



**THE HARMS OF SEXTING:
SCHOLARLY LITERATURE REVIEW**
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CULTURE REFRAMED
SOLVING THE PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS OF THE DIGITAL AGE

Table of Contents

Who sexts?	5
Why Sext?	7
Coercion and Double Standards	9
Sexting, Sex, and Porn	11
Mental Health	13
Sexting and the Family	16
Victims and Victimizers	17
There is No Safe Sext	19
The Law	22
Conclusion: Sexting and Sexual Agency	23
Notes	26
References	28

Introduction

Sophie was entranced the first time she fell in love at age 17. When her boyfriend asked for intimate private photos or 'selfies,' she was flattered (*Donnelly, 2019*). "It's almost empowering to think that someone finds you attractive and thinks you're beautiful and wants those pictures of you" (*Donnelly, 2019, para. 5*). She happily complied. It was fun and exciting. Naturally, she assumed that the photos were for her boyfriend's eyes only, a cherished photo, a personal token of love. That was a mistake. He later posted her "sexts" online. Sophie was naked for the whole world to see.

For many young people – preteens, adolescents, teens, emerging adults - sexting is an everyday occurrence, the social currency of romance, dating, reputation, and 'hookup culture.' Nude and semi-nude or sexualized photos widely circulate through social media platforms and online channels of communication: texts, email, *Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Kik, WhatsApp, Tumblr, Reddit, Tagged, YouTube*, gaming platforms, and more. A few 'sexts' are sent consensually. Most, we will see, are done under pressure and coercion, especially by young women. And a large percentage of sexts are eventually, as Sophie found out to her extreme distress, distributed without permission, what is often called "downstream reposting." Another name is "revenge porn," more formally called nonconsensual intimate image abuse.

Snapping an intimate selfie can often occur without reflection, in the heat of an impassioned moment. But that fleeting instant, once captured on film and sent to someone else, can remain on a phone and thus the internet for years. The sender might intend the photo to capture a private moment of intimacy. But the receiver – after a breakup, say, or with ill intentions from the beginning - can swiftly transform that secrecy into a public nightmare that can persist for years. And this is only one issue of concern regarding sexting. There are, we will see, a host of concerning psychological antecedents and sequelae to sexting.

Although this report focuses on youth, many adults also engage in sexting. Many, too, sext under false pretenses and identities to receive photos from children and teens. They then use those images for their own pleasures or to blackmail or 'sextort' the adolescent into sending them more photos of increasing sexual content, or money. But even among adults who sext only with romantic partners, many later find their photos nonconsensually posted to the internet. Sexting is not specific to any age, nor any race, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, neighborhood, level of affluence, the type of school your daughter attends, or how often your son prays (*Eaton et al., 2017*). Sexting is an equal opportunity pastime and harm.

The word "sext" is a portmanteau of "sex" and "text," which emerged in the media in the mid-2000s. In this report, "sexting" or "to sext" refers to the electronic sending, receiving, requesting, and forwarding of intimate photos (or videos), called "sexts," that depict nudity, semi-nudity, and sexualized poses – with or without consent. Sexts are often a

form of selfie, taken by the sender themselves for a specific recipient. Although sexting can also include sexual messages or text, that is not our main concern. We are focused on images of young people – say, a teenager’s vagina, a young man’s erection, an adolescent girl’s breasts. Not surprisingly, many young people use the term “pornos,” or they refer to “nudes,” “noodz,” “dick pics,” “tit pics,” or “sext selfies.” Most often, they just say “send me some pictures.” They are not talking about sunsets.

The scholarly literature on sexting is vast and growing rapidly. On the academic journal article database JSTOR, a search for “sexting” results in 736 results. But an academic research library brings up 23,759 sources, including 650 theses and dissertations, and 2,413 journal articles, more than 500 of which were published within the last two years. This report, then, is necessarily selective. But it nonetheless focuses only on peer-reviewed scholarly studies, most published within the past five or ten years, long past the release of the first iPhone in 2007.

Of course, adults have long fretted over teenage sexuality, especially in young women, certainly since the early-20th century and the flapper era. This report does not aim to feed into unreasonable concerns about teenage sexual agency or the healthy exploration by young people of their sexual selves. It is, instead, part of a data-driven effort to prevent young people from falling prey to sexual abuse, psychological harm, and, most pervasively, the fallacy that a young person can best demonstrate their sexual autonomy by following a particular script on how they should display your body.

But while this report rejects moral panic in favor of peer-reviewed scholarship, it also diverges from many scholars who disingenuously claim that flagging the harmful aspects of sexting is somehow sex-negative or a “panic discourse” intended to impose a “regime of control” (e.g., *Graham Holmes et al., 2021; Scarcelli, 2020*). We find these claims unsupported by empirical evidence. Many scholars deride studies that call attention to the negative aspects of sexting as “deviance discourse,” scare tactics, victim blaming, and more, even as they inevitably must recognize those very same negatives (e.g., *Döring, 2014*).

Our stance is that young people have the right and freedom to explore their sexuality. In that sex-positive spirit, we encourage young people to act on their sexuality with genuine feelings of freedom and legitimate consent that empowers their autonomy. For as we will see, sexting largely occurs when young people succumb to coercion. Casting a critical gaze at sexting aims to empower young people to re-claim their sexuality from porn culture¹. Rather than being driven by any sort of puritanism, we are motivated by the desire to see all young people – male and female, gay and straight, trans and nonbinary - exercise true agency over their bodies, identities, and sexual selves. We want *them* to define their own desires, not adopt a definition of desire made by the culture.

Thus, this report rejects as simplistic the assertion – in a paper about revenge porn, no less - that “sexting can be considered...an expression of sexual agency, exploration and expression.” While sexting “can” be considered thus, we find that peer-reviewed research shows otherwise. In one study, far more young people in Australia (ages 16-25) indicated

that they sext due to pressure from peers and dating partners than as a “form of self-expression.” Their sexting was also associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviors, concerns over body image, and cyberbullying (*Milton et al., 2019*). This is not sexual agency. We also recognize, along with others, that sexting is often a form of “sex-based violence” rather than “user naiveté” (*Henry & Powell, 2015*). For this reason, we reject any effort to shame young people who sext, or to blame them for any adverse consequences they may suffer. Before we can elaborate on these harms, however, it is useful to consider more basic questions: who sexts, and why?

Who sexts?

The answer is clear: a lot of people, especially the young, and within this category, especially girls and young women. Sexting is now so common that a *Washington Post* article called it the “new first base” (*Joyce, 2014*). This is particularly true among younger social media users across all ethnicities (*Castañeda, 2017; Peskin et al., 2013*), sexual orientations (e.g., *Rice et al., 2012*), and countries (*Olabode & Olushola, 2018*). Can we put a figure on youthful sexting? Studies vary considerably. The Cyber Civil Rights Initiative estimates that half of all young adult social media users in the US (ages 18-26) have sent nude or semi-nude sexts, and two-thirds have received them (*Eaton et al., 2017*). According to a 2020 meta-analysis of research publications, almost one-half of young adults (ages 18-29) send and receive sexts (*Mori et al., 2020*)². More than one in six have nonconsensually forwarded a private image to others.

