

'Send Nudes?': Teens' perspectives of education around sexting, an argument for a balanced approach

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Abstract

This paper explores teens' perceptions of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) around sexting (the exchange of sexually explicit imagery). Adopting a 'sex-positive' balanced approach to adolescents' digital expressions of sexuality may be a more beneficial response than censure since fear-based narratives fail to recognise sexting as part of an array of sexual behaviours enacted by teens. Prohibition, rather than educating for safe sexting practices, fails to protect young people. This qualitative study uses thematic analysis of interviews with teens, and social constructionism, to interpret their perspectives thereby contributing teens' perspectives to debates around adolescent sexting and RSE.

Keywords

Teenagers, sexting, Relationships and Sexuality Education, sex education, sex positive

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Introduction

'Send nudes' is a common phrase used by teenagers to initiate sexual communication and intimacy between individuals (Albury, 2017). 'Sexting', involves the sending of nude or sexually charged images, messages or videos via online means (Albury et al., 2013). From adults' viewpoints, sexting is commonly perceived as a threat to children's wellbeing and their presumed innocence (Page Jeffery, 2017), with parents, communities and schools often responding with concern and condemnation (Courtice and Shaughnessy, 2021; Cucci et al., 2023; Lee and Darcy, 2021). Despite sexting being a common adolescent behaviour, Lee and Darcy (2021) note that the potential for harm (cyberbullying, image-based abuse and creation of child sexual abuse materials) tends to fuel a moral panic, resulting '...in a messy patchwork of legal responses that often yield disproportionately punitive responses' (Lee and Darcy, 2021: 563). Meehan and Wicks (2020) call for the inclusion of teen voices in research pertaining to adolescent sexting, given teens' perspectives are largely left out of the discussion. In this paper, teen participants relay their own experiences of school-based education around sexting. They argue that fear-based messages are outdated and unfit for purpose. Contrasting with the received wisdom of schools and parents, the authors propose that sexting should be constructed as a legitimate element of many modern day courting and intimacy practices. Such framing increases the likelihood of open-minded, respectful and non-judgemental communication around aspects of gender, sex and sexuality, synonymous with 'sex-positivity' (Ivanski and Kohut, 2017), allowing digital sexuality to be considered as a normal part of contemporary relationship-formation (Ravn et al., 2021; Setty, 2019). However, a sex-positive ideology does not indicate that "abstinence from sexual activity is viewed negatively or that all sex is necessarily positive or healthy" (Harden, 2014: 457). Sex-positive approaches to education that acknowledge positive aspects of sexual communication, as well as risks, promote a healthy sexual self-concept and are crucial to wellbeing (Harden, 2014; Kågsten and van Reeuwijk, 2021; O'Brien et al., 2021).

The growing fear of children expressing their sexuality in online spaces (Bond and Phippen, 2020; Tsaliki, 2016a) and concern around increased engagement with sexting by young people ignores changes in everyday dating rituals and practices to incorporate digital dimensions. Adults are often reluctant to acknowledge that young people embrace sexting as an act of intimacy and sexual bonding, despite knowledge and practice developing over time. For example, US past-President Bill Clinton's (Hamilton, 2011: 146) notion of sex as occurring only when 'a penis enters a vagina', became outdated decades ago, when effective contraception and the legalisation of abortion removed the crippling fear of an unplanned pregnancy. Even so, vestiges of this construction still linger among older generations with a consequent rejection of newer understandings of what constitutes an acceptable expression of sexual desire or behaviour. The authors propose a wider conception of 'sexual activity' as embracing 'the consensual giving and receiving of pleasure through multi-sensorial and sexual means' as a more accurate representation of today's constructions of sex and sexuality. Indeed, many teens engage in sexting practices prior to experiencing their first kiss or beginning their first relationship.

Background

According to the 7th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health, 87% of respondent teens sent or received sexually explicit imagery with many perceiving sexting as a regular component of modern relationships (Power et al., 2022). However, the transfer of sexual images between young people under 18, consenting or otherwise, raises legal issues as well as moral and ethical considerations. Such issues include the potential criminalisation of behaviour by teenagers which is both legal and widely practiced in relationships involving over 18s (Roberts et al., 2021; Roberts and Ravn, 2020). The criminalising of the adolescent body punishes those it is supposed to protect (Albury et al., 2013), even though many minors disregard the restrictions through which such prohibitions are framed. Their approach supports Angelides' argument that 'The predominant legal, policy and pedagogical response to sexting functions as something of a displaced conversation about the complexity of teenage sexual agency' (2013: 682).

