Sexting and Young People: A Review of the Qualitative Literature

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Abstract

The term "sexting" refers to the sending and receiving of sexually explicit imagery via some form of virtual messaging. Although sexting is by no means restricted to young people, it is the participation of young people and its effect on their well-being that have led to widespread concern from parents, educators, and the media alike. Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, and Harvey (2012) argued that this "media panic" exists in response to a predominantly adult discourse with little input from the teenagers and young people who engage in sexting. As such, this paper will review the small but emerging field of qualitative research into teen sexting (TS) to identify the effect of sexting on the well-being of young people. Findings from this review indicate that many young people viewed sexting as "fun" (Lippman & Campbell, 2014) and amusing (Burkett, 2015). Moreover, sexting can be part of a sexual-experimentation phase for teens who are not ready to engage in physical sexual activity. Negative effects on well-being including reputational damage are also discussed. It is concluded that researchers must continue to use creative, participatory methods with young people to further explore the well-being effects of this complex form of communication.

Keywords

Young People, Adolescence, Sexting, Digital Media, Relationships, Social Media, Sex Education, E-Safety, Qualitative Research, Literature Review, Focus Groups, Interviews, Mixed Methods

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The term "sexting" refers to the sending and receiving of sexually explicit imagery via some form of virtual messaging. Although sexting is by no means restricted to young people, it is the participation of young people and its effect on their well-being that have led to widespread concern from parents, educators, and the media alike. Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, and Harvey (2012) argued that this "media panic" exists in response to a predominantly adult discourse with little input from the teenagers and young people who engage in sexting. As such, this paper will review the small but emerging field of qualitative research into teen sexting (TS) to identify the effect of sexting on the well-being of young people. Findings from this review indicate that many young people viewed sexting as "fun" (Lippman & Campbell, 2014) and amusing (Burkett, 2015). Moreover, sexting can be part of a sexual-experimentation phase for teens who are not ready to engage in physical sexual activity. Negative effects on well-being including reputational damage are also discussed. It is concluded that researchers must continue to use creative, participatory methods with young people to further explore the well-being effects of this complex form of communication. Keywords: Young People, Adolescence, Sexting, Digital Media, Relationships, Social Media, Sex Education, E-Safety, Qualitative Research, Literature Review, Focus Groups, Interviews, Mixed Methods

"Which is epidemic—sexting, or worrying about it?" (Bialik, 2009)

The role that mobile phones play in the lives and well-being of young people has long been the target of controversy (Dimonte & Ricchiuto, 2006). Negative behaviours associated with young people and mobile phone use include increased access to pornography (Rothman, Kaczmarsky, Burke, Jansen, & Baughman, 2015), mobile phone addiction (Walsh, White, & Young, 2008), and cyberbullying (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, & Tippett, 2008). One such behaviour that has received much attention from lawmakers, researchers, and the media alike is sexting, which is defined as "sexually explicit content communicated via text messages, smart phones, or visual and web 2.0 activities such as social networking sites" (Ringrose et al., 2012, p. 9).

Given that sexting often involves the self-production of pornographic images, comparisons have been made between the effect of teen sexting (TS) and the negative effects of adolescent exposure to pornography (Stanley, Barter, Wood, Aghtaie, Larkins, Lanau, & Överlien, 2016), which include an increased tolerance to unwanted sexual behaviours (Bonino, Ciairano, Rabaglietti, & Cattelino, 2006) and perpetration of sexual harassment (Brown & L'Engle, 2009). TS has further been linked to negative well-being outcomes such as depression (Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012) and low self-esteem (Sorbring, Skoog, & Bohlin, 2014). Indeed, a review by Döring (2014) revealed that 79% of papers on TS associated it with negative outcomes.

Whilst such quantitative investigations have contributed greatly to the TS discourse, it is important to note that this type of research alone cannot establish causality (Wolfe, Marcum, Higgins, & Ricketts, 2014, p. 7). Moreover, it lacks the nuances of personal experience and contextual details that qualitative investigations can capture. As such, this paper will review qualitative investigations into the effect of sexting on the well-being of young people. This will be one of the first reviews to focus specifically on the qualitative literature in this area and as such will be invaluable in helping to identify the directions such investigations should take in the future.

Method

The aim of this review is to provide a detailed summary of the small but growing body of qualitative research concerning young people and sexting. As such, a scoping review was deemed the most appropriate method, as it allows a rapid and broad examination of the area of interest and is particularly suited to areas in which reviews have not been conducted (Mays, Roberts, & Popay, 2001). Moreover, without the need for extensive data synthesis or quality assessment, scoping reviews allow for the maximum amount of work in a specific area to be included (Armstrong, Hall, Doyle, & Waters, 2011).

