

## Adolescents' Perceptions of the Applications Used, Motives For, and Consequences of Sexting

### Aims

The aim of this study is to explore high school students' perceptions of sexting behavior. The study was conducted among teenagers in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. Sexting is defined as the sending of self-made sexually explicit photographs using the Internet or the mobile phone. This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the technological and the social context that surrounds sexting behavior. It had three aims: 1) investigating the applications and websites that adolescents use to engage in sexting; 2) gaining a deeper understanding of why adolescents engage in sexting; and 3) investigating how adolescents perceive the potential consequences of engaging in sexting behavior.

### Key Findings

- The study found that applications that are unique to the smartphone, such as Snapchat and WhatsApp, were the most commonly used applications to engage in sexting. Facebook and other forms of digital communication such as email, were considered to be too 'open' and 'too direct' by the respondents. They perceived the risk of unauthorized distribution of photographs to be higher.
- Adolescents perceived the function of Snapchat which allows to define how long the photographs are visible as one of the major advantages of the application. They were aware of the potential risks of using the application, such as the risks for screenshots to be taken, but they perceived the application to be safest option available to engage in sexting.
- Most adolescents engaged in sexting to flirt, within the context of a romantic relationship, or with the hope of establishing a romantic relationship.
- Girls reported experiencing subtle forms of pressure to engage in sexting. They were often afraid that they would lose their romantic partner if they would not engage in sexting or that they would not get a romantic relationship.
- Another form of pressure that girls experienced was 'post refusal persistence', where boys would keep asking girls to send them a photograph by begging them or by insisting. This finding emphasises the need for prevention efforts to discuss strategies for how to deal with pressure with regards to sexting.
- Adolescents noted three ways in which sexting photographs could be misused: 1) bragging: adolescents liked to brag to their friends that they had received a sexually explicit photograph; 2) blackmail: the pictures could be abused to blackmail the creator to send additional photographs, to engage in offline sexual acts or to trap the victim into staying within the romantic relationship; 3) revenge: forwarding the photograph out of revenge after a romantic break-up.

### Methodology

57 adolescents (66.67% females) participated in 1 of 11 focus group conversations about the role of digital media within romantic relationships. The focus group interviews were conducted between March and May 2015. Each focus group brought together 3-8 participants between 15 and 18 years old. Given the sensitive nature of our research, the researchers decided to conduct same-sex focus groups (four male-only focus groups and seven female-only focus groups). During the focus group conversations teenagers sat around a table and were asked questions by one of three moderators. The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to make sure that all focus groups were conducted in a similar fashion. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, the respondents were asked to report on their perceptions as opposed to their actual behaviors. The study's methodology received approval of the ethical committee of the University of Antwerp. The study was supported by the Research Fund of the University of Antwerp, a grant by the Antwerp Doctoral School, and the Research Foundation – Flanders.

### Source

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**Research Team** Joris Van Ouytsel, Ellen Van Gool, Michel Walrave, Koen Ponnet and Emilie Peeters.

**Contact information** Dr. Joris Van Ouytsel ([joris.vanouytsel@uantwerpen.be](mailto:joris.vanouytsel@uantwerpen.be))

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