



Images across Europe: The sending and receiving of sexual images and associations with interpersonal violence in young people's relationships



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 June 2015

Received in revised form 4 November 2015

Accepted 4 November 2015

Available online 5 November 2015

Keywords:

Young people

Interpersonal partner violence

Sexting

ABSTRACT

This article explores young people's experiences of sending and receiving sexual images and text messages (sexting) within their interpersonal relationships and the contexts in which this occurs. The article uses data from a recent Daphne funded project 'Safeguarding teenagers' intimate relationships' (STIR) involving a survey with 4564 young people aged between 14 and 17 in a number of schools across five countries in Europe. Findings reveal that experiences of sexting vary by country and gender. The study also found that young people who reported victimisation in their relationships were more likely to have sent a sext message than those who had not. The article points to the need for a more nuanced understanding of the varied contexts and experiences around sexting in order to better develop policy, practice and education in this area.

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of sending/receiving sexual images has become a part of young people's lives due to the rise in use of mobile phones and in particular smart phones enabling the exchange of images (Willard, 2010). The sending/receiving of sexual images has commonly and problematically been referred to as 'sexting' and has attracted 'considerable legal, political, public, media and academic attention' (Lee & Crofts, 2015). It has been defined as the 'exchange of sexual messages or images' (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, Olafsson, & with members of the EU Kids Online Network, 2011) and 'the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images' (Lenhart, 2009) through mobile phones or the internet. It is described in the Oxford English dictionary as 'The action or practice of sending or exchanging sexually explicit or suggestive messages or images electronically, esp. using a mobile phone' (OED online, 2015).

Although we have decided to use the term 'sexting' to aid brevity and consistency with previous work we acknowledge, as others have, that it is not a definition used by young people themselves (Crofts, Lee, McGovern, & Milivojevic, 2015; Livingstone & Görzig, 2012). Throughout the article, we use the term 'young people' to refer to adolescents under the age of 18. For our own survey, we included young people aged between 14 and 17.

There is widespread policy concern over the risks and dangers sexting can pose to young people (Crofts et al., 2015; Livingstone & Helsper, 2009; Muscari, 2009; Ringrose & Barajas, 2011; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012). Across Europe, policy and practice in relation to sexting amongst young people is underdeveloped. At present across Europe and in the US, there can be serious legal consequences when young people send or receive sexual images as it may be against the law to create, transmit or possess a sexual image of a minor (Safer Internet Centre, downloaded, 07/05/2015, Arcabascio, 2010; Sacco, Argudin, Maguire, & Tallon, 2010). The lack of legislative clarity may cause young people to refrain from reporting negative experiences as they may be arrested or charged for engaging in child pornography (Willard, 2010) and could end up on the sex offender register (Morris, 2014). However, literal interpretations of the law vary across countries and across US states. There have been cases, particularly in the US, of young people being prosecuted for such activities (Schmitz & Stry, 2011; Lee, Crofts, Salter, Milivojevic, & McGovern, 2013). A report by Wolak and Finkelhor (2011) presents a typology of sexting episodes involving young people based on a review of more than 550 US cases from law enforcement agencies. In comparison, other countries such as Germany, permit non-prosecution where images have been made and distributed with the consent of the party depicted in the image (Morris, 2014).

What is unequivocal is that although sexting is not confined to young people (Gámez-Guadix, Almendros, Borrajo, & Calvete, 2015), it is the distribution of sexual images by teenagers which has received the most sensationalist media and public attention, portraying it as a routine and alarming aspect of youth interactions (Arcabascio, 2010; Crofts et al., 2015; Morris, 2014; Sacco et al., 2010; Ringrose et al.,

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2012). However, in contrast to this media depiction, it remains far from clear how prevalent an activity sexting is within young people's lives and cultures and whether and how it inflicts harm.

1.1. Incidence rates for sexting

A growing body of work has sought to address how common sexting is and to a lesser extent the contexts in which this occurs. Research has found very different rates, depending on age and the way sexting was defined and measured (Lounsbury, Mitchell, & Finkerhor, 2011) and differences in sampling (Ringrose et al., 2012). A recent systematic review (Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014) of studies which have explored incidence rates for sending and receiving of sexual images found 12 studies (most US based) which sampled participants from the age of 10–19. The review found that incidence rates varied from 3% to 34% for sending images and 7% to 42% for receiving images. For studies ($n = 6$) which used a randomly stratified sample, and therefore were considered nationally representative (Associated Press and MTV, 2009; Cox Communications, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Lenhart, 2009; ; Mitchell, Finkerhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; Rice et al., 2012), the average rate of young people sending messages was 10.2%. The average incidence rate for receiving sexual images in the five studies which measured this was 15.64%.