In a review of 50 research studies about young people’s sexting habits published between 2009 and 2013, the highest rate of sexting was 21% (*Döring, 2014*).³ Another review reported averages of 15%, 27%, and 12% for youth who send, receive, and nonconsensually forward private images (*Madigan et al., 2018*). A few papers provide lower rates (e.g., *Kopecký & Szotkowski, 2018*). But many report far higher figures. A partial tabulation of percentages around the world, arranged from low to high, includes:

- US high school men and women: 16% and 14% send, 40% and 30% receive (*Strassberg et al., 2013*)
- Teens aged 15-18 in Belgium: 26% send (*Walrave et al., 2013*)
- Undergraduates in Botswana who receive and send “frequently” and “occasionally:” 28% and 18% (*Makgale & Plattner, 2017*)
- Teens aged 14-18 in Spain: more than one-third (*Villacampa, 2017*)
- Americans aged 14-19: 28% send, 31% receive, and 57% - more women than men - are asked to send (*Temple et al., 2012*)
- German adolescents (aged 14-17) who exchange intimate photos not only with peers

but also with children (13 and under) and/or adults: 36% (*Sklenarova et al., 2018*)

- US undergraduates: 62% send or receive (*Drouin et al., 2017*)
- Italian children and youth (aged 13-20): 55% send, 77% receive (*Morelli et al., 2017*)
- Australians aged 16-19: 62% exchange sexts (*Yeung et al., 2014*)
- US youth (aged 12-19) who send or receive: 80% (*Penado et al., 2019*)

This list could certainly go on. But the point should be amply clear: sexting is not an occasional act performed by a few wayward young souls. It is a frequent happening that is now seamlessly woven into the everyday fabric of many young lives.

A key statistic repeated in almost every study is that the percentage of young people who receive images is considerably higher than those who send. In a study of Dutch adolescents, in fact, few of the participants had themselves sexted but almost all had received sexts from others (*Doornwaard et al., 2017*). This and other studies suggest that sexts – mainly depicted girls – are disseminated without consent far more often than they are initially sent to specific receivers. This is especially true should the emotional intensity or quality of the relationship at the time of sexting later wane or dissipate, as often happens in young relationships.

Does sexting predominate in any gender? Not globally, only in specific countries. In Zimbabwe, adolescent boys are twice as likely to sext as girls (*Marume et al., 2018*). But in some American studies, girls sext more than boys (*Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014*). (The same study found that one in three youth share private images with people they *only* know online.) In England and Norway, young women are the predominant sexters; in Cyprus and Italy, the boys (*Wood et al., 2015*). Sexual orientation similarly varies although most studies find that non-heterosexual young people tend to sext with greater frequency, perhaps in the hope of seeking the validation is unfortunately often lacking in their schools and communities (*e.g., Hertlein et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2014*).

The incidence of sexting with respect to race, ethnicity, rural/urban, and other demographic factors also tend to vary according to country and region (*e.g., Gassó, Agustina et al., 2021; Gil-Llario et al., 2021; Gil-Llario et al., 2020*). In one US study, for example, whites reported sexting most frequently, followed by African Americans and Latinos, with Asians and others far behind in incidence (*Temple et al., 2012*). Yet another paper showed that 50% of Lanita/o university students had sexted within the preceding six months, a high incidence, and the likelihood of sexting increased with sexual experience, as we detail shortly, and acculturation into the wider Anglo-American culture (*Castañeda, 2017*).

For any generalization, one can surely locate a paper somewhere that offers conflicting or divergent evidence. This review highlights the preponderance of evidence, which certainly

shows that sexting is common among the young.

Why Sext?

There are many reasons why young people sext. One is that many people act differently online than in what social media users and gamers abbreviate as “irl” and “afk,” that is, “in real life” and “away from keyboard.” In cyberspace, users often feel invisible (*Suler, 2004, 2015*). Anonymity fosters greater self-disclosure since we have “much less fear of disapproval and sanction.” Most cyber-communication also lacks the cues that shape in-person interactions and allow us to ‘read’ our interlocutor’s intentions, such as facial signals, posture, voice tone, and our own judgments about physical appearance (*McKenna et al., 2002*). In cyberspace, it is not easy to rely on intuition and quickly ‘get a vibe’ for the other person. Thus, many people hyper-personalize computer-mediated communication, even idealizing the other person if the initial exchange seemed favorable (*Walther et al., 2015*). At the same time, it is easier in cyberspace to deceive and manipulate, as well as to create a wholly new and different persona (*Amichai-Hamburger, 2013; Whitty & Johnson, 2009*). Data collected in 2008 revealed that “22% of teens and 28% of young adults say they are personally more forward and aggressive using sexually suggestive words and images than they are in “real life” (*Power to Decide, 2008*). At the keyboard, some people are more honest; some are not.

For many people, then, the digital self is detached from the face-to-face self, which is normally who one really is. This dissociative process is enhanced through the constant posting of selfies – naked and otherwise – that are so important to the public identity of many people today. Over time, the online self may be viewed as a distinct object, disconnected from the true self, that does what the face-to-face self would never do. This process comes easier to young people since, unlike most adults, they have not yet developed a stable or fully integrated core of identity, nor do they have a fully-formed prefrontal cortex. Youth are far more likely, too, to think that the digital self will never impact the real-world self (*see Aiken, 2016*).⁴

These general considerations aside, a growing body of scholarship addresses the specific reasons why young people sext. In a 2016 survey of 88 scholarly articles on sexting (*Cooper et al., 2016*),⁵ the three most common motivations voiced by teens were:

- To flirt and gain romantic attention; to feel sexy; to signal desire; to enjoy erotic playfulness;
- Because sexting is now a normal, everyday behavior within intimate relationships; private selfies are a ‘sexy present,’ a way of making your partner happy, a means of sustaining a relationship over distance or separation; they show mutual affection and trust, and serve as a prelude to physical intimacy;

- As part of adolescent experimentation with identity, self-expression, and emerging sexuality. Said one young person, “Well, I did not have a boyfriend at this time, and I was curious as to what my body would look like to other people..., so I took some pictures.” (*Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 4*)

Additionally, young people sext to gain popularity, as entertainment and bets, for joking and humor, and because “it was just a fun thing to do” (*Baumgartner et al., 2015; Casas et al., 2019; Del Rey et al., 2019; Hollá, 2020; Vanden Abeele et al., 2014*). And all these reasons apply not only to so-called consensual sexting but to the nonconsensual sharing of images, as well (*Englander, 2015; Mercy, 2018; Walker et al., 2021*).

A group of adolescent Czech girls sexted in order together to overcome their social shyness – even though three-quarters of them regarded sexting as “risky and dangerous” (*Kopecký, 2011*). Some sext to alleviate boredom; three-quarters of them in one study later reported “negative impact” (*Mitchell et al., 2012*). Looking for something to do, in fact, is how many young people explain why they shared images without permission (*Walker et al., 2021*). Last, detailed shortly, youth frequently sext in response to pressure from peers, partners, and others.

Some reasons for sexting are gender specific. Young men may send their male friends ‘dick pics’ as jokes or, as one put it, to ‘knock him off his game’ (*Burkett, 2015*). In fact, pranking is a common reason why young people circulate sexts (*Mitchell et al., 2012; see Yépez-Tito et al., 2019*). Young men, too, often exchange sexts in order later to circulate, typically without permission, photos of their female partners as bravado, akin to trophies, to gain approval, power, or “lad points” among their peers (*Setty, 2020*). Of course, this inflection of sexting only serves to solidify the reigning sex-based hierarchy in which women are objects to be judged and traded by men (*see also Bindesbøl Holm Johansen et al., 2019*). By contrast, young women often nonconsensually disseminate sexts – often of other women - for gossip (*Clancy et al., 2021*). The boys, in other words, show private photos to gain prestige, while the girls do so to police others’ behavior.

The sending of sext is often correlated with receiving images as well as time spent online. In diverse Los Angeles, four times as many middle school children received sexts as sent them (*Rice et al., 2014*). But those who received were 23 times more likely to send them, and vice versa. These sexters tended to be African American, male, identify as GLBQ or “uncertain,” and to have sent more than 100 message texts a day.

In sum, then, young people sext in order to achieve the same goals pursued by their non-sexting peers and, indeed, all of us. Sexters seek affirmation, social recognition, confidence, romance, and self-esteem. They wish to feel attractive, wanted, popular, and good about themselves. They also want to joke around and ease boredom. These motivations are not unique to either the act of sexting or the person who sexts.

