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ORIGINAL PAPER

Sending Nudes: Intent and Risk Associated with 'Sexting' as Understood by Gay Adolescent Boys

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Abstract

This study investigates the understanding of teenage boys, who do not identify as heterosexual, as they reflect on the intent and risks associated with sending and receiving self-generated sexual images (sexting). Questions within the research surrounded the prevalence of adolescent sexting practice, the relationship between behaviour and sexual identity and the motivations specifically in the gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning/undecided participants (GBTQ). This questionnaire based study surveyed 2198 14–18 year old males, of which 2034 returned the questionnaire, 5.9% of these self-identifying as GBTQ. The study showed that overall sexting practice increases with age, from 37.8% at 14-years to 52.7% among 17-year olds. The average percentage of sexting in those who reported as heterosexual was 43.9% contrasted with 63% for those who identified as GBTQ. Whilst each episode of sexting, particularly images sent to a stranger, presents a potential risk to the individual, this study shows those young men who identify as GBTQ place themselves at increased vulnerability, with 33.3% of these young men admitting to sending images to people they did not really know, compared to 16.8% of heterosexual sexters. The arising themes and dependent connections within the study support the conclusion that, whilst sexting may be associated with risk taking behaviours such as early initiation of sexual activity, unsafe sex, bullying and access to alcohol and illegal drugs, participants did report a degree of positive impact. Sexting was reported to support relationships, allow access to similar peers and increase self-confidence.

Keywords Sexting · Homosexual · Risk · Teenage · Sexual orientation

This article is dedicated to David whose brave disclosure inspired this research.

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Introduction

Mid-adolescence is often conceptualised as a crucial period of sexual development, with teenagers' cognitive maturity enabling them to reflect on their sexual feelings and behaviours. This developing 'sexual agency' is making active, informed decisions about sexual expression. It is proposed by Shields-Dobson (2015) that there is a strong relationship between the development of adolescents' sexuality and the growth of sexual communication within digital platforms. This study aims to explore the understanding of teenage boys, who do not identify as heterosexual, as they reflect on the risks and motivations associated with the sending and receiving of self-generated sexual images, films and messages.

Defining Sexting

With the increased use of communication technology have come reports of 'sexting' within a wider expression of teenage sexuality (Silva et al. 2016). However, the definitions of sexting within the literature vary, with no universal agreement on what precisely this practice consists (Judge 2012; Quayle and Newman 2015, p. 10; Handschuh et al. 2018, p. 91). In its simplest form, 'sexting' is a portmanteau of the words 'sex' and 'text' and represents sending and receiving of sexual photographs, films or messages via digital media platforms and mobile communication devices.

Mitchell et al. (2012, p. 19) cautions however that the term sexting 'may be fatally compromised by its multiple and expansive colloquial use'. Mitchell advocates for message content to be clearly rather than ambiguously defined. The challenge is to define subsets of sexts against which behaviours can be mapped; sexually suggestive or sexually explicit content, 'active' sender or 'passive' recipient, aggravated or experimental in nature, with sexual content and exposure linked to developing sexual identities and behaviours over time.

The 2016 United Kingdom Council for Child and Internet Safety (UKCCIS) guidance for dealing with sexting among youth populations identifies two main categories of sext: those that fall within an 'experimental' definition; youth generated and circulated to another young person to further romance, fun or entertainment, and 'aggravated' messages created with malicious intent e.g. created in exchange for money or gifts, forced by someone, or to hurt or damage another. This study is focused on the 'experimental' sexts, wherein this 'normalised' teenage behaviour, as described by Davidson (2014, p. 104) is 'just one of the many adaptions sexual expression has made to new technology' and under which the self-production of sexual images could be reviewed separately from the making, possession and distribution of illegal images of child abuse.

Van Oosten and Vandenbosch (2017, p. 43) put forward the argument that 'sexy self-presentation seems to convey the message of sexual availability, individuals who observe sexy self-presentation of peers on social networking sites may implicitly learn from their peers to be more sexually active'; they argue that this behavioural willingness occurs through the perceptions of social norms. Houck et al.

(2014) identified a circular argument in their own findings: those that sext perceived acceptance and that this perception led to reduced inhibition that further condoned the behaviour.