Within Australia, that complexity includes each state differing in legislation regarding teens' sending sexual-based imagery. In Western Australia (via Commonwealth Law), for instance, the creation of nude images by adolescents is technically considered 'child exploitation material' or 'abuse' via the creation of child pornography (Page Jeffery, 2017). Paradoxically, it is legal to engage in sexual intercourse (over 16) but not to participate in sexting (until over 18). Creating sexual imagery by a person under 18, in a consensual setting, even without sharing it with anyone, is illegal (Albury, 2017). In sum, the legislation denies teens' human rights (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2021; Gillespie, 2013) and fails to reflect real-life (Lee and Darcy, 2021).

However, sexting is sometimes abused by teens with an intent to harm. 'Revenge porn', for example, is especially problematic. This has been more recently referred to as one behaviour that can constitute Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse (IBSHA) (Ringrose et al., 2021; Ringrose and Regehr, 2023) or Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence (Henry et al., 2020). Such abuse often occurs where a former intimate partner deliberately shares images previously shared with them, in private, to wreak image-based violence and extract a form of revenge at the end of a relationship. Other forms of image-based sexual abuse include cyberflashing, where an individual receives unwanted sexual content (Karasavva et al., 2023), such as the 'unsolicited dick pic', cyberstalking and online sexual harassment (Henry et al., 2020) and the creation of deepfake images that purport to be authentic sexting material.

Public messages around sexting tend to reflect cultural anxieties and ideologies, attempting to constrain teen behaviours while focussing on the dire consequences (Page Jeffery, 2017) of sexting. One recent example of this is Big W's removal of the *Welcome to Sex* book from their Australian chain stores (Woodley, 2023) following public criticism and outrage at the book's non-standard safety messaging around illicit sexual practices. Authors Kang and Stynes, for example, said: 'if we were talking to our own children about sending nudes, we'd advise them to crop their heads off just in case, because once a picture is out there you have no control over it' (2023: 174). Indeed, digital forms of

sexual expression, such as sexting, can be particularly uncomfortable for parents and adults given that these activities permit young people's sexualised bodies and identities to be rendered in concrete ways (Albury, 2017).

Effective Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is cited as a primary factor in mitigating risk around teenage sexuality and sexual behaviour and is demonstrated to support the prevention of sexual violence (O'Brien et al., 2021; Santelli et al., 2018). Its value increases when a majority of young people receive this education at an age where their attitudes, behaviours and beliefs are still forming (Kaljee et al., 2007). The majority of current RSE programs present sexting as problematic and shameful. A systematic review conducted by Ojeda and Del Ray (2022) found that information regarding effective ways for teachers to navigate education and conversations around sexting by adolescents remains scarce, with educators needing to 'develop strategies' based on scientific research (Livingstone and Smith, 2014; Ojeda and Del Ray, 2022: 1661).

Dobson and Ringrose (2016) aptly termed educational campaigns surrounding sexting practices as 'sext education', encouraging young people's understandings of both their rights and responsibilities while recognising gender-based double standards around sexting practices. O'Brien et al. (2021) argue that young people would be better equipped to navigate their growing awareness of and interest in sexuality, in both online and offline spaces, if sex-positive RSE was offered in a consistent, comprehensive and age-appropriate manner. While Jørgensen and colleagues (2019) note that teens prefer to talk with rather than be talked at (for example, online safety in assemblies) as their preferred communication style.

This paper adds to previous work by directly researching teens' experiences of sexting as a potent change agent in their socio-emotional understandings. While predominantly asking teens about (any) harms they experience though accessing online pornography, researchers soon discovered that teens were motivated to address sexting. Experience with sexting can disrupt teens', and younger children's, understandings of themselves in relation to others. Where sexts are unexpected and unsolicited, teens find themselves constructed as recipients of non-consensual sexual messages. Such experiences can serve both as a threat, and as an invitation to explore different aspects of the young person's socio-emotional make-up. At the same time, sexts may offer an arm's length introduction to sexual agency and self-determination; a bell-weather for an emerging sense of gender identity and sexual orientation.