Coercion and Double Standards

Research shows that many teens are coerced into sexting. They report feeling pressured, threatened, forced, bullied, and tricked (*Casas et al., 2019*). Some are outright blackmailed (*Mercy, 2018*). But girls endure far greater pressure than boys to send sexts in order to get noticed, to be liked, and, as adolescents in Belgium agreed, “to prove their love” and out of “fear of losing a boyfriend” (*Van Ouytsel et al., 2016*). Not surprisingly, young people pressured into sexting tend to experience other forms of emotional pressure. Students who do not identify as heterosexual are also at higher risk for pressure to sext (*Downs et al., 2021; Van Ouytsel et al., 2019a; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020*). By any measure, coerced sexting is relational abuse. Sexts are especially dangerous for young people who are not able to recognize abuse as such or misunderstand “abusive behaviors and mistake them for signs of love” (*Van Ouytsel et al., 2016*).

How many young people are coerced into sexting? A 2017 study of teens in Denmark, Hungary, and England put the figure at 10% (*Project deSHAME, 2017b*). In Massachusetts, almost three-quarters of teens who sexted had experienced “some degree of pressure and coercion” (*Englander & McCoy, 2017*). Nearly 20% of these youth “were scared or felt that they had no choice,” and more than 10% sexted “to show that they were not afraid or did not care about sexting” (*Englander, 2015, p. 19*). Additionally, those who are pressured to sext often suffer image abuse, which suggests that these behaviors lie “on a continuum of violence and abuse” (*Walker et al., 2021*).

Furthermore, almost all the students in the Massachusetts study who “always” felt pressured into sexting were young women. In another American study, 36% of sexually active girls had been pressured into sexting while 68% experienced cyber abuse and 53% received unwanted sexts (*Reed, 2019*). They all had troubling experiences with alcohol, drugs, depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation.

In Spain, female university students are two-and-a-half times more likely to be coerced into sexting than male students, many doing so because they were “seriously” frightened, and more than five times as likely to be threatened with the exposure of their photos (*Gassó et al., 2020*). In England, too, about 25% of girls in one study who sent sexts did so under pressure from partners – and nearly all felt a “negative impact” afterward (*Wood et al., 2015*).

Across much of the world, every study of youthful sexting reports that women and girls are more often and more seriously pressured to sext than their male peers (*Branch et al., 2017; Burén & Lunde, 2018; Cooper et al., 2016; Hilinski-Rosick & Freiburger, 2012; Martinez-Prather & Vandiver, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; Reed et al., 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2016*). Young women, too, report greater pressure from societal expectations: so their partner doesn’t stray, for example, or to feel “sexy” (*Power to Decide, 2008*). Often, too, women who succumb to this pressure do so not by virtue of ‘free choice’ but because they have anxious attachments, and so fear an argument or losing their partner (*Drouin & Tobin,*

2014).

Almost three-quarters of teens and young adults in one study agreed that sexting “can have serious negative consequences” (*Power to Decide, 2008*). Yet 20% of the men, and half of the girls, nonetheless do so. In many instances, this attests to the power of cultural expectations and coercion from peers and partners. Adolescents who experience the most partner pressure, moreover, are “moderately to strongly more likely to engage in the most explicit sexting” – especially women (*Maes & Vandenbosch, 2022*). It is no surprise, then, that more girls than boys feel “significantly more annoyed, creeped out, turned off, angry, scared, disappointed, and embarrassed” after sexting, while more boys feel “amused, happy, sexy, turned on, and excited” (*Reed et al., 2020*).

Boys are fearful of looking “unmanly” if they fail to obtain sexts from their female partners, while the girls fear appearing “unfeminine” if they refuse to send sexy selfies. Sexting, in other words, often reproduces and amplifies the unhealthy pattern of men pressuring women into sexual activity. “The normalization of nudity in photos of famous female celebrities on magazine covers or Instagram posts” – and pornography, we must add – “reinforces the association between nudity and femininity.” Sexting helps teach adolescent girls to “do” their gender by “publicizing their body in sexually explicit ways,” and encourages boys to do likewise “through the consumption of such material” (*Branch et al., 2017; see also Dobson, 2017*).

Equally important is that the consequences for sexting are considerably more draconian for young women than young men. Those who resist the pressure to sext are ridiculed as “goody girls” or “frigid,” and mocked as unmanly or “gay.” But when they cave to coercion and send sexts, the young men are celebrated as “legends,” “rated,” and “sick,” all terms of admiration. The girls, however, are defined as “sluts” and “skets” (*Burén et al., 2021; Ravn et al., 2021; Ringrose, 2010, 2011; Ringrose et al., 2013; Salter, 2016; Setty, 2020; Thorburn, 2021; Yeung et al., 2014*). Across all countries and ethnic groups, girls who sext – or refrain from doing so – receive far greater moral opprobrium than boys (*e.g., Ruvalcaba et al., 2020*). Thus, to a young man in Australia, sexting provides a positive experience; to a girl, “the destruction of her sexual standing or reputation.” (*Walker et al., 2013*). Not by accident, was a Tumblr blog created for users to upload sexts they received called “Snapchat Sluts.”⁶

In fact, young men everywhere often display and swap the sexts they receive as “trophies” of their masculine prowess (*Phippen, 2012*). They may call these images “ratings” or “wins,” and treat them as a form of status or relationship “currency” (*Lenhart, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2012*). But this economy excludes the women depicted in the photos even though they serve as the coin.⁷ In fact, girls who send sexts are – in the words of some young men who request these very images – “crazy, insecure, attention-seeking sluts with poor judgment” (*Lippman & Campbell, 2014*). Shockingly, none of the men who voiced these opinions recognized their own culpability in reproducing this gender-based hierarchy. Why do the young women accede to the demands for sexts? Because that is the “undesirable price they had to pay for a desirable relationship.” Nowhere in the scholarly literature do men

report with any frequency likewise.

In the UK, young adolescents (aged 12-13) were “worried, confused and, in some cases, upset by the sexual and sexting pressures they face” (*Ringrose et al., 2012, p. 8*). The authors also observed that when boys solicited nude selfies or sexts of body parts, the girls would not only comply but also write the boy’s name on the photo in black ink. Youthful sexting, in this way, enacts the “deeply rooted notion that girls and young women’s bodies are somehow the property of boys and young men” (*Ringrose et al., 2012, p. 28*). For corroboration, they note all manner of gender-based physical abuse in schools, such as boys “rushing” a girl by pushing down in the hallway for “dagging,” that is, “thrusting one’s penis, ‘dry humping’ or masturbating against you from behind” (*Ringrose et al., 2012, p. 33*). They also tell of boys coaxing girls into sexting, then casually discussing “their power to ruin” her reputation by downstream reposting. Yet, surprisingly, the same authors condemn criticism of sexting as irrational public panic (*see also Ringrose & Harvey, 2015*).

More or less everywhere, women report far fewer positive outcomes from sexting than men but more discomfort and trauma (*Drouin et al., 2017*). Likewise, women receive far more unwanted sexts than men (*Clancy et al., 2021*), and report greater rates of online sexual victimization (*e.g., Gámez-Guadix, 2015*).⁸ It is rare to read in peer-reviewed studies of young peoples’ sexting, even in papers that strive to demonstrate otherwise (*e.g., Albury & Crawford, 2012; Ringrose et al., 2013*), the voices of young women speaking to self-expression or empowerment. We hear instead resignation, coping, anxiety, angst, and harm. Young women concluded a summary of comments posted about sexting on an MTV website, “appear to orient to male desire and expectations such that they accept coercive behaviors as normative” (*Thomas, 2018, p. 203; see also Bianchi et al., 2021*). So powerful is this orientation, which is sustained by sexting, that research in Sweden discovered that boys often sent sexts to “mess with” or harass girls – but that the girls interpret these sexts as signals of romantic or sexual interest even though they reported adverse effects from receiving them on their own well-being (*Dahlqvist & Gillander Gådin, 2020*).

Sexting, Sex, and Porn

The very name “sexting” points to a key feature of the behavior: its connection to sex. Time and again, peer-reviewed research demonstrates that young people who exchange, send, request, and nonconsensually disseminate private photos are more sexually active than their non-sexting peers – *real sex*, not virtual sex (*Handschuh et al., 2019*).