Albury and Byron (2014) argue that much of the research into sexting practice does not distinguish between heterosexual usage and that of same sex attracted young people. They argue that this general lack of recognition typically 'heterosexualises' the issues and potentially adversely frames the risks taken by young people who identify within a more fluid definition of gender.

The pressure on young gay men to present a sexualised on-line identity was noted where 'sexting-like practices appear highly normalised in the gay community' (Lee and Crofts, 2015, p. 469). The authors suggest that this cohort is amongst the most prolific producers of self-produced sexual images. Albury and Byron (2014) propose that photo-sharing in the gay community is understood to be an unremarkable practice within geospatial applications such as Grindr and Hornet. Therefore, if the perception is that the gay community is reliant on sexting-like images as a means of establishing a group identity, then to fit in, community members will produce sexual imagery. The need to belong to a community that allows identification with peers, and to engage in consensual flirtation, out-weigh the legal and adverse social implications of youth produced sexual imagery.

These images are used to convey the 'ordinary' sexual body and a means of establishing trust between those sharing. The images also convey preferences with regard to sexual role and practices. Same sex attracted participants were not concerned about sexting per se but 'were strongly opposed to non-consensual or coerced production or sharing of pictures among school age children and young people' (Albury and Byron 2014, p. 141). The authors write of this group developing very clear individual rules regarding when to produce an image, who to share it with, how to interact on and off-line and dealing with the inadvertent exposure of friends' sexual pictures.

Categories of Content in Sexting

In relating 'images that might, in fact, be no more revealing than what someone might see at a beach' (Mitchell et al. 2012, p. 14) to those that van Oosten and Vandenbosch (2017, p. 45) define as 'sexy on-line self-presentation' there is a continuum from suggestive, to provocative, to semi-nude and the sexually explicit in nature; while intent behind behaviours ranges from sending images to friends as forms of humour to sexting as relationship currency for fun and flirtation as part of casual non-romantic relationships to romantic affirmation. Findings from a study involving 511 predominantly female under-graduate students by Champion and Pedersen (2015) found that sexual orientation impacts on the explicit nature of a sext. Their work indicated that the percentage of heterosexual participants decreased by 14% as the explicit nature of the message increased, whilst those with a bisexual orientation increased from 3% of the overall participants to 15% of those classed as very explicit sexters.

Active and Passive Sexting

It is argued that a differentiation can be made between those who send an explicit image or text—'active sexting'—and those who receive a nude picture—'passive sexting', as an indication of the salient link between sexting and sexual behaviours. Bauermeister et al. (2014) in the study of why young men have sex with men, notes that those who identify within sexual minorities, e.g. homosexual, bi-sexual or transgender, are more likely to engage in sexting behaviour and expose themselves to higher risk sexual practice than their heterosexual counterparts. The Bauermeister study reported a high incidence of 'active sexting' among those young men who practise insertive anal sex and an increased incidence of high risk sexual behaviours depicted in reciprocated sexting (e.g. two-way sexting) but could not show a relationship between 'passive sexting' and those who prefer receptive anal sexual intercourse.

Differing Gender Dynamics

The popular discourse presented about sexting has focused on the differing gender dynamics. A study undertaken with over 2000 Australian young people by Lee et al. (2015, p. 4) identified that 50% of their female participants admitted to sexting as compared to 48% of their male subjects, but that males 'were more likely, overall to send sexual images to more sexting partners'. This study further identified that 81% of males who identified as homosexual, 65% of participants who identified as lesbian and 67% of participants who identified as bi-sexual had sent sexual images across the age brackets 13–15 years, 16–18 years and as adults. These findings replicate work by Bauermeister et al. (2014) who noted in a study of 1502 males, that 87.4% who identify within sexual minorities, were likely to engage in sexting behaviour.

Sexting Behaviour

Hertlein et al. (2015) write of the use of technology constructively to create opportunities for people to meet others with whom they would like a relationship. They note that GBTQ adolescents use mobile technology as a means of meeting like-minded people, both in and outside of the desire for a relationship, who may not be in their physical social circles.

Lee and Crofts (2015) challenge young people's interpretation of the impact on young people of sexting. They point out that many studies ask participants their opinion as to why they think young people sext, rather than asking participants if they have actually sent a sext. They argue that this introduces bias into the results as larger percentages of young people have never sexted, and so are reporting perception rather than understanding the motivations of those who actually do it.