Given the small number of qualitative research studies published to date in this area, mixed-methods investigations have been included in the review to ensure that as much relevant data are captured as possible. To this end, investigations with samples up to the age of 25 have also been included, as this is the age range most commonly used by studies investigating young people and sexting. As such, this paper will review any qualitative or mixed-methods investigation exploring the production and exchange of sexually explicit images by young people up to the age of 25. Papers will be excluded if they were published outside the peer-reviewed literature.

Based on the criteria detailed above, I searched Google Scholar, PsychINFO, and Science Direct using the following terms: adolescent sexting, young people and sexting, teenagers and sexting, and qualitative adolescent sexting. The search terms were based on those used by the two most recent systematic reviews in this area (Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson, & Svedin, 2016; Krieger, 2016) as well as my own experience as a doctoral researcher in this field of research. Via this preliminary search, six papers were identified. A further two articles were included based on a manual search of the bibliographies of the systematic review papers (Cooper et al., 2015; Krieger, 2016), bringing the total number of inclusions to eight (see Table 1).

Table 1

Investigations Included in the Scoping Review

Authors and Year of Publication	Methodology	Methods (Qualitative)	Age Range of Participants	Data Analysis Method
Burkett (2015)	Qualitative	Semi-Structured Interviews	18-25	Discourse Analysis
Le (2016)	Qualitative	Semi-Structured	18-24	Interpretive Phenomenological

		Interviews		Analysis
Lippman & Campbell (2014)	Qualitative	Open-Ended Written Questionnaires	12-18	Thematic Analysis
McGovern, Crofts, Lee, & Milivojevic (2016)	Mixed Methods	Media Analysis, Legal Analysis and Focus Groups	18-20	Thematic Analysis
Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, and Harvey (2012)	Qualitative	Focus Groups, Interviews and Online Ethnography	12-15	Thematic Analysis
Stanley, Barter, Wood, Aghtaie, Larkins, Lanau, & Överlien (2016)	Mixed Methods	Semi-Structured Interviews	14-17	Framework Approach (Spencer, Ritchie, & O'Connor, 2003)
Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith (2013)	Qualitative	Semi-Structured Interviews	15-20	Thematic Analysis
Yeung, Horyniak, Vella, Hellard, & Lim (2014)	Mixed Methods	Focus Groups	16-25	Thematic Analysis

I assessed the eight investigations for quality using the Qualitative Checklist of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2011). CASP is a ten-point checklist that allows for the systematic appraisal of qualitative findings and as such enabled me to assess the robustness of the investigations that met my inclusion criteria.

All eight investigations met the requirements of the CASP checklist and as such were included in the review. According to the framework for conducting a scoping review by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), before summarizing and reporting the review findings, the researcher should sort the data into key themes or categories. I initially sorted the findings into positive and negative effects of sexting on well-being before further splitting the positive and negative categories into sub-categories based on shared themes. Via this approach, I determined that the

outcomes associated with teen sexting can be split into four broad categories. The first two can be considered positive effects on well-being: (a) pleasure and amusement and (b) a safe relief of sexual frustration, whilst the final categories, (c) reputational damage and (d) feeling threatened, reflect negative effects on well-being. I will discuss each category in depth below.

Review

Pleasure and Amusement

Sexting for Fun. Pleasure and amusement are frequently revealed as an outcome when young people are given the opportunity to discuss their experiences of sexting. Open-ended questionnaire findings from North American 15- to 18-year-olds by Lippman and Campbell (2014) indicated that, far from having a negative experience, a majority of the participants felt that sexting was nothing out of the ordinary and "no big deal" (p. 378). Most of the responses indicated that a sense of enjoyment was gained by sexting and that the images were mostly shared within romantic relationships.

Lippman and Campbell's (2014) investigation also revealed that younger participants found the actual images humorous. This suggests that younger teenagers do not necessarily view the images for their sexual or pornographic content, a phase that Lippman and Campbell (2014) referred to as "pre-sexting" (p. 380). Burkett's (2015) in-depth interviews with university students also found that sexting does not always occur for the sake of sexual arousal. For example, Burkett (2015) found that sexually explicit images can sometimes be a source of humour or a type of joke within friendship groups. Interestingly, Burkett (2015) also found that, when sexual images are shared within a romantic context, sexting is governed by an "unspoken rule" (p. 854) understood by both parties that the images are not a declaration of sexual intent but simply a way to have fun and flirt. Burkett (2015) also reported that young females might share such images with other female friends as a way of gaining feedback on their physical appearance.