Among middle school students in diverse Los Angeles, “those who reported receiving a sext were 6 [note: the original text used numerals] times more likely to report being sexually active and those who sent a sext were almost 4 times more likely to report being sexually active” (*Rice et al., 2014, p. e26*). Note that these children are *still* developmentally in early adolescence. A sample of students in middle and high schools from the American

Midwest showed that sexting is significantly associated with multiple sex partners, oral sex, anal sex, and intercourse without the use of contraception (*Dake et al., 2012*).

In fact, it is not just sexual activity that is so often pinned by the researcher to sexting. More troublingly, it is unsafe or risky sex, and even sexual abuse: the absence of condoms or contraception, multiple partners, encounters while under the influence of drink and drugs. The relationship between sexting and unsafe sex has been reported for Latinos in Los Angeles (*Rice et al., 2018*), American undergraduates (where sexting also correlates with a higher incidence of STIs) (*e.g., Benotsch et al., 2013; see also Smith et al., 2016; Temple et al., 2012*), teens and young adults in Nigeria (*Olatunde & Balogun, 2017; see also Ayinmoro, 2020*), pre-teens in Uganda (*Bukenya et al., 2020*), university students in Croatia (*Kričkić et al., 2017*), and in other demographic groups (*see also Choi et al., 2019; Mori et al., 2019*).

Adolescents who sext in Zimbabwe – both boys and girls – are almost three times as likely to engage in prostitution (*Marume et al., 2018*). Sexting is connected to sexual violence in other ways, too. Among Dutch youth under the age of 25, sexting was “significantly associated with experience of non-consensual sex” (*De Graaf et al., 2018, p. 7*). Another word for “non-consensual sex,” of course, is rape. The same study found an association between sexting and victimization of intimate partner violence, while other researchers identified a significant association between coercive sexts and coerced sex or intimate partner violence – and that girls and women again suffer more often and more severely (*Wood et al., 2015; see also DeKeseredy et al., 2019; Marganski & Melander, 2018*). Among US university males, technology-based coercion is “significantly predicted” by anger, impulsivity, and high-risk drinking, as seen above, but also by hostility towards females, the belief that rape victims deserve their assault, peer approval of “forced sex” (again, read: rape), and exposure to pornography (*Thompson & Morrison, 2013*).

In fact, numerous studies have found strong or predictive links between the online use of pornography – by all genders – and sexting (*e.g., Boer, 2021; Symons et al., 2018*). Sexting among emerging adult minority men in an urban area of the US with high crime and poverty was linked to risky sexual behaviors as well as viewing pornography (*Davis et al., 2016*). Another study showed that pornography use, like unprotected sex and video chatting with strangers “predicted” sexting (*Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014*). Among Italian adolescents, sexting was “significantly and robustly correlated with alcohol consumption and cyber pornography addiction” (*Morelli et al., 2017, p. 116*). Pornography and sexting are often inextricably linked (*see also Alexandraki et al., 2018; Machimbarrena et al., 2019*).

We need to also take into account the viewing of violent and degrading pornography, which is associated with taking or posing in “sexual” photos (*Romito & Beltramini, 2015*). These same children were also more prone to fighting, suicidal thoughts or attempts, and having friends involved in prostitution. Among Italian students exposed to violent pornography, 61% of the boys and 44% of the girls believed that “the women appear to enjoy the violence inflicted on them” (*Romito & Beltramini, 2015, p. 284*). They, too, had

higher than average rates of sexting.

Sexting and porn use are also tied to adverse relationship behaviors. Regular use of online porn in Europe is generally associated, especially among boys, with a “significantly increased probability” of sexting as well as with sexist attitudes and perpetrating sexual coercion (*Stanley et al., 2018; see also Raine et al., 2020*). A study of male and female Spanish adolescents found a cluster of “positively related” behaviors that included sexting and pornography consumption as well as intimate partner cyberstalking (*Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2021*). For the girls, they wrote, “the fear of losing their partner possibly pushes” them to consume porn to show “their total dedication to the male’s desire in their sexual practices” (*Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2021, p. 10*).

At the same time, this study found that girls are more prone to cyber-control than the boys, who in turn are more prone to physical control. In fact, both “see controlling behavior as a way to express love, care, and affection” and to maintain the relationship. Sexting, in this sense, is not so much an expression of mutual intimacy as it is part of a wider misperception by young people that a ‘normal’ relationship entails coercion.

Mental Health

Among US undergraduates, male students are two-thirds more likely to sext with casual partners while women are more apt to do so within committed relationships (*Drouin et al., 2017*). A “sizeable percentage” of all those who sext, however, report negative consequences, regret (*e.g., Kerstens & Stol, 2014*), or “some level of trauma” – more so for the women.⁹ But trauma is not only a result of sexting. For many young people, sexting signals problems with mental health.

In a 2021 assessment of peer-reviewed articles, the putatively positive effects of sexting were far outweighed by the abusive, traumatic, stigmatizing, and other harmful outcomes (*Doyle et al., 2021*). Likewise, a 2019 meta-study in an American Medical Association publication partly concluded that “Sexting youth, relative to their non-sexting counterparts, are more likely to use substances, experience anxiety, depression, and delinquency.” (*Mori et al., 2019, p. 776*). A less conclusive review still observed that “the majority of studies have found significant associations between sexting and mental health symptoms,” including anxiety and “suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, depressive symptoms, and feelings of sadness” (*Gassó et al., 2019, p. 11*). Again and again, peer-reviewed research has identified significant statistical links and predictive relationships between sexting – mainly sending images, and forwarding without consent – and mental health, especially anxiety, stress, and depression (*e.g., Chaudhary et al., 2017; García-González et al., 2021; Gassó et al., 2020; Klettke et al., 2018; Klettke et al., 2019*). And, to repeat, the empirical evidence connects sexting to higher-than-normal adolescent thoughts and attempts at suicide – 39% and 50% respectively according to one study (*Dake et al., 2012*).

But research has also tied sexting to a range of other mental health problems among adolescents, teens, and young adults. Many of these issues are clustered together, especially with depression. Thus, Spanish adolescents who sext tend to score higher on impulsivity, extraversion, vulnerability, and depression - but lower on agreeableness (e.g., *empathy, kindness, warmth*) and conscientiousness (Alonso & Romero, 2019).¹⁰ Other psychological issues that are routinely linked to sexting among the young include:

- Alcohol, marijuana, ecstasy, cocaine, and other drug use (Benotsch et al., 2013; Dake et al., 2012; Dir et al., 2013; Dir et al., 2018; Makgale & Plattner, 2017; Romo-Avilés et al., 2020; Ševčíková, 2016; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Not surprisingly, these behaviors are connected not only to sexting but to unprotected and other forms of risky sex (Lim et al., 2016; Yeung et al., 2014; see also Salter, 2016).
- Low self-control, high impulsiveness, low conscientiousness (Gómez-García, 2020; Holt et al., 2021; Kerstens & Stol, 2014; Reyns et al., 2014).
- Difficulties with emotional competence and emotional self-efficacy, that is, the ability to properly recognize emotions and effectively and constructively respond (Houck et al., 2014; Sesar et al., 2019).
- Sensation seeking (e.g., finding excitement in danger), often also linked to impulsivity and negative urgency (the tendency to act rashly in response to extreme negative emotions) (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Champion & Pedersen, 2015; Dir & Cyders, 2015; Scholes-Balog et al., 2016)
- Low self-esteem (Scholes-Balog et al., 2016; Wachs et al., 2017).
- Ambivalent peer attachment (Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014; see also Galovan et al., 2018; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011), and especially insecure attachment in romantic relationships (i.e., attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance) (Brenick et al., 2017; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Trub & Starks, 2017; Weisskirch et al., 2017).
- Aggression and hostility (as well as general “emotion dysregulation”) (Lu et al., 2021; see Amichai-Hamburger & Efrati, 2019).
- Low agreeableness and high neuroticism (e.g., emotional instability, acting rashly in response to negative emotions) (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017).
- Narcissism, especially coupled to extraversion, disinhibition, and lower empathy (which predict not only sexting but also online grooming and victimization) (Peris Hernández et al., 2021; see also de Abreu Silva et al., 2020)¹¹

Sexting has also been tied to an unhealthy dependence on how others evaluate your own body, or “body objectification” (Bianchi et al., 2017).¹² These youth view their own body “as an object that is evaluated according to cultural and sexualized standards and

is perceived to belong less to the self and more to others" (*Bianchi et al., 2017, p. 169*). Body objectification often leads to shame and "unrealistic beliefs of control about body appearance" (*Bianchi et al., 2017, p. 169*). There may also be a connection between sexting and eating disorders (*Katz & El Asam, 2020*).

