

Sexting and young people

Experts' views

Young people's 'sexting' – defined by the *Macquarie Dictionary Online* (2010) as the sending and receiving of sexually explicit images via mobile phones – has become a focus of much media reporting; however, research regarding the phenomenon is in its infancy. This paper reports on the first phase of a study to understand this activity more comprehensively. Interviews were conducted with notable key informants (including teen culture authors and professionals from the academic, education and health sectors) to create a context for a second phase involving interviews with young people. Insights were offered into reasons for young people's participation, potential consequences and solutions. Highlighted was a gap in reliable data from the perspective of young people themselves, and the importance of their voice in understanding and developing effective strategies to prevent and deal with this phenomenon.

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Daniel and Abbey are 15 years old and have been together for two months. Daniel texts Abbey, "Send me a 'noodz'". Abbey is worried Daniel will "dump" her if she doesn't, so she sends a naked photo of herself via mobile phone text, asking him to promise he won't show anyone else. Daniel assures Abbey he won't, but then can't resist texting the photo to his mate. Within a week, almost everyone in school has seen the photo. It is anecdotes such as these, echoed by secondary school staff, local police and youth health service workers in Melbourne's outer east, which prompted this study.

Young people are growing up in an increasingly sexualised world driven by technology (McGrath 2009), with mobile phone ownership among Australian young people aged 15 to 17 years having risen to 90% (Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) 2010). Sending and receiving text messages, taking photos and accessing the internet are mobile phone activities that have been taken up at ever-increasing rates by young people (Mackay & Weidlich 2009; Brown & Bobkowski 2011). "As digital culture becomes increasingly pervasive and embedded in young people's everyday experiences" (Weber & Dixon 2010), young people's relationships with each other, in terms of how they interact and socialise, are being transformed.

Advances in technology offer many opportunities to improve youth health; however, this progress also brings potential risks. The introduction of text, Bluetooth and webcam mean

sexual images can be forwarded to cyberspace easily and rapidly. These images then “become part of a young person’s digital footprint, which may last forever and potentially damage future career prospects or relationships” (NSW Government 2008). Of particular concern is that images of young women are reportedly being distributed without their consent, and mobile phone technologies are being used “as vehicles for the perpetration of sexual assault” (Quadara 2010; Powell 2009).

The viral spread of these images and the associated shame have reportedly led to social, psychological and legal consequences for victims (Katzman 2010). A wealth of local anecdotes abound of young people being excluded from friendship groups and moving schools, with reports of their having experienced emotional distress and school suspension (O’Keefe & Clarke-Pearson 2011), and, in the more extreme cases, committing suicide (Tomazin & Smith 2007; Chalfen 2009). Furthermore, young people face the risk of criminal charges for the production and distribution of child pornography (Prince & Jordan 2004; Krause 2009; Weiss & Samenow 2010), although there has only been one criminal case against a young person in Australia to date in relation to sexting (Pace Legal 2010). However, the story in the US is quite different. A report by Wolak and Finkelhor (2011) presents a typology of sexting episodes involving young people based on a review of more than 550 cases from law enforcement agencies there. At least a dozen peer-reviewed law and policy journal articles were sourced regarding this topic in the US (examples include Ryan (2010) ‘How the state can prevent a moment of indiscretion from leading to a lifetime of unintended consequences for minors and young adults’, and Wood (2009) ‘The failure of sexting criminalization: A plea for the exercise of prosecutorial restraint’).

Issues relating to the practice of sexting among young people have been increasingly

gaining media attention both nationally and internationally. An online search (see Table 1) of 10 academic databases (Psychology and Behaviour Sciences, Medline, PsycINFO, Web of Science, PubMed, CINAHL PLUS, Academic Search Premier, Expanded Academic ASAP, JSTOR and Google Scholar) revealed very little reliable literature, particularly from an Australian perspective.

