises children. The Deputy Chief Constable (Ministry of Defence Police) explained the significance of this on policing policy [5.8]:

"The policing dilemma was that the person at the centre of this issue was technically committing a criminal offence of distributing explicit images of children, whereas they were also being victimised and exploited, which has led to people taking their own lives. Supported by Prof Bond's research, the policy change was to ensure such incidents were dealt with sensitively and recognising that at the core was a young person who is growing up that should not be criminalised. Her work [in] the area of sexting and indeed more broadly has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on policing policy through challenging an institution that had been used to a traditional approach towards a significantly changing pattern of crime and vulnerability".

The National Police Chiefs Council Lead for Child Protection in England and Wales summarised the impact of Bond's research and training on protecting children [5.2]:

"There is no doubt that the research and training conducted and developed by Professor Emma Bond and her team has had a significant impact on Child Protection work, not only in the police but across multiple agencies leading to thousands of children and their families being safeguarded nationally. Crucially, it has kept more vulnerable people safe, it has supported professionals across many disciplines to make the right decisions, do the right thing and provide improved services to our communities".

5. Sources to corroborate the impact
[5.1] Testimonial from Will Gardner OBE, CEO Childnet International
[5.2] Testimonial from Simon Bailey QPM, National Police Chiefs Council Lead for Child Protection in England and Wales
[5.3] Testimonial from David Wright, Director UK Safer Internet Centre
[5.4] Testimonial from Laura Higgins, Director of Digital Civility, Roblox former Online Safety Operations Manager, UK Safer Internet Centre
[5.5] Dinh *et al.* (2016). INSAFE Helplines Operations, effectiveness and emerging issues for internet safety helplines: A report commissioned by European Schoolnet
[5.6] Testimonial from Fred Langford, Programme Director of Online Technology, Ofcom; former CTO and Deputy CEO Internet Watch Foundation; former President of INHOPE International
[5.7] Testimonial from Tink Palmer MBE, CEO Marie Collins Foundation
[5.8] Testimonial from Gareth Wilson, Deputy Chief Constable, Ministry of Defence Police; former Chief Constable, Suffolk Constabulary