Of course, it is not to be implied that every young person who sexts is driven by all or even some of these psychological ailments. Nor is it the case that sexting necessarily causes a young person to suffer poor mental health. Nevertheless, these statistically significant associations and predictive relationships suggest that many young people whom sext suffer from psychological difficulties to a greater extent than their non-sexting peers (*see also Kurup et al., 2021*). This is not, of course, victim-blaming or shaming. It is to suggest that sexting, rather than an autonomous and joyful expression of sexual agency, is a call for concern.

Sexting, as we have seen, is often coerced, even if, as often happens, a young person states that it was consensual. Thus, many who sext suffer the psychological symptoms already mentioned as a consequence, not only of the sext itself but the coercion, too. Many studies additionally show "significant relationships between sexting coercion, sexual coercion, and intimate partner violence" (*Drouin et al., 2015, p. 201*). Young people who suffer any of these forms of relational violence also tend to experience "more general anxiety symptoms, depression, and traumatic stress" (*Drouin et al., 2015, p. 201; see also Barter & Stanley, 2016*). As the researchers rightly claim, "Based on these data, it seems clear that partner coercive behavior related to sexting should be considered a form or manifestation of intimate partner aggression" (*Drouin et al., 2015, p. 2033*). Sexting, in other words, is often not linked just to sexual activity but to a cluster of mental health problems associated with forced and coerced, often violent sexual relationships.

Not surprisingly, researchers generally find that young women report higher rates of sexting coercion than men and also, no surprise, higher rates of relational violence and coerced sex – even as young as the 6th grade (*Kernsmith et al., 2018*). Young women give in to requests for sext and sex for the same reasons, including feelings of obligation and, as noted earlier, fear of losing the relationship. Under these psychological conditions, there can be no 'free choice' when deciding to send a sext; the sext is inherently coercive. After coerced sexting, male and female adolescents, teens, and young adults experience similar psychological ailments, including distress and attachment dysfunction. But women tend to suffer more acute symptoms, and their trauma often increases over time (*Ross et al., 2019*). Sexting, in other words, is not just about images in cyberspace; it is often linked to real-world violence within relationships, and victims suffer accordingly.¹³

Scholars have also identified links between young people who sext and a variety of wider social problems. Among teenage South Korean students, "the most important influence on sexting behaviors" is peer pressure (*Lee et al., 2016*). But sexting is also predicted by prior delinquency, including underage drinking, sneaking into clubs, having sex for money, and fighting. The latter also increases the likelihood of male adolescents sexting in Peru

(where the equivalent prompt for girls is being cyberbullied) (*West et al., 2014*).

Sexting in some studies is connected with gambling. Sending and nonconsensually forwarding sexts, what is sometimes called “active sexting,” is positively associated with curiosity or novelty-seeking and humor, including ridicule, and negatively associated with fairness and authenticity. These associations are also linked to risky sexual behaviors, illegal substance use, and gambling (*Yepez-Tito et al., 2021*). Among more than 3,000 adolescents (ages 12-17) in Spain, cyberbullying was linked to sexting, contacting strangers, porn use, and, again, gambling (*Feijóo et al., 2021*).

In Italy, researchers identified a cluster of anti-social behaviors that revolved around bullying and cyberbullying. They included sexting as well as racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia (*Tintori et al., 2021*).¹⁴ In rural North Carolina, distributing private sexts without permission is associated with petty theft, such as using another person’s credit card without permission, or computer theft (*Marcum et al., 2014*). The latter includes logging into someone else’s email to maliciously send messages under their name or hacking into a Facebook account to make unauthorized posts.

Adolescents, as we have seen, sext for many reasons, including the pursuit of passion, sexual intimacy, and arousal. One study found that sexting is not linked to higher relationship satisfaction (*Van Ouytsel et al., 2019b*). Instead, participants in the study who perceived high verbal conflict in their relationship were more apt to sext – which provides further corroboration for the association between sexting and relational aggression and lower emotional regulation (*see Stonard, 2019, 2021*). Thus, sexting can exacerbate the anguish of a fraught relationship, which is especially troubling since partners sometimes use or threaten to use intimate photos to exact ‘revenge’ after a conflict or breakup.

It is important to note that these and all the studies cited in this report were drawn from a wide geographic range of countries, including two-dozen nations in Europe as well as Thailand, Botswana, Nigeria, India, Canada, the US, and South Korea. Some of these studies, too, draw on sizable samples. For example, an investigation of more than 18,000 European adolescents (aged 11-16) concluded that the risk of receiving sexual images and messages and experiencing harm from them was greatest among those who register high sensation seeking, emotional struggles, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and inattention, and peer relationship problems (*Livingstone & Görzig, 2014*). The data are rigorous and cross-cultural. And the data convincingly show that sexting is connected to a host of unhealthy consequences and antecedents regarding the mental health of young people.

Sexting and the Family

A young person’s family milieu make a demonstrable difference in shaping their proclivity to send and forward intimate photos (*e.g., Barbovschi et al., 2021*). In Croatia, greater sexting among female secondary students was linked to lower psychological well-being

as well as family problems such as frequent and intense quarrels, physical aggression (shoving, slapping, breaking things), and family members systematically ignoring each other (*Burić et al., 2021*). Swedish youth who sexted had, as we have seen earlier, lower self-esteem, poorer mental health, greater consumption of porn and drugs, experience with sexual abuse, and worse relationships with parents (*Jonsson et al., 2015*). Economic stress often precedes adolescent sexting in Belgium, suggesting that the behavior is often an unhealthy coping mechanism (*Van Ouytsel et al., 2014; see also Van Ouytsel et al., 2015*). In a disadvantaged part of the Bronx, New York City, sexting by girls was correlated with abuse, among other factors, and running away from home (*Titchen et al., 2019*).

According to a 2021 paper, almost three-quarters of US high school students participate in active or passive sexting – but only 18% broach the subject with their parents (*Widman et al., 2021*). There is no evidence, the study continued, that parents who speak about sexting with their children inadvertently encourage the behavior. In fact, these conversations moderate sexting. By contrast, conversations with peers tend to result in encouragement. Indeed, American adolescents are over ten times more likely to sext if they believe that the popular kids do so (*Maheux et al., 2020*).

In fact, kids who perceived their parents as too permissive or too lax in supervision have an increased likelihood of sending and requesting sexts (*Dolev-Cohen & Ricon, 2020*). By contrast, protective factors against sexting include open family communication, fostering a child's trust and attachment in parents, and active parenting that is warm and non-judgmental but authoritative - not authoritarian or 'helicoptering' (*see also Atwood et al., 2017; Bianchi et al., 2019; Campbell & Park, 2014; Confalonieri et al., 2020; Hunter et al., 2021; Molla-Esparza et al., 2020; Romo et al., 2017; Tintori et al., 2021; Tomić et al., 2018; Valido et al., 2020; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2018*). Caretakers should exercise reasonable awareness of what their kids are doing, where, and with whom, teach the value of honesty, and show an interest in their children's experiences and peers, on and off-line. It is also important to negotiate clear rules concerning online behaviors.