Lee and Crofts argue that, for a small proportion, participating in sexting has a negative impact either from coercion to join in or being 'turned off' by the action. Most participants who were involved in sending and receiving sexualised messages or youth produced sexual imagery, as 'experimental' sexting, and not containing aggravated factors, do not see the issue as problematic.

Houck et al. (2014) identify the phenomenology of early adolescent sexting. They report that the associated risk-taking behaviours that can accompany sexting increase the earlier in adolescent development the teenager engages in the practice. Jonsson et al. (2015) write that, whilst young people may be mindful of the risk, they may not always be cognisant of the consequences of their actions. They write that young people who engage in high risk sexual practices off-line are more likely to do so on-line and acknowledge the 'combination of an urge for sensation during adolescence with a relative lack of impulse control' as contributing factors to these behaviours (Jonsson et al. 2015, p. 1246). These authors draw an association between sexting behaviours and the incidence of illegal drug use, increased tobacco use and previous physical or sexual abuse. The study noted a hierarchy of risky behaviours from meeting online for sex on-line to meeting online with the purpose of selling sex off-line; the higher risks being associated with more extreme behaviours.

Previous studies have attempted to establish a contiguous correlation between sexting prevalence and risk-taking behaviours. Ševčíková (2016, p. 159) established that younger boys who sext will experience higher incidence of alcohol use, more emotional problems and are more likely to engage in sexual risk-taking behaviours compared to their older counterparts and those who identified themselves as non-sexters.

Ševčíková (2016, p. 157) again identifies that the adverse impact on mental health and emotional well-being decreases as the teenager approaches adulthood. Van Ouytsel et al. (2014, p. 206) report the impact of bullying and reputational reduction when pictures are shared within the wider community. However, Klettke et al. (2014, p. 51) report no significant difference in the self-esteem of those who sent sexts and those not, and reported no correlation was found between depression and sexting behaviours. Albury and Byron (2014) identified a concern that gay and bisexual young people fear exposure and bullying from being identified on on-line geospatial applications. However, further work by Albury (2017, p. 721), identified that the anxiety associated with the sharing of images without consent was less of an issue within gay society as the 'sharing of sexual pictures is mitigated by a sense that participants are 'in this together'.

The association in risk taking sexual behaviour is identified in several articles. Ševčíková (2016, p. 160) reports a link between sexting and risk taking sexual behaviours, in teenagers compared to their non-sexting peers. Houck et al. (2014) identify the increased possibility of sexually transmitted infections that an increase in sexual activity presents. Rice et al. (2012, p. 670) noted that LGBTQ students were more likely to have had unprotected intercourse at their last sexual encounter compared with their heterosexual counterparts, and that LGBTQ students were more likely to be involved in sexting incidences.

Sexting and Gay Culture

In describing the development of a contemporary urban gay culture, Mowlabocus (2007, p. 66) writes that male sexuality increasingly provides a cultural framework by which identity is produced, negotiated and maintained. His work proposes that the on-line profile generated by a person has become the most common form of self-representation, and one by which people are empowered to identify with other members of 'minority groups who have historically been characterised as invisible'. Van Oosten and Vandenbosch (2017) write that sexualised self-presentation on social networking sites may encourage similar behaviour in peers, to develop confluent attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. They write that the sharing of explicit pictures may convey the message of sexual availability, and individuals who observe images of peers may implicitly learn to become more sexually active themselves. Work by Lee and Crofts (2015) underpins this hypothesis by noting that peer group pressure and the desire to belong to a social group are likely to influence normative behaviours to the point that non-participation may jeopardise group membership. They write that:

> The pressure on young gay men to engage in such behaviours, and for a sexualised selfhood to delineate their online identities suggests that members of the cohort may well be the most prolific senders and receivers of self-produced sexual images and videos. (Lee and Crofts, 2015, p. 469)

Hertlein et al. (2015) write that this identification with a like-minded gay community can be seen to promote self-esteem and a sense of belongingness to a group that otherwise feel marginalised by a comparison with a traditional hegemonic view of masculinity. Whilst the sharing of images that would fall within the definition of 'experimental' i.e. created for peers without coercion or exploitation, they may create a potential for loss of face and a damaging loss of control. This is mitigated by the sense of community and belonging to a defined group. As Albury puts it: 'queer community ethics … rely on a sense of sexual camaraderie and generosity that acknowledges a shared capacity to experience both public and private sexual indignities and embarrassments' (Albury 2017, p. 720).