Acknowledging that sexting by minors is legally fraught and heavily policed by most schools and parents, its pervasiveness and persistence indicates that teens construct it as an important component of their culture. Through talking with teen participants via in-depth, one-on-one settings and reinterviewing teens a year later to gauge the development of their perspectives over time, this project interrogates sexting from a teen perspective, in teens' own words, in a contemporary Australian setting. Thus, the paper updates the literature while re-asserting its relevance, highlighting the messiness of the contested frames (legal, educational, sexual, gendered and family-bound) that teens navigate while engaging in sexting practices. The qualitative findings that follow contribute to debates on sex education, policy and law-making around adolescents' sexual attitudes and

behaviours while starting a conversation around new ways of integrating teens' perspectives within future approaches to these challenges.

Methods and approach

This paper is informed by data gathered as part of Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project *Adolescent perceptions of harm from accessing online sexual content*. It responds to the Australian government's call to include young people's voices in debates about adolescents' experiences of harm from accessing sexual content online. While the project initially asked teens about experiences of online pornography, it became clear that many teens wanted to talk about their alternative constructions of online sexual content—specifically 'nudes' and 'dick pics'. The research method employs a multi-layered social constructionism framework (Burr, 2015) that seeks to understand the ways that individuals construct meaning in response to social interactions with those around them. While attention was paid to teens' perspectives of resistance against authorities' constructions of meaning around sexting, they were invited to tease out the various influences that had led to their understanding including their own ethical framework, family, input and media coverage. Adolescents' perspectives often evolve in response to specific socio-emotional experiences, constructed via shared encounters with significant others. These others include the social institutions that pattern young people's lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979): such as family, school and media. It is these iterative influences that are unpacked via in-depth interviews and focus groups that interrogate multi-layered meaning-making.

Social constructionism acknowledges that sociocultural norms and knowledges, including those relating to sex and sexuality, are constructed in social settings. Whereas parents and educators might discuss and inform young people about their constructions of sex, teens and adolescents typically develop their own social practices around sex via shared sexual interactions, partly reflecting a lack of what teens see as applicable education. They learn with and from each other in intimate social settings, constructing what it is to be sexual, and the importance of various sexual practices, together. These teen constructions of sexual content, including sexting, were investigated via semi-structured qualitative interviews, with a majority agreeing to subsequent follow-up interviews. Social constructionism allows exploration of how adolescents' meaning-making impacts their sexual and broader identity formation. It enables researchers to investigate teens' shared understandings around accessing online sexual content and their perceptions of its effects upon them (Tsaliki, 2016a). Additionally, the researchers represent a mix of backgrounds and disciplines including communications, sexology and anthropology.

Recruitment and demographics

COVID-19 meant that the original recruitment method of random walk doorknocking, as used by the EU Kids Online project (Livingstone et al., 2014), could not be used. Instead, researchers used social media (Twitter and Facebook), online and in-person community groups featuring parents, or parents and teens (such as school, parenting, civic and sporting groups), to recruit participants aged 11–17. Crucially, the overarching Ethics

Approval precluded the direct recruitment of teens: teens could only be approached with their parents' permission. Once a core group of participants had been secured, these were augmented by 'snowballing' (Streeton et al., 2004) where existing participants suggested others who might be interested, effectively vouching for the bona fides of the researchers and enhancing credibility and acceptability. The combination of the research topic, mandatory parental consent and the focus on minors meant snowballing operated predominantly at the level of parents' participation. While parents were also interviewed (separately from their teens, and by a different interviewer), this paper focuses upon teens' contributions.

Thirty teenagers aged 11–17 from Perth, Australia, participated in this research. Fifteen identified as male, thirteen as female and two young people identified as non-binary at the time of the study. Three participants labelled themselves as 'queer' or 'bi-curious'. Participants were drawn from public, private and catholic schools and represented a range of ethnic backgrounds including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Vietnamese and Japanese. In all, there were 49 interviews with 19 teens taking part in a second interview at least 1 year later, offering semi-longitudinal data. Limitations of this study include that most participants were white Australian, from Western Australia and from a middle-class socio-economic background.

Interviews ($n = 49$) were conducted primarily in the homes of participants since this was their preference. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. The data collected allows a comparative and detailed exploration of individual views. Data has been deidentified.