Production of Images and Videos. To date, much of the quantitative teen sexting literature has focused on what transpires or how young people feel once the sexually explicit content has been shared (Cooper et al., 2016). However, the emotions that can be derived from the act of creating sexts have been largely overlooked as a topic of investigation.

Lippman and Campbell (2014), however, reported that the act of producing the images can be innately enjoyable for some young people. Interestingly, investigations with adult samples have also found this. For example, Goggin and Crawford (2010) also cited the process of creating and editing sexts as a pleasurable experience that could result in bonding and friendship formation. Le (2016) found that one young woman saw creating sexts as comparable to "crafting art" (p. 35) during her semi-structured interviews with 19- to 22-year-old women, whilst Burkett (2015) noted that male university students derived pleasure from producing and sharing sexts with current or prospective partners.

Findings from this first section challenge the notion that, when young people engage in sexting, they do so purely for sexual arousal. That is, younger participants might sext because they find the images humorous, whilst young adults might sext because they gain enjoyment from the process of creating the images or see it as a joke. What is clear, however, is that sexting can take a variety of forms and does not occur exclusively within romantic or sexual relationships.

Safe Relief of Sexual Frustration

A recurrent finding is that sexting is often seen as a safe experimental phase for younger teenagers who are not sexually active or ready for the emotions associated with a sexual relationship (Burkett, 2015; Lenhart, 2011; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; McGovern et al., 2016; Yeung et al., 2014). Moreover, focus group findings by Yeung et al. (2014) aligned sexting with the concept of the "cyber self" (p. 338). The cyber self is a persona that can be utilised online in which technology users behave differently when communicating via the internet than they would when communicating with others face to face. This modified persona is the effect of the barrier that technology creates, leading boys to feel safe in requesting sexual images from girls and girls to feel safe in producing and sending the images (Yeung et al., 2014, p. 338) because the online environment creates the perception of privacy. Sexting has also been described by teens as an alternative to sex where the risk of pregnancy does not exist (Stanley et al., 2016).

With older teenagers and young adult samples, sexting has also been identified as relief of sexual frustration when they want to have sex but are unable to because they lack a partner (Stanley et al., 2016) or are in a long-distance relationship (Le, 2016).

Taken together, these findings suggest that, despite the concern that surrounds TS, young people might be sexting because they see it as a safe way of developing and maintaining their romantic relationships. This is both due to the perceived safety of sexting platforms and a way of avoiding the risks associated with having sex. This, interestingly, seems to mirror how the media frames adult sexting as a healthy way to communicate sexual desire despite failing to acknowledge that it might have similar benefits for young people (Hasinoff, 2013, p. 7).

Reputation Damage

The sharing of sexts beyond the intended audience is considered by many to be the biggest risk associated with TS (Yeung et al., 2014). Colenbrander (2016) referred to this phenomenon as "escalated sexting."

Bond (2011) discussed two situations in which an image might be circulated: the first occurs when an image originally created for private use within a romantic relationship loses its private status once that relationship breaks down. Yeung et al. (2014) noted that the relationship between the sender and the receiver can affect how the image circulator is seen. For example, their sample of 16- to 25-year-olds deemed the circulating of images made within a romantic relationship objectionable, whilst images generated within a non-committed relationship can be circulated with less judgement. This was echoed by Le (2016), who found that, once a relationship becomes serious enough, an "implicit understanding" (p. 26) that sharing sexts is a betrayal develops.

The second image-sharing scenario discussed by Bond (2011) is images being shared unintentionally, such as sending an image to the wrong recipient by mistake. Whilst this seems at odds with the idea that sexting is viewed as safe by young people, it appears that teenagers are very aware of the privacy limitations of modern communicative technology. In some cases, even "hacking and government monitoring" (Le, 2016, p. 33) are cited as threats to the privacy of sexts.

Whatever the cause of the images being leaked, the well-being outcomes for the individual shown in the photo once the images are shared are often negative (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Burkett (2015) also noted that, whilst escalated sexting was not a frequent occurrence in her investigation, when it did occur, the victims found themselves doubting whom they could trust.

Escalated Sexting and Gender. One consistent finding from the literature is that sexting is a gendered behaviour (Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013), and it is often girls who fall victim to escalated sexting. Ringrose et al. (2012) described how young girls can be tagged with the reputation of being a "sket" (p. 43), which is a British slang term implying promiscuity, once images are shared. Notably, their focus groups and interviews revealed that it was not only the boys who saw them this way; other girls also participated in the name-calling and judgemental behaviour. Furthermore, in Le's (2016) investigation, one teen labelled *herself* as "trashy" (p. 47) for sending her boyfriend explicit images. Interview findings with 14- to 17-year-olds by Stanley et al. (2016) also indicated that the gendered nature of the reputational damage appears to be particularly apparent in more traditionally religious communities.