Victims and Victimizers

A study of diverse adolescents in an impoverished area of New York City found that sending sexts was associated with "adverse life experiences and potential emotional or behavioral responses" (*Titchen et al., 2019, p. 484*). For both girls and boys, these included sexual abuse and suffering or perpetrating intimate partner violence. Sexting, the researchers concluded, "was independently associated with [most likely prior] experiences of exploitative and abusive sexual relationships" (*Titchen et al., 2019, p. 485*).

Among German adolescents, too, "greater online sexual engagement" – including sexting – "was related to a higher risk of being victimized and indirectly, via these victimization experiences, to decreased psychosocial well-being" (*Festla et al., 2019, p. 107*). Moreover, the "higher willingness to engage in sexting was directly associated with worse mental

health...depression/anxiety, loneliness, and lower life satisfaction" (Festla et al., 2019, p. 107). In England, Italy, Norway, Bulgaria, and Cyprus, more than 4500 young people (aged 14-17) showed a "significant" association between sexting and having experienced online abuse or face-to-face interpersonal violence (Wood et al., 2015).

These studies - and many more (Cornelius et al., 2020; Machimbarrena et al., 2018; Thompson & Morrison, 2013) - are evidence that both male and female victims of sexual violence and online or offline abuse often became sexters. Among Italian adolescents and young adults (aged 13-30), for example, moderate and high sexters have greater experience as perpetrators and victims of face-to-face and online dating violence than occasional and non-sexters (Morelli et al., 2016b). For girls, in particular, there is a "significant association" between sending sexts and being a victim of face-to-face, interpersonal violence and abuse (Wood et al., 2015). Additionally, a study from the US found that female adolescents who experienced offline forms of sexual coercion were more likely to sext than their peers (Choi et al., 2016). They conclude that sexting "could function as a continuation of offline forms of sexual coercion and function as an additional way for perpetrators to harass their victims" (Choi et al., 2016, p. 167).

A great deal of evidence shows that sexting youth of all genders often had prior experiences as the targets of bullying and cyberbullying (Dake et al, 2012; Long & Dowdell, 2021; Reyns et al., 2013). In one study of rural US high school students, female sender-receivers of sexts were six times more likely to have been bullied than non-sexters (Woodward et al., 2017). Cyberbullying in general among youth, peer-research has shown, can give rise to suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Among Spanish adolescents, moreover, kids who bully offline often engage in the nonconsensual forwarding of sexts (Ojeda et al., 2019). Among early adolescents in Nicaragua, moreover, boys are pressured more than girls to send and ask for sexts; those who do tend to commit more dating violence, and have suffered victimization (Van Ouytsel, 2021).

Among Mexican university students, "more sexting behavior was significantly related to more cybervictimization" (Medrano et al., 2018, p. 160). The explanation is likely that young people who sext are more easily discoverable by perpetrators, which increases the likelihood of online and then in-person sexual abuse. For the same reason, adolescents who sext in Zimbabwe are considerably more likely than their non-sexting peers to come to the attention of predators (Marume et al., 2018). The Mexican study also found that "cybervictimization was associated with a greater likelihood of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation in the victim" (Medrano et al., 2018, p. 160). The data, too, revealed "a direct link between sexting and suicidal ideation" (Medrano et al., 2018, p. 160).

We must also consider the relationship between sexting and the grooming of children and young people by adult perpetrators of sexual abuse and rape. Ample evidence connects adolescents who sext with a higher-than-average likelihood of being victimized through grooming (Calvete, 2021; Marengo et al., 2019; Muncaster & Ohlsson, 2020). Among adolescents in Spain, in fact, sexting "predicted" the receiving of sexual solicitations

(Schoeps et al., 2020). Conversely, sexual solicitations predicted sexting (Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérezb, 2019). Sexting, too, is a risk factor in sex trafficking for girls with intellectual disabilities (Reid, 2018). Many victims of grooming, too, as the latter study noted, “have been found to develop certain sexual behaviors as a consequence of abuse.” (Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérezb, 2019, p. 74).¹⁵ The same, we have seen, holds for some young people who sext.

Grooming is connected to sexting in another way. Young people who are unhappy with their body, are at risk of grooming, perhaps by reaching out to others online – say, by sexting - for approval and social relationships that are, or seem to be, validating (Tamarit, 2021).¹⁶ Those who perceive themselves to be physically attractive are also at risk of grooming, perhaps because – albeit for different reasons – they are more likely to send sexualized images over the internet. Adolescents with problematic internet behaviors, such as gambling and excessive gaming, are more likely to send sexts, as we have seen, which increases the risk of becoming a victim of sextortion (see O’Malley & Holt, 2020). Impulsive internet use is another risk factor in sexting, which increases the likelihood of coming to the attention of adult groomers.

There is No Safe Sext

A few years ago, 4,000 male students at Otago University, New Zealand, posted and ogled the sexts of ex-girlfriends on a secret *Facebook* page. There were also rape jokes. No consent was obtained for any of the photos (“*Offensive Dunedin Facebook page shut down*,” 2014). The student who orchestrated the page was unrepentant, declaring “a big fuck you to everyone who has taken this whole thing seriously” (Hume, 2014, para. 8). What’s more, he stated that “original intent of the page was purely out of respect and nothing less.” (Hume, 2014, para. 18) Unquestionably, one of the worst, yet most common dangers from sexting is the breach of trust by the recipient – which happens regularly. Many of these images end up online on curated “slut pages.” Visits to these websites are “positively associated” with sexting (Clancy, 2021; see also Maas, 2021).

The results of intimate image abuse are devastating, sometimes “akin to other forms of sexual violence,” (McGlynn et al., 2021, p. 544) including assault and rape. Studies with adults and youth report a litany of traumas caused by the nonconsensual distribution of intimate photos: post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts and attempts, severe anxiety, acute depression, inability to trust others, withdrawal from relationships, feeling trapped, constant fear, and various coping mechanisms such as high alcohol use (Bates, 2017; Gassó et al., 2021; Núñez et al., 2021; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2020). Victims describe the experience as life-ruining, hell on earth, torture for the soul, “just stayed at home in my room...because I couldn’t face the world” (McGlynn et al., 2021, p. 554). To escape, some adults have changed their names, appearances, jobs, even where they live. But the images, perhaps stored on some obscure website or hard drive, can always re-surface. “There is no end to it, there is no stop, there is no finale” (McGlynn et al., 2021, p. 552).

In a Massachusetts study (Englander & McCoy, 2017), nearly one-quarter of students who sexted also had their photos distributed without their consent beyond the initial recipient. Students who identify as non-heteronormative are often said to be at the highest risk for suffering this abuse as well as other forms of online victimization (Gámez-Guadix & Incera, 2021; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Half of all teens in the UK have seen their peers circulate sexts of someone they know (Project deSHAME, 2017a). One in 25 Americans are either victims of, or threatened with, nonconsensual pornography; for women under the age of 30, the figure is one in ten (Lenhart et al., 2016).

There are many reasons why young people recirculate sexts that were sent to themselves or others in confidence. Most rationales also apply to cyberbullying and cyber-aggression in general: anger, jealousy, lack of emotional resilience or competence, boasting, to name just a few (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Both youth and adult perpetrators frequently hope that threats of dissemination, or actual reposting, will compel the victim to remain in a relationship or return (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2019). "I'll make you regret losing me," said one perpetrator to his ex-partner. Another victim, a young gay man, reported that his abuser threatened to "tell my parents about my sexuality...My family didn't know, but I knew that if they found out, I'd be in danger" (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2019, p. 24).

