

# Teenage Sexting: Sexual Expression Meets Mobile Technology

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## INTRODUCTION

Due in part to the rise in the popularity and accessibility of smartphone technology in the western world, the practice of teenage sexting has recently emerged as a pressing topic of inquiry. Sexting refers to the practice of digitally producing and sharing nude, semi-nude or sexually explicit self-portraits and text messages using a cell phone or another digital device. Teenager, for the purpose of this article, refers to those between the ages of 13-17 and is used interchangeably with youth, adolescents and minors. While the term 'sexting' is popular among the media and adult responders, the term is not typically used by youth themselves (See Karaian, 2012; Ringrose et al, 2012; Albury, 2013; Peskin et al., 2013; Strassberg et al., 2013). Instead, youth tend to refer to such self-produced imagery as 'nudes' (Karaian, Forthcoming 2015) or as selfies (Albury, 2013), the latter of which also refers to a host of self-produced imagery, most of which does not involve nudity and sexually explicit content.

While most images are kept private or between two consenting individuals for their own private use (Mitchell, et al., 2012; Englander, 2012), images may at times be shared, with or without the consent of the image's creator, among mobile phone users. Content may also be shared via email or by postings on social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, or Tumblr. The creation and distribution of such imagery is by no means a new phenomenon, nor is it restricted to youth-

ful producers and distributors (Klettke, 2014). Rather, it is a new manifestation of a long-seated practice of self-expression fuelled by technological advances (cell phones with forward-facing cameras), new software (on-the-go mobile applications like Snapchat), and myriad motivating factors. Nevertheless, given the perceived risks and potential ramifications of the practice, it has met with a great deal of international attention, if not enthusiasm, from media sources, parents, pundits, policy makers, medical and legal actors, child protection agencies, and academics. This article highlights key empirical and theoretical research on the prevalence, incentives and effects of this mobile phone behaviour, and the responses to it.

## OVERVIEW

A number of studies have sought to determine the approximate number of teens who engage in sexting, however statistics regarding sexting's prevalence and its correlates vary across divergences in research models and their dependence on different age ranges (Klettke et al, 2014). In 2008, the American-based National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy combined efforts with Cosmogirl.com to publish the first quantitative study on teen sexting. The study, which consisted of an online survey of 1,280 males and females between the ages of 13 and 26, revealed that 20% of participants aged 13 to 19, and 33% of those aged 20 to 26, had used their cellphones

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to send nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves to at least one other person (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and Cosmo Girl, 2008, p. 1). Since then a host of studies on this topic have emerged. Bianca Klettke and her co-authors' recent systematic review of the literature on sexting's prevalence rates as well as its risks and protective factors, considered 31 sexting studies (out of a total of 128 articles which met their original inclusion criteria) (2014, p. 45). While the authors acknowledged the difficulties in accurately establishing the prevalence of sexting behavior due to the variance in definitions and sampling techniques, the following trends were presented for consideration, if not as a foundation for policy or for institutional responses.

Overall, Klettke's review found that of the 12 prevalence studies sampling participants ranging between 10 and 19 years of age, "the estimated mean prevalence across studies that specifically measured sexting with photo content was found to be 11.96%" (2014, p. 46). Their results also demonstrated that "both sending and receiving sexts is substantially more prevalent amongst adults than adolescents (2014, p. 51) and that "[a]lthough findings relating to gender are somewhat mixed, there is some evidence that females may be more likely to send sexts than males, whilst males may be correspondingly more likely to receive them" (2014, p. 51). Despite knowledge of the potential risks of sexting, such as the unintended distribution of one's sext to a third party, the authors found that across most of the studies, "attitudes to sexting were more positive amongst those who had previously engaged in sexting behaviour. This suggests that, on average, engaging in sexting does not produce subsequent negative attitudes towards the behavior" (2014, p. 51). While motivations for sexting via mobile phones varied widely, the authors did point to pressure to sext as an emerging theme for females (2014, p. 51). Other more positive motivations for sexting, such as "to be fun and flirtatious" (National Campaign, 2008); "to be sexy or initiate sexual activity" (Henderson and Morgan, 2011); and to

engage in "self-representation" and to alleviate boredom (Kopecky, 2011) rated among the top reasons for sexting in the five studies that sought information on sexters' motivations (Klettke et al., 2014, pp. 50-51). Also of note is the extent to which Klettke and colleagues found sexting to be "associated with a higher likelihood of being sexually active, as well as engagement in a range of sexual risk behaviours, such as having unprotected sex and consuming alcohol and drugs prior to sexual activity" (2014, p. 51). Nevertheless, the authors are quick to point out that they are not suggesting that there is a causal relationship between sexting and these behaviours (2014, p. 51). Indeed, as Amy Hasinoff notes in her book on this topic, alternative perspectives have also emerged from literature on sexting (much of which is included in Klettke's review). Hasinoff writes:

*[P]eople of all ages, from teens to senior citizens, report that sexting can increase sexual communication and intimacy with a partner (especially in long-distance relationships), that it provides an outlet for sexual self-expression that can help people overcome inhibitions, and that many find it exciting, arousing, and fun. Indeed an emerging body of research on sexting highlights the distinctions between consensual and nonconsensual sexting and situates both the risks and benefits of sexting in their social context (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Albury, et al., 2013; Cupples & Thompson, 2010; Karaian, 2012; Powell, 2010a, 2010b; Ringrose, et al., 2012; Salter, et al., 2013). Taken together, these studies suggest that consensual sexting is a normal, everyday part of some teenagers' and adults' romantic relationships and that the nonconsensual distribution of a private image can be a serious humiliation and violation (2015, p. 4).*

Hasinoff goes on to note that

*... [t]his work on sexting is consistent with the findings of a range of studies of mobile phones through the 2000s that offer a rich tradition of closely*

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