One explanation for the gendered aspect of escalated sexting emerged from focus groups with 16- to 25-year-olds from Australia (Yeung et al., 2014). One participant reflected that, whilst boys can expose themselves "for a laugh" (p. 336), girls will often experience humiliation if their bodies are exposed because society attaches a greater stigma and more embarrassment to the exposure of the female body (Yeung et al., 2014, p. 336). Further findings from this investigation indicated that the shame associated with sexually explicit images of females make them more likely to be circulated because the images are more controversial and therefore become a greater commodity. This in turn causes more reputational damage for the girl in question. These qualitative investigations seem to provide context for findings from quantitative investigations in which young males are found to be far more likely than females to circulate sexts of the opposite gender (Strassberg et al., 2014).

Furthermore, as well as managing the effects of reputational damage, young girls are likely to blame themselves for having caused the situation in the first place by creating the images whilst attributing little blame to the person who circulated the photo (Burkett, 2015). This was echoed by Hasinoff (2013), who noted that victim blaming is a common aspect of the TS narrative.

These findings indicate that, if a young girl has an explicit image of herself forwarded to an unintended audience, she will likely face judgement from male and female peers alike, as well as blaming herself. If she belongs to a religious community or the original image was sent within a casual relationship, the negative outcomes might be intensified. This suggests that, whilst there are examples of escalated sexting affecting males and taking place in a non-sexual context (Burkett et al., 2015), young girls are much more likely to experience negative effects of sexting.

Feeling Threatened

In the UK, sexting is illegal under the age of 18 (Sexual Offences Act, 2003); however, sexting can also be deemed a crime under the Malicious Communications Act of 1988. Context for this has been provided by qualitative literature. Bond (2011) noted that the content of a sext remains unknown until the message is opened; thus, managing risk is a challenge for young people when they engage in this type of behaviour. Moreover, participants in Burkett's (2015) investigation referred to feeling "uncomfortable and threatened" (p. 850) after receiving sexts from people they had met online. Burkett (2015) noted that these feelings were caused not only by the sexual content but also the context of having never met the sender. Le's (2016) investigation with young women from Canada also found that the threat, either explicit or implicit, of images being leaked can lead to feelings of apprehension and paranoia for young people. Further findings from focus groups have indicated that these feelings of threat and paranoia can last for years after the images have been sent (McGovern et al., 2016).

Conclusion

A common conclusion of papers exploring young people and sexting is that qualitative investigations are of immense value to the discourse, as they provide the contextual details that quantitative investigations lack; however, they remain scarce (Cooper, 2016; Burkett, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2012). The small body of literature available for this review supports this notion. What is clear from the existing literature is that the effect of sexting on the well-being of young people is difficult to quantify into a binary positive or negative outcome. Gender, culture, age, and relationships can all alter how both senders and receivers are affected by participating in sexting, and this challenges the traditional notion that sexting is exclusively bad for the well-being of young people.

Gaps in the Literature and Recommendations for Future Research

This area of research is gradually growing as teen-sexting gains more attention from educators, lawmakers, and the media; however, it is still very much lacking in qualitative investigations that explore sexting in different contexts and educational settings such as religious schools, private schools, and suburban schools. Moreover, the existing body of research is predominantly focused on heterosexual relationships, leaving a considerable gap in the literature regarding young people in same-sex relationships that future investigations could fill.

Another notable omission concerns methodologies. Although there is consensus that young people are experts in online communication, this review has demonstrated that few qualitative investigations into young people and sexting have taken the opportunity to use online methods to capture what sexting means to young people. The use of online methods can provide anonymity and therefore serve to put participants at ease; this is especially important when sensitive topics of research such as sexting are concerned. Furthermore, the imbalance of power and knowledge between researcher and participant has been cited as the most significant ethical consideration when research is conducted with young people (Morrow & Richards, 1996). Using a method of communication that young people are likely to be proficient in and comfortable with using can help to address this imbalance. As such, future investigations could greatly benefit from incorporating such innovative methods into their designs.

Given the complex nature of sexting, it is vitally important for these qualitative investigations to continue, and it is hoped that this review will facilitate these future investigations in identifying the direction they will take. The importance of this stems from the need for more effective interventions and policy to help support and educate young people as they navigate the rapidly involving digital world.

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