Semi-structured interviews

The interviews were semi-structured to allow participants to add emphasis in the areas that interested them, and to raise additional matters such as sexting. Individual interviews lasted between 30 min and 2 h, offering rich insights into teens' experiences around sexuality, their experience with sexual content and their formal sex education. Indicative questions asked of teens include:

Have you accessed sexual content/adult content/porn?

How old were you when you first accessed sexual content? Can you remember how that came about?

There were no questions directly relating to sexting in the first set of interviews. Following analysis of this initial interview material, sexting was recognised as a prominent theme. It was often the first, and sometimes the only, encounter teen respondents had engaged with regarding online sexual content. Follow-up interviews more centrally interrogated teens' perceptions of sexting and sexting education:

What are your thoughts on sending nudes? (If someone sends a nude photograph of themselves to someone else [consensually]?).

Consent education has recently been made mandatory, is this something you have been taught in school?

Have you been taught about sexting and online safety?

Teens' raising of sexting in the first round of interviews might be interpreted as them using the interview to suggest a mismatch between adults' concerns around the harms they might experience compared with their own perspectives on 'sending nudes'. Teens said they wanted to be better educated around sending nudes and responding to unsolicited imagery.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to code meta-themes, with sexting identified as a prominent theme. Subthemes included consensual sexting (part of a relationship), non-consensual sharing (IBSHA) and sexting education. Data analysis and coding was conducted by the first author, under guidance from the second author. Semantic analysis to explore participants' meaning-making was combined with latent level analysis which focuses on in-depth meanings behind participants' expressions (Braun and Clarke, 2023). Interpreted via social constructionism (Burr, 2015), the data allowed exploration of issues around identity and culture; all deeply influenced by family (McKee, 2007) and by the contexts within which sexual content is accessed. As well as investigating (self-) perceived harm experienced by some adolescents through accessing sexual content online, this research explores teens' views about how such harm may be avoided or mitigated through education, and whether there might be compensatory positives. This empirical evidence and the subsequent findings add nuance to existing work examining harms-based approaches (e.g. Flood, 2009: 386; Pavón-Benítez et al., 2022; Ringrose et al., 2021; Setty, 2019); however, further research is needed.

Evidence

Perceptions of sexting education

Throughout interviews, teens shared their experiences of RSE which predominantly comprised consent, puberty, reproduction and (increasingly) online safety, including sexting. When it came to sexting, most young people recall the message as being 'Don't'.

Max (non-binary, 12) found the education surrounding sexting to be unhelpful, noting:

'We did a topic about nudes in health ... mainly about consent and actually knowing that you consent to send nudes ... It wasn't talking about formal consent, it was just basically saying.. "don't send them."'

From this teen's perspectives, education was somewhat ad hoc and delivered as a prohibition.

Some respondents had experienced ‘sexting education’ in the form of year-group assemblies, where students were shamed, where there was little room for questions, and where ‘cringe-worthy’ videos unreflective of teens’ experiences were played:

‘This video we had, it was someone who took a photo of their hip bone and had a star tattoo and then everyone called her Starry the next day and she cried and left school. Everyone was like “what??? ... this is [a] dumb bad quality video [that] kind of overdramatised things.” It was more fear-based, like “don’t send it.”’ (Nicola, female, 15).

Nicola suggested such campaigns lack credibility when they aim to address ‘sexting’ but compliance with media content classifications, legalities and other sensibilities may prevent videos from including actual depictions of school-aged sexting behaviours. She adds: *‘I actually don’t know if the talk really did anything’*.

Most teens were hyperaware of the legal complexities surrounding the sending of nudes, whereas their preferred discussion topics were ignored in the education they received. Knowing the legislative framework appears not to dissuade teens from engaging in sexting. When asked whether lessons deterred her peers from sexting, Tiffany (15) answered *‘Uh, no’*.

Most of the 30 teens interviewed felt the quality of their online safety education was mixed at best and, in some cases, inappropriate or at odds with teens’ experiences. As Lauren (14, female) explains: *‘It’s not really working’*:

‘They more veer on the safety side of things... We covered it in health, and it was more like... what nudes were... they more said why nudes are bad... kind of a message of... “don’t send nudes.”’

She went on to say that education around sexting tends to be fear-based, risk focused, and mostly ignored:

‘They know the warnings, but it just sort of goes in one ear and out the other. I don’t think kids listen to that’ – Lauren (female, 14).