A few expert opinion papers were sourced; most are authored from a North American viewpoint. The little available quantitative data is of poor quality, and contradictory. Two consumer surveys by young women’s magazines in Australia (Battersby 2008) and the US (*Cosmogirl* 2009), and the first quantitative study to be cited in a peer review journal, involving 16- to 25-year-old Hispanic women (Ferguson 2010), have indicated that as many as 20%–40% of respondents aged 12–19 years have been asked to send or have posted nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves in cyberspace. In contrast, a Victorian independent schools survey (Association of Independent Schools of Victoria (ASIV) 2009) and a US report (Lenhart 2009) found as few as 4%–7% of 12- to 17-year-olds were involved in this behaviour.

Only one qualitative study about young people and sexting was sourced. Pew Research Center in the US conducted a mixed-methods study (Lenhart 2009) involving telephone surveys and focus groups with young people aged 12 to 18 years. This report describes sexting as one of three main categories of behaviour that involves the exchange of images between young people. It is suggested that images are sent 1) between romantic partners, 2) between partners and shared with others, and 3) between young people where at least one person hopes to be in a relationship with the other. Lenhart’s report showed very little evidence of difference in the behaviour of sexting related to gender. However, many other authors (Hand, Chung & Peters 2009; Kee 2005;

The viral spread of these images and the associated shame has reportedly led to social, psychological and legal consequences for victims.

TABLE 1 Key terms used for online search

Sext* AND Teen* OR ‘Young person’ OR ‘Young people’ OR Youth OR Adolescen*
‘Cell phone*’ OR ‘Mobile Phone*’ OR ‘Text messag*’ OR SMS (Short Message Service) OR Technolog* OR ‘cyber’ OR ‘electronic’ OR digital AND Teen* OR ‘Young person’ OR ‘Young people’ OR Youth OR
Adolescen* AND Sex* OR porn* OR nud*

TABLE 2 Key informant participants

Professional role of participants	Participant ID
Cyber safety expert	FG(P7)
Education policy academic (sexuality education)	FG(P3)
Secondary school teacher / student wellbeing	FG(P4)
Sexual violence prevention (schools)	FG(P1), FG(P6), FG(P5)
Sexual violence prevention research academic	I(P10)
Social diversity academic / author (youth culture)	FG(P2)
Teen magazine author / youth & family psychologist	I(P12)
Telecommunications security and safety expert	I(P11)
Youth health academic	I(P8), I(P9)

P=Participant FG=Focus Group I=Interview

Powell 2009; Flood 2008) argue it is young women's sexual images in particular that are being distributed without their consent, and that ultimately this is just another means of controlling and exerting power over women.

Muscari (2009) suggests "the topic of sexting is nonexistent" in health research literature and, along with Katzman (2010), believes we must recognise sexting as a public health problem.

Much of the popular literature discusses the need for education targeting young people about the potential consequences of sexting (Muscari 2009; Brown, Keller & Stern 2009). It has been posed in the literature and in policy responses (Marwick et al. 2010) that if young people understood the potential consequences of their behaviour they would not be sexting, a view contrary to evidence on risk-taking among young people (Zirkel 2009). Despite this, in Australia a number of government campaigns (NSW Government 2008; Diliberto & Matthey 2009; Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) 2010) have attempted to warn young people and parents about the potential harmful effects of sexting. In 2009 the NSW Government launched the *Safe Sexting – No Such Thing* campaign, followed in 2010 by the launch and rollout of the Australian Federal

Government *ThinkUKnow* program and *The Line* campaign (based on a recommendation from a *Time for Action: the National Council's Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Children* (The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2009). Apart from a video resource for schools (Developing Ethical Digital Citizens 2009), to promote discussion about sexting among students (which was developed with and by young people), there is no evidence that these campaigns have been informed by young people's understanding or experience of the practice, and therefore their effectiveness in dealing with the phenomenon remains to be seen.

Understanding sexting from the perspective of young people is fundamental to the development of strategies for preventing potential harms (Heath et al. 2009). This paper reports on the first of two phases of a study that aims to give young people a voice to promote a better understanding of the phenomenon. Phase two is currently under way and involves the gathering of qualitative data from young people aged 15 to 20 years. An important early step was the development of a local context for the study, which would identify appropriate language and recruitment strategies for individual interviews with young people. Thus, in Phase one, discussions were held with experts from the youth health, education and cyber safety sectors (Table 2 describes the informants and lists their participant IDs). Initially, results of these consultations were not intended for publication; however, given the current sparse academic literature on sexting and young people, we felt that placing the results of our expert consultation phase in the public arena would stimulate much-needed debate on the topic. Although the data collected for this paper is not exhaustive, the systematic analysis of the data obtained from key informants raises important issues for discussion among those who work with young people as well as for young people themselves.