Albury and Byron (2014) argue that the production and sharing of sexual images is accepted practice within the gay community. That the sharing of 'the ordinary body' rather than the pornographic representation of the 'extraordinary', serves as a way of trading trust within the community. Pingel et al. (2012) describes the disillusionment young gay men experience in the transition from their on-line identity to real-life experiences and report that the scripts developed within their on-line personas were seen to be initially insufficient for negotiating their real-time needs and desires within relationships.

Whilst some heterosexual young people can practice relationship skills in public places such as parks and playgrounds, by social construct these public spaces feel denied to same sex attracted young people. Albury (2017) argues that the increased prevalence of sexting in the teenage gay community relates to a lack of social space in which to develop relationships. She argues that for young people,

whose boundaries between public and private expression of sexuality have never been clear cut, tensions exist between what is legal and what is socially accepted. By right of their age, limited agency and lack of material resources, teenagers are denied access to private spaces such as restaurants, hotel rooms and family homes to explore a courtship accepted by wider society. Ybarra and Mitchell (2014) argue that sharing sexting imagery is used by gay youth as a means to create intimacy in the absence of public displays of affection.

Research Methodology

The epistemological knowledge base around sexting behaviours is constantly growing as digital mobile technology and geospatial applications develop, whilst national law and public opinion often lag. Therefore, this study was situated within an interpretive enquiry utilising a mixed methodological approach to seek an understanding of the perceptions and motivations of teenage boys through the use of a Sexting Behaviour Questionnaire (SBQ) and the use of semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of boys who indicated they were willing to participate in the interview process on the SBQ consent form and identified as 'other than heterosexual' within the questionnaire itself.

A two stage, mixed-methods approach to the research was undertaken:

- Stage 1 investigated the 'sexting' habits of the population of boys in school years 10, 11, 12 and 13 (aged 14–18 years) using the SBQ.
- Stage 2 looked at the specific issues raised by the boys who did not identify as heterosexual using a semi-structured interview approach with the intention of triangulating the findings from the SBQ.

The development of the SBQ reflected work undertaken by Bianchi et al. (2016) on intent and reward, de Gámez-Guadix et al. (2017) on prevalence and motivation and Burkett (2015) on passive and active use. The SBQ and semi-structured interview questions were further developed by the author using a participatory action research approach, utilising the members of a Gay and Transgender support group based in an independent secondary school. The purpose of this group was to validate the questions and questionnaire; to ensure the comprehension of language and the overall suitability and application to the age range and community.

The SBQ was subjected to a review by the local police force. The making, possessing and distributing of indecent images of children under the age of 18-years is illegal in the UK, outlined in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (England and Wales). To complete a questionnaire that acknowledges the sending of self-made images asked participants to admit to breaking the law. However, the College of Policing (2016) guidance notes that criminal justice proceedings should be proportionate and in the public interest. This research focused on youth produced sexual imagery, with no intent to exploit or harm those involved and with no aggravated factors. The Evidence Based Practice Team within the Borough Police

therefore issued an agreement that allowed this study to take place without risk of prosecution, as it furthered the understanding of the risks posed to young people.

The terms sex and gender are often used interchangeably in colloquial discourse, though they have distinct meanings. For this study, sex refers to the biological classification assigned at birth based on chromosomes and reproductive characteristics. Gender however refers to the social construct of an 'individual's self-representation as male or female and/or to socialisation based on others' interpretation of sex' (Martel 2013, p. 1222).

Recognising gender expression as a developing social construct, this research study asked 14–18 year old males, including those with a transgender identity, to self-define their gender and sexual orientation and to complete the SBQ. The SBQ condensed the available spectrum into five broad categories:

- Bi-sexual.
- Straight (heterosexual).
- Gay (homosexual).
- Other.
- Undecided.

This was not to diminish the self-determined expression of the young person but solely to facilitate analysis and determine the relationship between sexting behaviours, gender and sexual identity.