Most participants felt awkward or uncomfortable speaking to their parents about sex, noting that sexting was barely discussed, or glossed over. As Seraphina, 13, said:

‘Parents just tell me “try and avoid it.” Like, “if it’s there just get rid of it,” type of thing’.

Despite consistent messaging from adults around the dangers of sexting, and instructions to avoid it, teens continue to sext. Most adults in the space were presented by teens as adopting a formulaic tick-box approach to sexting, with little respect for, or understanding of, the real needs of their teen audiences, privileging instead a no-questions: ‘adults know best’ approach.

Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse (IBSHA)

Teens acknowledge there is a 'dark side' of sexting. Most younger participants shared their discomfort around their first experiences of sexting and encountering sexual content online non-consensually. This was especially true of young female participants and is a form of IBSHA (Ringrose and Regehr, 2023), where recipients receive unsolicited images and/or images are leaked or shared by peers without consent. Most teens argued for better information and education about sexting, sex and bodies which would have helped them cope with unsolicited sexts:

'You should be prepared before you see any of it'. It was just unlucky that I wasn't ... 'cause the photo I saw ... 'I think ... you should be prepared and have [it] explained at school before [seeing] it'. – Lauren (13)

The disgust expressed by Lauren and her peers reflects a lack of warning around receiving unsolicited sexual content. While Lauren presented herself as resilient and able to move on, she argued that education around sexting before she encountered it might have helped her. Lauren's desire for effective education around sexting, and sexual content, is predicated upon her experience of unsolicited imagery and the notion of consent in terms of ensuring a recipient is willing to *receive an image*.

Much school-based education focuses on avoiding creating or sharing images, coupled with the dire consequences of sexting; however, this ignores the experiences of recipients. Interviewees like Lauren highlight that two-way consent is paramount prior to sending, or seeing, sexual imagery. Interviewees were also concerned about consent in terms of leaked images. As Tiffany (15, female), notes:

'It's the guy's fault, or whoever leaked its, fault, 'cause the person that sent it never wanted it to be leaked. There was no consent if they've leaked it'.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that the leaking of images, or sending images without consent, was common among their age group: '*It happens regularly, daily*' (Tiffany, 15). Interviewees noted this as a betrayal of the person whose image was shared without consent, noting the risk of the image becoming part of a person's digital footprint and the possibility of the image being shared widely. Teens argued that non-consensual sharing of images showed a lack of respect: '*I think it's dumb*', said Caris (15, female) '*I think that's showing how much [little] you care about the female or male*'.

Classes around sexting failed to position sexting as one of a repertoire of sexual behaviours, where bodies and individuals should be respected, as per real-life sexual scenarios. Teens clearly understood the repercussions of sexting but sought information and discussion regarding mutual respect and minimising harm. Nicola (15):

'Obviously if you're under 18 you probably have to be more careful with it... I think sending nudes of yourself probably isn't bad but sending other people's [nudes]... it's kind of f*cked'.

Tiffany (at 16, in her second interview) suggested the sharing of nudes had become so common, that there were few repercussions and the behaviour had become normalised:

‘I feel like you probably don’t want to send it if you’re not in a relationship but also I know people –whose nudes have been spread and I feel like it does get overdramatised how much it will ruin their life, like it made them a little upset for maybe a day – or not a day, obviously, longer – but then they seemed fine and they moved on and they were fine with it’.

While Tiffany had not experienced this breach of consent first-hand and her observation may be anomalous, leaking images of someone may have a diminishing impact, given that these behaviours appears to be comparatively commonplace.

A younger participant, Seraphina (13), found her first experiences of unsolicited sexting to be distressing:

‘Well it was a bit traumatising but now it’s alright because it’s just like normal, I guess’.

Such comments suggest the normalisation of sexting, and even IBSHA, among Seraphina’s peers, indicating the possibility of desensitisation:

‘Everyone pretty much gets [sent] that sort of stuff... Getting sent stuff without [consent] ...and getting asked for them as well is normal now’.

Clearly, prohibitions are not working, but school-based education is yet to develop a more credible and engaging message. If more attention were paid to the fact that adolescents are more likely than other groups of people to be impacted as the victims and/or perpetrators of image-based sexual abuse, then issues of consent and mutual respect would grow in significance.