Methods

Given the relative newness of the phenomenon of sexting among young people, a qualitative approach of inquiry was used, as is often the

strategy when little or nothing is known about a phenomenon. This meant we were able to approach the study without set assumptions or being constrained by pre-determined categories for exploration (Patton 1990).

A mixed-methods approach was used, with initial information collected via a focus group of seven participants, and subsequent data gathered via five individual interviews. It was hoped that the initial group process would lead participants to raise issues not anticipated by the interviewer, and that participants would challenge each other's views or opinions to create a lively and stimulating discussion (Hansen 2006). Thus, it was anticipated that the purposeful use of group interaction would generate data (Kitzinger 1994; Morgan 1996). Furthermore, focus groups are considered an economical way to gather a large amount of data in a short time span (Heath, Brooks & Cleaver 2009). As this phase of the research was about setting a backdrop for interviews with young people, this was an important factor for the research, given the limited time available.

Choosing individual semi-structured interviews as an additional means of collecting data meant we were able to support an expansion of the study group to include valuable sources that otherwise would not have been involved in the study, including those not wanting to share opinions in a group setting and those unable to attend the focus group. A preliminary analysis of focus group data was completed to provide new themes for questioning in individual interviews. This mixed-method approach allowed us to build on information gathered in the focus group to create a more complete picture. Data were reviewed by three researchers, and it was agreed that saturation was reached at this point.

Careful consideration was taken to select an appropriate number of research participants for each stage of data collection. Purposive sampling was used to recruit key informants, which meant we were able to locate important and information-rich cases by deliberately seeking to include people (Barbour 2001). It meant the researcher had a degree of control in selecting the sample, to ensure data gathered provided a "full and sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Rice & Ezzy

1999). Twelve key stakeholders with diverse experience and views were sourced through the first author's own professional networks and snowball sampling. Those recruited were professionals notable in their field including researchers; cyber safety experts; those working with individual young people in a teaching, support, counselling or sexual violence prevention role; an author who writes for the general public; and a popular teen-magazine psychologist.

Individual and group interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, thematically coded and systematically analysed using a grounded-theory approach (Hansen 2006).

Results

Mobile phone: The mechanism or the cause?

A commonly held view was that sexting is merely a new manifestation of motivations and behaviours among young people that have been around forever:

We are using a new technology in order to do it, but at the end of the day it's not new ... even the sharing of images of women, I mean that's not new. (Violence prevention research academic [P10])

We don't necessarily acknowledge that the behaviour has been similar for a long period of time. It's just that the technology facilitates that behaviour in a slightly different way, and ... maybe it makes dissemination of things like photographs easier because normally you would have had to have photocopied them and hung them up on the wall, whereas now it's a click of a button, which may for some young people mean that the consequences are more severe because they do get out there quicker. (Youth health research academic [P8])

It was acknowledged that mobile phone ownership is increasing among young people and, given most mobile phones today have in-built cameras and Bluetooth, that fast and easy distribution of images is inevitable:

[They] are much more savvy with using their phones ... mobile phones are probably the greatest transmitter of pornography out there. (Violence prevention research academic [P10])

A commonly held opinion was the need to consider sexting within the broader context of the sexualisation of culture.

Are all young people sexting or is it just media hype?

Views were polarised about the prevalence of sexting. One view expressed by an academic researcher who works in secondary schools, was that the media is over-reporting:

The young people that I've worked with ... have never disclosed that they have engaged in sexting behaviour. However, whenever I ... do professional development workshops for teachers, for parents, everyone's talking about it ... it seems to be ... sensationalised or over-reported by the media. (Youth health academic [P8])

However, for others who spend time in schools, there was a strong sense that the behaviour is widespread among young people:

After a presentation to students in a school about cyber safety, and in particular sexting, they went out with the teacher/coordinator ... [and] said "Oh my goodness you've really rattled the cages because ... the kids walked out and said, 'Oh my god, we all do that' ". (Cyber safety expert [P7])