A combination of a deductive and inductive approach to the analysis of the participant semi-structure interviews was utilised. A priori questions within the semi-structured interviews were used to address the main research queries, and inductive analysis identified the *post priori* themes and dependent connections that emerged following the interviews. This allowed a wealth of data to be analysed and interpreted. The a priori questions provided the initial coding themes, were adapted by the researcher following the first interview to create a coding matrix that reflected the teenage participant's views rather than the researcher's preconceptions.

A convenience sampling approach was adopted for the SBQ distribution, utilising secondary schools within a major city of the United Kingdom. The SBQ was administered during a specially arranged school assembly where students with parental assent to participate, sat at individual tables whilst completing the SBQ to preserve confidentiality and research integrity. Before SBQ completion the researcher delivered a presentation to the participants outlining the research project, the implications of participation, the right to withdraw and how data would be used. It was made very clear that participation was not mandatory and that all data would be treated confidentially including the fact that the participant's school or parents would not see the results. Similarly the safeguarding implications were outlined including the exemption from police involvement and the need to refer to specialist support any boy who was identified to be at significant risk. The participants were then asked to sign a consent form and complete the SBQ as a 'paper and pencil' exercise. Students who chose not to participate submitted a blank SBQ.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was sought in accordance with the ethical standards of the Research Ethics Committee of Newman University and with the BERA (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research before commencement. Consideration was given to the nature of consent and confidentiality, the role of the parents given the participants' age and the moral and ethical issues should a disclosure arise. The potential existed for the participants to reveal their involvement in potentially illegal activity albeit, historical in nature. Participants were offered the opportunity to debrief and appropriate advice and guidance was given. Any disclosures that constituted historical or contemporaneous sexual abuse were dealt with following both child protection and safeguarding regulations, but ongoing support was also offered via the host setting. It is a point of note that during the data gathering exercise four boys indicated that they were being groomed by an adult and were referred, with their agreement, to Child Protection Services for support.

Consent Considerations

UKCCIS (2016) guidance on the dealing with 'experimental' sexting requires settings to involve parents. Therefore, in the majority of situations, the research project required both the consent of the participants and the assent of parents for their child to complete the SBQ.

However, an important principle existed within the project; that participation was based on the consent of the young person. Where a young person chose not to complete the questionnaire, they were not included regardless as to whether their parent had assented to their participation. Before completion of the SBQ, student participants were asked to sign a research consent form, the briefing sheet for which made it clear that confidentiality would be maintained, unless the participant was thought to be at risk, or pose a risk of harm to others.

Additional consideration was given to the consent process for the semi-structured interviews. It was anticipated that, for most participants selected for interview, their parents were aware of their boy's sexual orientation and so parental assent was sought to undertake the interview.

However, where it was felt by the host setting that *in exceptional circumstances* the young person's safety would have been compromised by the involvement of the parent, then this additional assent was not required. The need for parental agreement was waived to protect the anonymity of participants whose sexual orientation was undisclosed to parents, and to allow them to access confidential support from the school if they requested it. Offering a competent consent option allowed this hidden, vulnerable group to be approached.

Where parental assent was not sought, a record was made by the educational setting. The school then assessed the risk to the young person and assumed the

responsibility for this competence decision, with this recorded within the school safeguarding records and the alternative consent form stored with the interview records and school file.

Data Interpretation and the Discussion of Data Findings

Data extracted from the questionnaires included prevalence and sample size as well as potential moderators; including age, orientation, method of sexting and message content. The stage 2 interviews consisted of a small group of twelve young people, interviewed not to compare participants but to gain greater respondent validation and triangulate answers from the questionnaire by identifying common experiences, meanings, and contextual influences, thus securing a level of internal generalisation.

However, it is important to acknowledge that external generalisation is not guaranteed. Although analysis of the sample size and make up did confirm a degree of homogeneity with national expectations, the small sample group of interviewees meant that views expressed may not be typical, and recognition is given to the substantial diversity incorporated within the wider GBTQ community.

Participant Numbers

Fifteen schools participated in the research project offering a potential cohort of 2973 participants aged 14–18 years old. Following the approval route for participation as identified in the methodology, the schools approached parents for permission for their sons to participate in the Stage 1 data gathering exercise. Parental assent was achieved for 2198 boys, giving a parental agreement rate of 68.4%. Of the 2198 pupils that were given the questionnaire to complete 7.5% ($n=164$) chose not to participate or withdrew their consent, giving a final questionnaire completion rate of 92.5% ($n=2034$).