Asked about her first sexting experience, Seraphina said ‘*I didn’t really know what it was*’. Given that most teens interviewed received their first image somewhere between 10 and 13 years old, education about sexting should happen before children start encountering ‘nudes’. As Seraphina notes:

‘In primary school you don’t really get taught any of that stuff’.

Ruby (female, 13) had also received an unsolicited image without prior education:

‘If I was older, I don’t think it would be shocking’.

Arguably teens would be better equipped to safeguard themselves, and their first experiences may not have been as distressing, if relevant education had been offered at an earlier age and teens understood consent and respect in digital contexts.

Sexting as part of romantic relationships

Most teen interviewees argued that, despite the legal implications, it was appropriate to share nude images with consent when two people were in a relationship:

‘As long as they don’t send it to anyone else without them knowing then I don’t really have a problem with it, because that’s just between them... If they consent, it’s fine’ (Rebecca, 13).

Indeed, where there was trust, sharing and bonding in the teen relationship, interviewees failed to see a cause for concern. Warren (17, male) noted that most of his friends keep their sexting ‘*within the relationship*’. Warren continues:

‘I wouldn’t want my stuff getting leaked so I wouldn’t send it, but if I was in a relationship, it’s a bit different ‘cause I trust them, they trust me. But if it’s just some girl I’m talking to, I don’t know where it’s going to go, but if it’s a relationship I trust her to keep it’.

Warren’s view is that the sense of safety in a relationship enables the respect and trust that stops either person from sharing images outside the parties involved. He constructs a relationship as a safe space for digital sex. Young people indicate they are not currently taught that sexting can be part of a healthy relationship, yet that is frequently their perspective. One possible implication of this is that the educational message should move from ‘don’t engage in sexting’ to ‘share images only when you both agree to do so’, offering a more sex-positive and balanced approach. When Lauren gave her second interview the now 14-year-old reflected that:

‘I reckon it’s probably better to send a nude to someone you know, like a partner or someone you know and trust really well... I definitely think it’s more ok to send a nude if you’re in a committed relationship... and you really know and trust the person’ (Lauren, female, 14).

Lauren was asked whether an educational message which acknowledges that sexting happens and that seeks to support safer practices when teens engage in digital sex, might help:

‘I think it would be really useful, some people just don’t know, if you send something to someone that it’s obviously “private” [...] you just want to share it with that one person. I think there’s just a level of common decency. It should be pretty obvious, if you’re sending a nude to someone and its only to them. It’s even worse if you’ve sent something to someone and you say, “Don’t send this to anyone else” and they send it someone else. That’s obviously completely bad in the first place, because they’ve betrayed you’ (Lauren, female, 14).

In addition to risk-based information, teens could be encouraged to negotiate and respect exclusivity within an established, trusting relationship or interaction. Moreover, teens should be taught their right *not* to receive sexual images without their active consent and could be offered ways to respond to such images when they simply land in their

phones. Appropriate education would include the need for active consent and refraining from sending unsolicited images. What became clear from the interviews was that educational conversations were framed in terms of the law, and the potential for police involvement, rather than via acknowledging teens' rights, sensibilities and their growing experience and understanding of their sexuality. Despite having visiting cybersecurity experts, specialist speakers and legal discussions about online safety that used scare tactics, teens persist in sending nudes to one another, and some teens continue to disrespect the imperatives of consent.

Discussion

When asked, adolescents indicate that current education around sexting is unfit for purpose and too heavily focused upon risk. As Caris (15) argues, the only message she received was '*Sexting's bad*'. This research, based on teen voices, suggests educators and policymakers consider a sex-positive approach that balances discussion of risk with benefit, acknowledging that teens construct sexting as one element in an array of explorative sexual activities. Teens' comments indicate that Australian approaches to sexting education are outdated, suggesting that a reset should acknowledge emerging adolescent relationships, engage with teens' real-life practices and meet teens' expectations around fairness, noting that the legal context of sexting in Australia does not take consensual sexting behaviours into account (Albury et al., 2013). Providing information that supports the building of mutual respect, consent and safety when engaging in digital and online sex is likely to be more successful than purely risk-focused information. It also respects teens' growing agency and their lived experience. These study findings are consistent with existing literature which explores teen perspectives of 'sext education' (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016; Jørgensen et al., 2019; Ojeda and Del Rey, 2022; Setty, 2019). In answer to a call for further teen perspectives (Albury et al., 2013; Dully et al., 2023), this data offers an indication of Australian teens' normative experiences of sexting and sext education, urging educators and other adults to consider reframing their messages.