You only ever [hear] them saying, "It didn't happen to me, it happened to a friend of mine", but they must all be engaging in [this] somewhere on the continuum. (Education policy academic [P3])

I'm saying of course it's out there ... when people say it's not happening, yes, it's not being reported. (Telecommunications security and safety expert [P11])

Furthermore, concern was raised about the role of the media:

I do think there's a bit of a media beat-up about it ... but in many respects the media beat-up actually encourages it. (Teen magazine author/youth and family psychologist [P12])

A sexualised culture

The gendered expectations of young people were discussed in relation to the behaviour of sexting, including a view that young women face pressure to present themselves in sexual

ways, and young men are expected to be interested in this:

... something that seems to be pronounced at the moment, [is] the expectation on young women to present themselves in sexual ways ... as objects for consumption. (Sexual violence prevention research academic [P10])

I think it would generally be more males sending it on ... and so there's a lot of pressure on other boys I think to kind of go along with it too. (Sexual violence prevention – schools [P1])

A commonly held opinion was the need to consider sexting within the broader context of the sexualisation of culture:

There is also the sexualisation issue, which I think plays a huge role. If you allow this third parent into your home through the television set ... videos ... YouTube ... fashion ... Basically I think the whole thing has blurred the line between what is a girl and what is a woman ... I see this as incredibly sinister ... creeping corporate paedophilia. (Teen magazine author/youth and family psychologist [P12])

Moreover, some key informants were concerned that young people have become desensitised as a result of their increased exposure to sexually explicit images that were once considered "hard core porn":

The mainstreaming of pornography, including the increasingly hardcore nature of what is widely available, is impacting on what seems normal and acceptable. It makes "sexted" images of nudity, for example, look quite tame. (Sexual violence prevention – project worker [P6])

It was also considered that sexting among young people is possibly a reflection of what occurs in the adult world:

We'd better remember this isn't a youth issue; this is affecting everybody across society ... I don't think it's different to what's happening in the adult world. (Secondary school teacher / student wellbeing [P4])

Should we be concerned?

While the prevalence of sexting in Australia is uncertain, participants' stories did demonstrate reasons for concern. Non-consensual sexting, where an image is misused and sent on without permission, was considered a form of sexual violence by some key informants:

Where there is pressure ... coercion ... those are harassing, potentially aggressive behaviours, even if that image is sent consensually ... the risk then of it being sent on without consent is of concern. (Sexual violence prevention research academic [P10])

There was, however, a view that consensual sexting may in fact be acceptable:

... one of the other considerations, and it might be quite controversial, is to actually reflect on who is being hurt by the behaviour ... I'd probably rather that young people were viewing stuff on their mobile phones than if they were ... getting themselves into bars and hooking up with older guys. (Youth health research academic [P8])

What should we do, if anything?

While a variety of responses were expressed regarding strategies for dealing with potential risks associated with sexting (Table 3), one participant felt that the developmental nature of adolescence makes it too difficult to manage. Others were concerned that assumptions are made about young people's behaviour that may be untrue; and, consistent with much media reporting and expert opinion, was a view by key informants that current legal responses to sexting are inappropriate. The potential for young people to be charged with the production or dissemination of child

pornography, if the image is of a person under 18 years depicted in a sexual manner, was of concern to key informants, who agreed that current legislation is ineffective:

I think that's a very dangerous road to go down and I think we do need to make a qualitative distinction between young people of a similar age basically exploring their sexuality and the very serious offence of child sexual exploitation because they are not equivalent ... (Violence prevention research academic [P10])

Consensus was shared about the need for adults to have conversations with young people about their use of technology in the context of broader discussions about relationships, intimacy, gender, sexuality and ethics:

We need to ... find strategies to engage with young people to potentially shift their discourse, so they're learning ... that sex can be fantastic, it can be fun and mutually respectful, and engaging ... (Sexual violence prevention project worker [P6])

It was acknowledged, however, that having these discussions with young people is not something teachers and parents find easy:

Over the last few years more and more people [in schools] are saying, "How do we deal with this problem?" and so they don't know how to address it ... we're having trouble keeping up with the technology. (Education policy academic [P3])