Part of the problem is that many young people send intimate selfies to just about anybody. Among adolescents in Israel, half of all sexts are sent to partners, the other half to peers, potential partners, and *strangers* (Dolev-Cohen & Ricon, 2020). In the US, 15% of teens have sent nude and seminude selfies to people they only know online (Power to Decide, 2008). American teens who identify as LGBTQ are increasingly more vulnerable, "with 33.3% of these young men admitting to sending images to people they did not really know" (Needham, 2021, p. 396). Sometimes young people are tricked into sexting, or worse. Some adults, as noted earlier, do pretend to be young in order to forge abusive relationships with minors (Quayle & Newman, 2015, 2016). Most sextortionists who prey on adolescents and teens are adult men. In a study of victims aged 18-25, a large percentage provided sexual images because they were tricked, pressured, or forced (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2018 p. 16). The perpetrator then typically threatens to post the photos online, or send them to the victim's family and friends, mostly to obtain more photos or to in-person assault the child ("Sextortion," n.d.). Some perpetrators also encourage the victim to harm themselves by, say, cutting or suicide (Wolak et al., 2018). They may also threaten rape and murder.

The majority of people who engage in the nonconsensual distribution of sexts are also male, but of all ages (Lucero et al., 2014; Morelli et al., 2016a). According to one study, perpetrators tend to score high in pornography consumption and also instrumental attitudes toward sex, such that sex is a game for their own good time (van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2020). Indeed, image abuse is not "revenge porn," as many victims know. 'Revenge' is rarely the real reason: it is a misogynistic claim that men are entitled to control all aspects of a woman's life (McGlynn et al., 2021).

When sexts are distributed, as we have seen, the victims often bear the blame, not the perpetrators (e.g., *Branch et al., 2017*). In 2017, boys from more than 70 Australian schools were illicitly swapping nude photos, including private sexts, of young women (*Funnell, 2016; see also Powell, 2016*). When one victim begged for the removal of her photo, she was berated for acting like a “slut” and told that her photos now belonged “to the internet.” Her pleas that some victims might be driven to suicide went ignored. Numerous studies, we have seen, empirically link sexting to various psychological ailments, such as depression and substance abuse, as well as contemplated and attempted suicide (*Frankel et al., 2018*). A 2021 meta-study concluded, for example, concluded that there are “significant, positive associations” with self-injurious thoughts and behaviors and sexting as well as with cybervictimization and cyberbullying (*Nesi et al., 2021*). Another study associated sexting with suicide attempts, as well as non-suicidal self-injury (*Nilsson et al., 2019*). Even a paper that seemed to go to some lengths to diminish the harmful aspects of sexting still felt compelled to acknowledge the serious problems with down-the-line nonconsensual sharing, which is largely perpetrated, we have seen, by young men to young women (*Gordon-Messer et al., 2013*).¹⁷ Thus, they cited a 2009 study which stated that “8% of [online bullying] targets and 12% of sexters have considered ending their own life in the past year compared to 3% of people who have not been bullied and are not involved in sexting” (“*A thin line*,” n.d., p. 5).

The willingness to sext has put many young people in such harm’s way that the victim sees no way out but to take their own life. Adam Wood, not yet 20 and reeling from a breakup, met Hope Joy on *Kik*, a free messaging app for mobile phones with hundreds of millions of users. After some sexually-charged conversations, Hope requested a nude selfie from Adam. He complied. Hope then demanded £300 or she would distribute the photo. Adam only had £50 pounds. It wasn’t enough for Hope. He hung himself from a tree (*Glass, 2019*). Hope turned out to be a gang from the Philippines. Similarly, fifteen-year-old Amanda Todd sent a selfie of her breasts to a boy. He turned out to be a thirty-something Dutch man who posted the photos online. After relentless bullying by peers and cyber-stalking by her tormentor, Amanda hung herself (*Dean, 2012*). These are just two of many, many instances that make it into the headlines. A 2021 meta-study pointed out that sexting among adolescents and young adults is a problematic behavior, consistently associated with STBs [suicidal thoughts and behaviors] (*Macrynika et al., 2021*).

A recent paper about the nonconsensual sharing of sexts wrote that “For some youth, the taboo against sexting was even the main reason for non-consensually sharing another person’s image: they felt like they had to ‘teach’ peers not to participate in sexting, and did that by non-consensually sharing those peers’ images” (*Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021, p. 87*). They concluded that the “current negative attitudes towards sexting not only facilitate, but even encourage non-consensual image sharing” (*Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021, p. 87*). The implication is that normalizing sexts is the answer, what they call a sex(ting)-positive” solution. We would propose a different, far easier solution, one that is more attuned with the data – a truly sex-positive solution, that restores to each young person the right and opportunity to take control over their own private life.

The Law

There is one final topic we must broach: the law. Simply put, sexting by anyone under the age of 17 or 18, in most countries, is a crime. Yet sexting persists. As such, sexting poses an even graver danger to a young person. The law, of course, varies greatly across countries and even across jurisdictions within nations, such as states and territories in the US and Australia. And many laws about sexting and the nonconsensual distribution of intimate photos and videos are rapidly changing to try and halt this abuse. There are many efforts, too, to moderate how young offenders are charged and penalized. But until the law changes, specifically regarding underage sexting, a young person in possession of a sext in many countries, even a consensual sext, can be prosecuted for the possession of child pornography.

The US, for example, lacks federal laws against “revenge porn.” But almost all states have recently passed legislation, and the others, including the District of Columbia, have statutes pending or proposed. These laws criminalize sexting in one form or another. But what if someone is charged with nonconsensually disseminating a sext that shows a person under the age of 18, who is a legal minor? If the person charged is an adult, the answer is clear: that person, regardless of relevant state laws, can be prosecuted for child pornography. The US has several federal statutes that would come into play, including laws against producing child pornography (*18 U.S.C. § 2251- Sexual Exploitation of Children*) and possessing, distribution, and receiving child pornography (*18 U.S.C. § 2252- Certain activities relating to material involving the sexual exploitation of minors*). If convicted, the adult would serve mandatory time in prison, “a statutory minimum” that, depending on which laws were violated, can range from five to 30 years for a first offense. They would also be required to register as a sex offender for at least 25 years thereafter. An adult in possession of a sext that shows an undressed minor is in serious legal trouble.

These laws all make exceptions for legitimate purposes related to law enforcement and often health care professionals. But there are no legal exceptions for parents or guardians who happen to come upon a sext on their child’s phone or computer – or, worse, a naked selfie sent to the child from another minor – and then save that image to their own device. That is illegal. A parent who comes upon that underage sext might not know what to do next. Call the other parent? The school? The police? Understandably in a panic, the parent might forward the image to a trustworthy friend for advice. That is illegal.

As the law stands today in the US and many other countries, children who sext inadvertently put their parents at risk. More importantly, they put themselves at legal risk. Since the laws against child pornography are federal laws, they often take precedence over any state laws, especially if the offense involves different jurisdictions. From a federal perspective, the possession of a photo of a naked minor by anybody, even other minors, is illegal. Some young people have been prosecuted with these federal laws, even though the laws were aimed at adults, not minors, who traffic in child pornography. One may believe that the law should make certain exceptions for minors who consensually sext

other minors. In fact, the federal laws governing child pornography were written long before mobile phones were in the hands of children. But the federal government, at least at present, disagrees. There are no age-appropriate provisions and penalties in the federal law code that address underage sexting.

The legal picture varies considerably, however, across the states (*see Strasburger et al, 2019*). At present, less than 80% of state laws in the US criminalizing “revenge porn” include special provisions for minors who nonconsensually forward sexts to other minors. In general, a few states exempt minors who sext in certain conditions from the laws governing adult sexting of and with children. Other states have enacted special clauses that afford minors leniency in sentencing and diversionary programs. Again, this only applies in certain situations, say, if both parties were at least 14 years old, and no further distribution occurred. Many exemptions aimed at adolescents and teens, too, require the youth depicted in the photos to have granted full consent. But over 20 states have no special provisions for young people. If they are prosecuted, it is as an adult, even though they are doing what, as we have seen, many kids do.