When incidents of sexting become visible, through accidental exposure or deliberate intent, participants experienced their school's response to be reactionary and fear-based. Indeed, teens say schools will frequently roll out a specific 'online safety education' program in response to such revelations, with little regard for the perspective of the teens involved and generally via a discourse of victim-blaming. Although such messages aim to ensure teenagers are safe and protected, teen respondents in this study suggest that these programs have little positive impact and can be counter-productive, encouraging stigmatisation. Such negativity potentially hinders dynamic, open conversations about digital sex.

Given the cultural and legal complexities associated with sexting and young people, schools take care when discussing sexting and online safety. However, messages that tell teens not to engage in sexting seem unhelpful to that audience and are often ridiculed or ignored according to teen participants. Teens argue that messages are fear-based and that positive aspects of sex, sexuality and sexting are seldom discussed. Indicating that they

want safe, positive, real-life informed conversations around sex, sexuality and sexting, teens are quick to acknowledge that ‘digital technologies increasingly play a role in the sex lives and relationships of young people’ (Power et al., 2022: 64).

Almost all teen interviewees had experienced IBSHA via receiving unsolicited sexual images, in the absence of informed consent and sometimes at a stage where participants didn’t understand what they were viewing. These young people wished they had known more about the sending and receiving of ‘nudes’, indicating a requirement for earlier, targeted education. Existing research notes that Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence and IBSHA tends to be gendered in nature, disproportionately impacting females and gender diverse individuals (Dobson, 2018; Dobson and Ringrose, 2016; Henry et al., 2020; Ravn et al., 2021).

However, rising rates of non-consensual sharing hint at the possibility of growing toxicity and misogyny that might correspond with increased rates of sexual violence (Borumandnia et al., 2020), despite movements towards consent awareness education and #metoo-informed reframing of public discourse. Most participants seem able to build resilience and rationalise subsequent experiences and non-consensual sexting communication – by ignoring, blocking or deleting such advances. In part, this aligns with previous research findings that suggest teens’ negative experiences of online sexual content are mostly socially constructed, with the majority of young people appearing to be able to process their experiences and remain unaffected (Rovolis and Tsaliki, 2012). However, many teen participants argue they need better education around sexting, along with clear advice about how to deal with persistent non-consensual sexting.

Teens indicate that sexting education should start in upper primary, with age-appropriate discussions and information continuing into high school, and with students and educators engaged in a two-way exchange of views and perspectives. Recent guidance to schools around sexting education in the UK has moved towards less emphasis on the legal aspects of sexting and a deliberate attempt to reduce the shaming of young people who participate in sexting (Setty, 2019). Setty (2019) encourages educative approaches to further de-stigmatise youth sexuality, instead emphasising young people’s rights to make informed choices over their own bodies, ethics, responsibilities and sexual selves.

Ordering young people to avoid sexting amounts to fear-based education, which has repeatedly been shown to fail, especially in communication with adolescents. Messages to ‘not engage’ in sexting are akin to abstinence-based education which is ineffective and unsuccessful (Kaljee et al., 2007; Kohler et al., 2008; Stanger-Hall and Hall, 2011). The ‘True love waits’ and ‘Silver ring thing’ campaigns in the US in the mid-noughties (DeRogatis, 2012; Williams, 2011) are just one indication of this. Given the pervasiveness and persistence of sexting as a teen (and adult) sexual behaviour, it is likely that it serves a useful role in promoting and supporting intimacy: a view shared by the majority of teenagers in this study who are sexually active online and/or in person. In the same way that young people are taught safe sex practices before they turn 16, even though penetrative sex is illegal at that age, in an effort to keep them safe; likewise, fit for purpose education around safe sexting should be administered to acknowledge and match adolescents’ lives. Indeed, sexting, a component of digital sex, is sex and education should be expanded to include digital intimacies.

Equipped with the skills to navigate digital sex safely, and offered balanced information around consent and risk, teens can exercise their desire for autonomy and intimacy as key aspects of their digital sexual development. Additionally, teens indicate that education around respecting digital representations of one another's bodies, as they would respect a partner's body in real-life, would be useful. As yet, there is little indication of teens receiving appropriate sexting education, such as ensuring that a private image sent and received consensually, is honoured and respected by not sharing the image. Developing teens' communication skills and encouraging them to treat and regard one another's bodies with reverence, would help build respectful, healthy relationships that can be maintained through adult life.