Participants emphasised the importance of talking "with" rather than "at" young people, ensuring discussions are not framed to focus on the negative aspects of behaviour:

TABLE 3 Summary of suggested solutions

Proposed solutions to manage potential risks of sexting among young people
• advocating for legislative policy review to ensure current laws are appropriate for dealing with sexting;
• advocating for more comprehensive relationship/sexuality education in schools;
• challenging the cultural discourse that promotes gendered sexual violence against women;
• creating conversations with young people to understand/address the phenomenon;
• determining the real prevalence of sexting among young people;
• engaging with, and providing information/education to, parents about young people's use of ICTs; and
• focusing on the benefits of new technologies for young people, along with the associated risks.

think there certainly needs to be some work done, probably led by young people, to educate teachers, parents and healthcare professionals around the way in which young people do use technology, and the meaning that they place on the use of technology. (Youth health research academic [P8])

Finally, but not least importantly, key informants expressed consensus regarding the need for Australian prevalence data to determine the real extent of the phenomenon among young people.

Discussion

This study confirmed a gap in rigorous research about the phenomenon of sexting among young people. Furthermore, it has highlighted the complex nature and polarised attitudes that exist in relation to almost every aspect of the behaviour. A range of views were raised by key informants about whether sexting is common practice among young people or just “media hype”; whether the practice is a result of our sexualised culture, or just young people exploring their sexual identity as they have always done; whether or not sexting is something we should be concerned about; and, finally, what (if anything) we should be doing about the phenomenon.

There was no doubt among key informants that sexting is “a new iteration of previous practices” with advances in information technology making the transmission of images faster and access easier (Hand, Chung & Peters 2009; Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA) 2010); it is this aspect of sexting that is new. These views are consistent with media reports and expert opinion (Chalfen 2009; Muscari 2009).

A particular concern raised by key informants in our study was the potential gender bias of the behaviour. A commonly held view was that young women are more likely to be negatively impacted by this behaviour, a theme also reflected in media reports and expert opinion. The possibility of a link between sexting and gendered sexual violence targeting women (Powell 2009; Flood 2008), where young women are being coerced or pressured to send images, was a view shared by key informants, albeit with varying levels of concern.

The findings of this study support the need for solutions at both the treatment and preventative end of the health care spectrum. At the treatment end, the mental health consequences for young people who experience guilt, shame, victimisation, along with fear of criminal charges being pressed, highlight the need for health professionals who work with young people to understand the implications of the phenomenon and how to address these. An obvious response posed by key informants, and supported elsewhere in the literature, is the need for legislative change (Powell 2009) to deal with what some refer to as “e-crime” (McGrath 2009), an area that to date has not managed to keep up with the fast-paced growth of technology. There was consensus among key informants on the need to educate young people, their parents and teachers of the potential risks involved in the behaviour; this view is reflected in much of the literature (Katzman 2010; Muscari 2009; Ryan 2010; Brown, Keller & Stern 2009). Participants emphasised the need for prevention education to be taught within a sexual ethics framework that provides young people with the skills necessary to make informed ethical decisions. In line with this view, Carmody (2009) argues for a new approach to sexuality and sexual assault prevention education based on developing skills in ethical intimacy.

Finally, key informants were unanimous in their view that effective solutions need to be shaped by the expressed experience of young people, with reference to developmentally appropriate changes. In line with this, a recent literature review suggests that “much popular writing (and some research) includes descriptions of young people, online technologies, and privacy in ways that do not reflect the realities of most children and teenagers” (Diliberto & Matthey 2009). It is vital, therefore, that opportunities are created for young people’s voices to be heard.

Conclusion

This paper was precipitated by concerns about the potential short- and long-term harms for young people involved in the behaviour of sexting. Reliable prevalence data is lacking, as is qualitative data about the meaning of

sexting from the perspective of young people in an Australian context. Not surprisingly there was broad support from key informants for further investigation regarding sexting and young people. Future research efforts need to identify how young people define sexting, the role it plays in their lives and their suggestions for how best to intervene. Combined with prevalence data, this information will inform and support responses to prevent and minimise harm to young people.

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