The study was made available to all boys in the year groups 10 to 13, both cisgender and transgender. Of the sample group, 0.4% ($n=9$) identified as transgender male and completed the questionnaire. Whilst transgender is not classed as a sexual orientation their results are included in the Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (GBTQ) statistics within the 'other' gender category data results.

Twelve teenagers who identified as GBTQ volunteered to take part in the semi-structured interview process. All these young people had disclosed their sexuality to their family members, but three requested that the school countersign the consent form as they felt acutely uncomfortable disclosing to their parent their sexual practice. In each of these cases the school safeguarding lead assessed their pupil as competent to participate and assented to the interview process. Interview participants were encouraged to choose an anonymised name.

Table 1 Sexual orientation (UK Office of National Statistics – ONS)

	ONS figures (%)	Study sample
Heterosexual	93.4	93.3% ($n=1898$)
Homosexual	1.2	1% ($n=21$)
Bi-sexual	0.8	1.7% ($n=34$)
Undecided	4.1	2.3% ($n=46$)
Other definitions of gender	0.5	0.9% ($n=18$)
Not stated		0.8% ($n=17$)

Table 2 Sexual orientation by age group

	14–15 years Year 10	15–16 years Year 11	16–17 years Year 12	17–18 years Year 13
Heterosexual	92.4% ($n=730$)	93.2% ($n=726$)	95.2% ($n=241$)	94.8% ($n=201$)
Homosexual	0.8% ($n=6$)	1% ($n=8$)	1.6% ($n=4$)	1.4% ($n=3$)
Bisexual	1.7% ($n=14$)	2% ($n=15$)	0.8% ($n=2$)	1.4% ($n=3$)
Undecided	3% ($n=24$)	2% ($n=16$)	1.6% ($n=4$)	1% ($n=2$)
Not stated	1.3% ($n=10$)	0.9% ($n=7$)	0	0
Other definitions of gender	0.8% ($n=6$)	0.9% ($n=7$)	0.8% ($n=2$)	1.4% ($n=3$)

Sexual Orientation

As this research study looked at the sexting practice of those teenage boys who do not identify as heterosexual, it was important to establish that those who self-identify within this category were representative of the wider GBTQ community. Within the UK, sexual orientation statistics are not collected on those under 18-year-old and so a variant analysis can only be undertaken between Office for National Statistics (2018) (ONS) figures for 18 to 25-year olds and the 5.9% ($n=119$) self-identifying as GBTQ within the research study (see Table 1).

Cross tabulated Pearson Chi squared analysis shows no significant differences between the expected percentages and observed percentages, showing a similar normal distribution rate between the two [$\chi^2(2, N=5)=20$, $p=0.707$]. This would indicate that those who have responded to the questionnaire are in line with national statistics allowing the results to be applicable to the wider society.

The distribution across school year groups shows a corresponding pattern. The survey results (see Table 2) do indicate a contiguity in the decreasing number of males who identified as 'undecided' as they became older, and an increase in the number of boys who identify as homosexual rising to the slightly above the expected national average by Year 13 (age 17 and 18) as they acknowledge their orientation.