A recent study by Walrave et al. (2015) based on a small sample of 217 15- to 19-year-olds found that a total of 18% of respondents had engaged in sexting in the 2 months preceding the study. A nationally representative study of sexting found that 19% of teenagers had electrically sent a nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves and 31% of teens have received such a message (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008). In comparison Mitchell et al.'s (2012) US study based on a national telephone survey of 1560 young people aged 10 to 17 found much lower rates. Two and one-half percent of young participants had appeared in nude or nearly nude pictures or videos. However, this percentage was reduced to only 1% when the definition was restricted to only include images that were sexually explicit (i.e., showed naked breasts, genitals, or bottoms). Slightly more young people (7%) reported receiving nude or nearly nude images of others; and 6% of participants said the image received was sexually explicit. However, few youth reported distributing these images.

One study absent from Klettke's review was the EU kids online survey (Livingstone et al., 2011) which included questions on the sending/receiving of sexual images. This study, which involved interviews with over 25,000 young people across 25 countries in Europe, found that 3% of the young people across Europe aged 11–16 said that they had sent a sexual image and 15% said that they had received one. Mitchell et al. (2012) conclude that sexting is far from being a normative behaviour for youth. However, it is likely that the variations in rates reported reflect cultural differences, differences in the age range of the samples utilised and the timing of the research since widespread use of smart phones by young people is relatively recent.

1.2. Conceptualisation of sexting

Beyond an exploration of sexting rates studies have raised a variety of factors which highlight the complexities that surround this phenomenon. Much of the debate has prioritised the possible risks involved, thus conceptualising sexting as a primarily negative childhood activity abounding with online peril and exploitation, defined by Ferro as the 'perfect storm' (p1. 2012).

Consequently, much of the sexting literature has sought to identify the risks and negative outcomes associated with young people's sexting. There are for example mixed concerns around the links between sexting and engaging in physical sexual acts (Temple et al., 2012). A study in the US which included 420 participants aged 12–14 found that those who had reported sexting in the past 6 months were four to seven times more likely to engage in other sexual activities such as interpersonal

kissing or touching and intercourse (Rice et al., 2012). Other studies also report associations between sexting and engaging in physical sexual activity (Houck et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Studies also report high levels of pressure for young people to send sexual images (Associated Press and MTV, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2012). Recent reviews provide a comprehensive overview on risks and sexting (see Döring, 2014; Drouin, Ross, & Tobin, 2015).

Another key risk factor associated with sexting is the propagation of such images over which the sender has no control. Distribution of images can be used as a means of showing off (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015), as blackmail or in what has become known as 'revenge porn' where sexual images are shared by an ex-partner as a means of humiliation or for their own amusement (Morris, 2014; Willard, 2010). Sexts can also be taken from their original location on social network sites and uploaded to porn sites (Smith, 2012). One US study (Rice et al., 2012) found that around one third of the 606 14–18 year olds that they surveyed were not aware or did not consider legal or other risks when sexting.

However, some commentators have contended that adhering to a risk approach to understanding sexting in young people's lives is too restrictive and fails to reflect young people's own perspectives and experiences (Lee & Crofts, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2012). Thus, some researchers have sought to recast the debate away from risk to a more balanced account which seeks to acknowledge the role that sexting also plays in relation to pleasure and sexual intimacy. Unfortunately, few surveys have addressed positive motivations for sexting or included outcomes which reflect affirmative sexting experiences (Albury & Crawford, 2012).

Two studies which did provide a range of outcomes report similarly findings. The Sex and Tech survey (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008) found the most common reason for sending an image was for fun or to be flirtatious (66% of girls, 60% of boys), 52% of girls said it was a 'sexy present' for their boyfriend, 44% of both female and male respondents said it was in response to receiving a sext from their partner, 40% of girls sent it as a joke and 34% to feel sexy. Mitchell et al. (2012) also found that the vast majority of respondents (51%) said that sexting occurred as part of a romantic relationship and 23% said it was a joke. The Sex and Tech Survey (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008) showed that the majority of young people involved in sexting reported it as a positive experience: 50% reported being amused; 50%, turned on; 44% excited; and 40% happy. Cox Communications (2009) also reported that 90% of young people sending a sext reported no negative consequences.

Not all experiences were positive. Just under a quarter (21%) of participants in Mitchell's study reported being very or extremely upset, embarrassed or afraid as a consequence of sending an image. Comparable levels were reported in The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (2008): 22% were 'grossed out' and 15% 'turned off'. Unfortunately, no gender breakdowns were provided.

Lee and Crofts' (2015) recent review of the literature stresses that while negative scenarios can occur, risk approaches 'do not reflect the experiences expressed by the majority of girls who actually engage in sexting, who are more likely to express motivations associated with pleasure or desire' (p. 454). They strongly argue that the risk discourse within which sexting is most often submerged has significant moral overtones which are themselves rooted in historical attempts to regulate childhood sexuality (Renold, 2005).

We support this contention and share their concerns about how sexting has been used as an additional site to further problematise and attempt to confine young sexualities. Nevertheless, we also recognise that new technologies, including sexting, can be used as a means of control and abuse even if, as Lee and Croft contend, this represents a minority experience. Consequently, pleasure, fun, risk and harm all require attention, albeit within a more balanced framework of childhood sexual citizenship and agency (Albury, Funnell, & Noonan, 2010). We need also to remember that childhood, as numerous scholars have

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