In practice, and in many states in law, prosecutors and judges can exercise discretion regarding minors who are charged and found guilty of nonconsensually distributing other minors’ sexts. But there is no guarantee. In the UK, children under the age of 14 have been arrested for sex crimes. These crimes likely include sexting – although we cannot know for sure because of privacy constraints (*see Phippen & Brennan, 2020*). Denmark is noteworthy for specifically addressing teen sexting such that most minors are not treated as adults in possession of child pornography (*Ministry of Children and Education, 2020*). Other countries, such as the US, have no such legal protections. Many American children who sext can potentially be registered as “sex offenders” for the possession of child pornography (*see “Criminal law,” 2018; “In re: S.K.,” 2020; Karaian, 2012*).

One final legal point. The law in many countries – the US, UK, and Canada, for example – protects against various forms of discrimination. Certain characteristics of a person’s identity are ‘protected.’ It is generally unlawful for employers and universities, for example, to use these characteristics when evaluating applicants. These “protected” characteristics include race, skin color, national origin, sex, disability, religion, pregnancy, and often age. Sexting is not included. Thus, for example, an applicant can be denied admission if the University discovers a naked selfie - even one that the applicant never intended to be publicly viewed. The same can be said for future employers. There is no legal guarantee that the sext sent today will not harm them five or ten years later.

Conclusion: Sexting and Sexual Agency

Adolescents frequently send intimate photos, we have seen, to express and make sense of their newfound interest in sexuality. Many young people also sext in order to express their emerging autonomy by flirting with danger. They seek “a re-envisioning and rejection

of normative understandings of risk, respectability and privacy" (Karaian, 2012, p. 66). Sexting allows them to push on conventions as part of their emerging autonomy and identity (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). But the sexts they send undermine that very ideal by mirroring the reigning media images of male and especially stereotypes surrounding female sexuality (see Bobkowski et al., 2016; Coyne et al., 2019). In this way, young people who seek to express their individual choices through sexting are really acquiescing to marketing and the media, and conforming to the multi-billion-dollar online pornography industry that in many respects set the standard for 'sexting.'

We do not want to deny the agency of any young person to pursue pleasure, especially young women, which many scholars highlight in regard to youthful sexting (see also Lee & Crofts, 2015). But it is vital that young people exercise authentic agency, which sexting undermines by mirroring an old, conventional model of sexuality and gender in which the self must be made desirable in a certain way in order to be valued. From this angle, sexting is little more than the age-old pursuit of validation.

This affects young women far more than their male peers. Thus, while males tend to see the receipt of unsolicited photos as a welcome form of flattery; females find them threatening and uncomfortable. Additionally, of course, women and girls are socialized to present themselves in a hypersexualized way more often than boys and men (Matthews et al., 2018; Speno & Aubrey, 2019). In this sense, the gendered norms that govern sexting for young people represent not only an opportunity to exercise individual agency but to learn to reflect the sexist ideals of domineering masculinity and hypersexualized femininity.

Sexting, too, as reflective of the wider pornography industry, represents the 'male gaze' (Davis Kempton, 2020). Sexting also teaches young women, admits a study that advocates for sexting as a form of agency, to mirror the "negative impact" of the media on their self-image, sexuality, and sexual agency by portraying themselves as objects for men's pleasure (García-Gómez, 2017). In other words, sexting allows young women to exercise very little agency at all. Thus, among US university students, wrote another researcher, men share sexts they receive from women as trophies of sexual prowess. The women share "nude images of men to cope with unwelcome sexual advances and to commiserate with other women" (Johnstonbaugh, 2021, p. 666). While most of these male students traffic in these images to gain prestige and to "increase their dominance over" women, "most women perceive nude images of men as undesirable symbols of male dominance that they share with friends who use humor and outrage to disarm them" (Johnstonbaugh, 2021, p. 686). What these women do does not sound like assertive agency but, rather, an effort to protect the self from the unjust, sexist, and violent agency of others.

Another scholar, also seeking to challenge the discourse that sexting is harmful, still acknowledged,

in my female participants' experiences of performing 'sexy' for the camera, it may certainly have been the case that such experiences felt empowering and 'sexy' at the time; however, ultimately their perceptions and reflections on their experiences rested

on how they felt they looked—and the type of feedback received—rather than whether or not the sexual experience was pleasurable. (*Burkett, 2015, p. 856*)

In other words, what was important to these young women was how they were evaluated by young men, not how they felt about themselves.

To the extent that sexting reflects dominant media ideals about the body, especially young women's bodies, we need to situate sexting in the wider economic map of social media: commercial and corporate profits. Young people have been seen as a key source of revenue since the early 20th century. Sexting, in so far as it ties young people even further into cyber-commerce, is less about agency than it is about the economic value of their attention (*Lee et al., 2018; see also Wu, 2017*).

Yet numerous scholars continue to argue that sexting by young people, especially by girls, is "agentic" and therefore any objections are panicked and puritanical (*e.g., De Ridder, 2019; Dobson, 2018; Dobson & Ringrose, 2015*). To claim that sexting is freedom of expression by young people is to ignore the extent to which young people are subject to profound pressures to conform to what the empirical evidence shows to be demonstrably harmful behaviors. And despite some scholars' admonitions to the contrary, what many youths say they want is clear instruction about the legal and psychological consequences of sexting (*Barrense-Dias et al., 2020; see also Jørgensen et al., 2019, Wachs et al., 2021*).

Young perpetrators of image abuse must be called to account. Unquestionably, those who shame young sexters must also be stopped. But drawing attention to the harms of sexting is not tantamount to imposing undue restraints on young people's ability to explore their emerging sexuality freely and consensually, especially girls, or to assert the right of autonomy over their own bodies and identities.¹⁸ Quite the opposite, we have seen. They are relinquishing their agency, creativity, and sexual autonomy in order to pander to the wider pornification of culture. They let PornHub, not their own desires, dictate how to define sexuality.

There is nothing shameful about sexuality. What is shameful, however, is how easily our culture allows the sexuality of young people to be coopted by the porn industry, which as sexting shows, has assumed an unparalleled position of authority in telling young people how they should express and perform their sexual selves. Much of the literature on sexting rightly castigates the common 'discourse of shame' precisely because it is gendered and serves as another way of diminishing and denying women's autonomy (*Setty, 2019b*).

Notes

1. The report, then, also reclaims feminist scholarship from those who erroneously view sexting as liberating, e.g., Naezer (2018).
2. For a slightly earlier meta-study, see Madigan et al. (2018).
3. I do not, however, endorse Döring's (2014) approach to 'safe sexting.'
4. See also, in a more popular vein, Cummins (2020).
5. We note that this review tends to go out of its way to paint a rosier picture of sexting than the literature actually reveals.
6. The site, set up by a rampant misogynist, was shut down. But if you google the phrase, you will find "Snapchat Sluts Porn Videos" on Pornhub, YouPorn, and many others adult-themed websites.
7. For how some girls respond to the "slut" label, see Dobson (2019).
8. Sending unsolicited sexual self-images to strangers is a type of abnormal sexual behavior, or a sexual paraphilia, that involves narcissism and exhibitionism [regarding the latter among adults see Kaylor et al. (2016)].
9. Almost every researcher who identifies positive aspects to youthful sexting also observes that the supposed benefits accrue far more often to males than females (e.g., Bonilla et al., 2021).
10. The original study is Gamez-Guadix and de Santisteban (2018).
11. For non-sexualized images, see Stuart and Kurek (2019) and van Oosten et al. (2017). Note that narcissism is part of the so-called "dark triad" of personality traits, along with psychopathy and Machiavellianism, which are often associated with those who disseminate sexts without consent (e.g., Morelli et al., 2021; Clancy et al., 2020).
12. For Chinese adolescent girls who post non-nude selfies to the social networking platform Qzone, see Zheng et al. (2019).
13. For the term victim, see DiTullio and Sullivan (2019).
14. For sexism, too, see Morelli et al. (2016a).
15. They cite Paolucci et al. (2001).
16. For sexting and body image among adults, see Howard et al. (2019) and, relatedly,

Boursier et al. (2020).

17. In this vein, see also – with considerable reservations – Kosenko et al. (2017).

18. For examples, see Setty (2019a) and for a similar approach, García-Gómez (2018), Albury (2017), and Hasinoff (2015).

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