



Literature review

Adolescents and self-taken sexual images: A review of the literature

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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing public interest and concern about young people's involvement in the self-production of sexual images (or 'sexting'), there remains a dearth of research into their reasons for making and sending images, the processes involved, and the consequences arising from their experiences. This article reviews the motivational, lifestyle and personality factors influencing adolescent sexting practices and explores the research evidence within the wider context of debates around contemporary social and visual media cultures and gender. A systematic search of databases was conducted and eighty-eight records were identified for inclusion in the review. The findings reveal that sexting is remarkably varied in terms of context, meaning and intention, with the potential for consensual and non-consensual aspects of the activity. Whilst sexting can be a means of flirting or enhancing a sexual relationship, it can highlight potential vulnerabilities to victimisation or to participation in risky sexual practices. Sexting is also inextricably linked to social expectations of gendered sexual behaviours, with females often deriving less satisfaction from their experiences and being perceived more negatively by their peers. Further research linking adolescent motivations, well-being, relationships and lifestyles with the broader socio-cultural and media landscape will ultimately help drive understanding about the subject forward.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade there have been considerable changes in the role that technology plays in young people's lives. Smartphones, in particular, enable adolescents to connect to one another, and to the world, through a range of social and visual media. Alongside the perceived benefits of online and mobile technologies, public concerns have emerged relating to young people's changing social communication practices. One adolescent practice to receive public attention is the self-production of sexual images (or 'sexting'). Sexting can be understood as the sending or posting of sexually suggestive text messages and images, including nude or semi-nude photographs, via mobiles or over the Internet. Definitions vary however and some studies may also refer to the receiving of texts and images, or explore an aspect of image content or sexting behaviour such as forwarding or sharing images (for discussion, see [Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013](#); [Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014](#)).

Despite an increasing number of studies aimed at identifying the prevalence of adolescent sexting, there remains a dearth of research exploring young people's motivations for sexting, along with their experiences of both making and sending images (see [Döring, 2014](#); [Klettke et al., 2014](#)). The aim of this review is to provide a clearer, more detailed summary of the existing literature by focussing specifically on research findings and discussions around young people's sexting practices and the influence of motivational, lifestyle and personality factors on their experiences. With social media providing a platform for many adolescent social interactions and, increasingly, their sexual exploration and behaviours, the review will explore these behaviours within a broader developmental framework of adolescent online and mobile practices and debates around gender and social/visual media cultures, including risk and identity creation. These issues are crucial in highlighting the contemporary cultural and technological environment within which sexting takes place and in assisting with future academic research, policy development and practice.

2. Methodology

Given the ever-increasing wealth of media-generated and academic literature examining young people's sexting behaviours, there is a surprising lack of quality research providing adolescents with a voice to explain their motivations and behaviours. Previous systematic reviews have detailed sexting prevalence and the factors influencing participation across the age spectrum (See [Döring, 2014](#); [Klettke et al., 2014](#)). However, as yet there has been no literature review specifically exploring the adolescent and young adult population. A decision was therefore made to generate a review focussing thematically on contemporary debates around young people's motivations for self-producing sexual images, the factors influencing their behaviours, and the potential psychological and behavioural outcomes. To move the debate beyond a more pathological focus these behaviours are explored within the literature on normative adolescent social, visual and media culture. This provides opportunities to highlight the relationships between young

people's attitudes towards user-generated media, image construction, gender, and online and mobile practices.

The aim of the review was to identify articles covering both empirical studies and non-empirical research discussions relating to young people's personal motivations, perceptions and experiences of sexting – particularly in relation to the relatively unexplored area of why young people make and send images. The process of decision-making and the potential roles of gender and personality within this process are crucial in forming an understanding of adolescent engagement in sexting. Furthermore, research and discussion exploring the links between adolescent sexting and the developing media and visual culture were also included. Although the knowledge base in these areas remains comparatively weak, they are of considerable relevance to parents attempting to identify and deal with adolescent behaviours, and to practitioners working with young people who may be engaged in the activity. Criteria for inclusion in the review were as follows:

- Research exploring the sexting behaviours of young people under the age of 25;
- Examination of young people's experiences of *sending* (rather than receiving or viewing) nude or nearly nude pictures or images via a mobile or on the internet;
- Discussions around any risks, issues or consequences related to young people's sexting practices.

A systematic search was conducted to minimise bias, thus contributing to more reliable findings and conclusions ([Liberati et al., 2009](#)) and essentially following the recommendations of systematic reviews ([Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2008](#)). Nine relevant databases were searched using the key words 'sexting', and 'self-produced sexual images', alongside the search terms 'adolescents', 'teens', 'young people', 'youth(s)' and 'social/visual/digital media', 'digital/sexual images', 'online/mobile technology', 'online/mobile risks' and 'cyberbullying/bullying'. The following bibliographic databases were searched: Academic Search Premier, AS-SIA, ERIC, MEDLINE, PsYINFO, SCOPUS, Social Service Abstracts and Sociological Abstracts. These databases were selected to cover the broad range of research on sexting across the inter-disciplinary subject areas of psychology, sociology, health, media studies and education. A search of the 'grey literature' was also carried out using the search database ETHOS, in order to identify any dissertations or theses linked to the key topics.

In light of the extensive literature base and the continually changing nature of social and online media technology, the search was restricted to research and literature published between January 2009 and September 2014, written in English and appearing in peer reviewed journals. The search was conducted in September 2014. A visual summary of the process is presented as a flow chart in [Fig. 1](#).

The initial bibliographic database search produced 364 articles. In addition to this, 19 articles were added following hand-searches through reference lists and further online searches. Of these 383 articles, 157 were excluded due to duplication.

The remaining 226 articles were appraised for inclusion by screening of the title and abstracts. A total of 108 articles did not

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