Taking a sex-positive approach to sexting education is challenging. The quest to preserve childhood 'innocence' involves moral regulation and a hyper-awareness of risk in response to adult anxieties regarding youth sexuality (Tsaliki and Chronaki, 2020). Such attitudes generally aim to stop young people engaging in anything pertaining to sex (Ballal et al., 2022), sexual self-expression (including via sexts) and the claiming and enacting of sexual citizenship and agency (Millner et al., 2015). Young people argue it is time they be given a speaking position on these issues (Dudek et al., 2022; Tsaliki, 2016b).

Parents interviewed in this study revealed their own sex education was flawed, suggesting this created uncertainty for them about what makes for good sex education. The perspective shared by teens, however, is supported by other recent research (Power et al., 2022; Stanley et al., 2018), where sexting is perceived as a positive activity by young people. Therefore education they receive about sexting ideally needs to match and acknowledge adolescents' worldview as well as support respect, consent and reciprocal intimacy. "'Good" sexting demands consent and mutuality", say Roberts and Ravn (2020: 259) in a study with undergraduate males, adding, 'this is complex given the perceived understanding of the need to engage in a stepwise escalation of sexualised content as the sexting encounter unfolds'.

Moving away from victim-blaming, sexting can be understood as a learnt social practice distinct from flirting and harassment. Sexting education should foreground affirmative consent and offer positive ways in which to navigate the world of sexual intimacy, instead of focussing on avoiding (but thereby perpetuating) public humiliation and shame (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016). Further, in an age of the sextortion and IBSHA of minors (Wolak et al., 2018), it's crucially important that adolescents should be able to confide in adults about their sexting practices. Prohibiting such behaviours may impact a young person's willingness to approach their parent in the event of a shocking interaction. An open-dialogue that provides support and guidance is recommended.

Encouraging young people to recognise that they often use sexting as a testing ground for trust, and for relationship building, could support constructive education regarding digital sex. Acknowledging the courtship, and intimacy-building nature of digital sex, whilst being risk-aware and harnessing young people's desire to engage in consensual, trust-building online relationships, could constitute one element of a more holistic form of sexual education. Although some participants said they were not interested in sexting themselves, they knew their peers engaged in such practices and, like adult research participants (Power et al., 2023), argued sexting is an acceptable avenue through which to

build trust and intimacy. Sharing a holistic view of what it means to be intimate, and the value teens should place on their own bodies and image, and upon consent and the maintenance of personal boundaries, would transform sext education. Such an approach would acknowledge key drivers of positive teen behaviour including loyalty, trust, self-respect and respect for others within relationships. In concert with action to address gender-based discrimination inherent in the negative messaging around people whose images are shared, sex-positive RSE may assist to reduce sexual violence (O'Brien et al., 2021; Schneider and Hirsch, 2020), including the incidence and severity of IBSHA.

Conclusion

Sexting is a prevalent form of communication in teens' sexual relationships and courtship rituals. It is exceedingly difficult for young people to navigate a world in which IBSHA occurs, in violation of consent, but those difficulties are not addressed by an absence of guidance and a surfeit of fear-based education that perpetuates gender-based discrimination. 'Don't do it' messaging is akin to abstinence-based education and can negatively impact teenagers' perceptions of sexuality, general wellbeing and may prompt sex shame. Such negative narratives can lead to sexual repression, denial and the shaming of young people through categorising their early sexual experiences as illegitimate or, worse, illegal. Such approaches, especially where assigned differential value and censure to identical behaviours practiced by adults, are experienced by young people as a social double standard (Albury et al., 2013) and teens reject these notions. Teens illustrate a clear need for more direct education around digital and online sex, provided at an earlier age, prior to engaging with or being exposed to such acts. A more nuanced approach, supported by young people in this research, is to balance the actualities of young people's sexting practices, while addressing the risks as part of a holistic approach to teen sex education. Teens' (and many adults') experience is that sexting can act as a building block for constructing intimacy between individuals and is an important component of many contemporary dating practices. A sex-positive approach to sexting education that validates the everyday experiences of young people would acknowledge these factors.

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