Sexting Practice

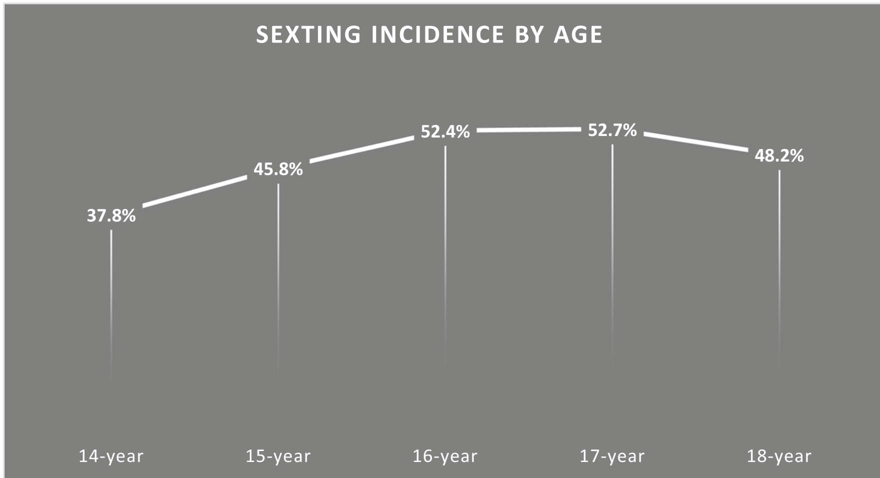
All the interview participants ($n = 12$) recognised the term 'sext' but felt that is was not a word within the usual teenage argot, rather it being something that adults use to describe the issue. All the participants described 'sending nudes' as the in vivo term to describe a naked picture or film sent to someone else. Each participant felt that sexting was now seen as normalised behaviour in young people's lives. This assumption is supported by this research which identified that only 0.4% ($n = 3$) of heterosexual participants who reported to be in a relationship said they did not sext, and all GBTQ participants, in a relationship admitted to sexting. Participants described images being requested within the process of determining a relationship status. 'Felix' also described short videos, known as 'memes', requesting a nude picture as a *joke* but with serious intent, as an additional method of gathering images. 'Bruce' described a process of *sliding into the DM* [direct message] as the process of starting a conversation with someone on-line, who you are unlikely to meet in person, with the intention of eliciting images with sexual content so that the recipient could masturbate to orgasm. Both 'Daniel' and 'Nathan' described images beginning in the *chirpsing* stage of a relationship, the term given to 'chatting up' a potential partner.

To compare sexting practice between the GBTQ community and those boys who identify as heterosexual, it is firstly important to establish the overall prevalence of sexting practice within the population. Jütte (2016), on behalf of the NSPCC and the Office of the Children's Commissioner, reported that overall 16% of UK teenagers (11–16 year olds) had generated a naked or semi-naked image of themselves and therefore would be classed as active sexters. The findings of this study build on Jütte's original work and now identify 47.8% ($n = 389$) of the study participants as active sexters, and 52.2% ($n = 434$) as passive sexters, giving an average incidence of 43.9% ($n = 832$). Reported sexting by age shows an increase in the practice year group on year group from 37.8% ($n = 221$) of 14-year olds taking part to 52.7% ($n = 117$) of 17-year olds (see Fig. 1).

Within this study sexting practice was analysed by sexual orientation. Of the 119 participants who identified as BGTQ, 38.6% ($n = 46$) admitted to an active sexting role, 26% ($n = 31$) declared a passive sexting role, giving a significantly higher overall average percentage of 63% ($n = 75$) compared to both of their heterosexual counterpoints.

Of additional interest is the difference in sexting behaviours for sending sexually explicit, self-generated images to a person the young people didn't really know. In the heterosexual population this was reported at 13% ($n = 52$) yet the result was significantly higher at 33.3% ($n = 15$) for those who identify as GBTQ.

Of the 1898 boys who identified as heterosexual, 13.9% ($n = 262$) stated they were in a relationship. Of the boys who identified as passive sexters 23.3% ($n = 61$) of these reporting receiving images of a naked or semi-naked female. Of the 76.7% ($n = 201$) active sexters who were in a relationship, 25.9% ($n = 52$) of these reported sending semi-naked pictures, 34.3% ($n = 69$) sending full frontal naked pictures, 13.9% ($n = 28$) sending sexually explicit messages (with 25.9%



Sexting incidence by age - Raw data:

14-year	37.8%
15-year	45.8%
16-year	52.4%
17-year	52.7%
18-year	48.2%

Fig. 1 Overall sexting incidence by participant age and combined sexual orientation

($n=52$) not stating their activity) supporting the traditional gendered dynamic of the acceptability of female imagery within a male hegemony.

In comparison of the 119 boys who identified as GBTQ, 42% ($n=50$) stated they were in a relationship. With 66% ($n=33$) of these passively receiving pictures of naked or semi-naked males. Of the 34% ($n=17$) of GBTQ active sexters in a relationship, 17.6% ($n=3$) of these reported sending a semi-naked sext, and 35.3% ($n=6$) sending naked picture of themselves, 5.9% (n = 1) sending an explicit message and 41.2% (n = 7) not stating their activity whilst in a relationship (see Table 3).

All the interview participants perceived sexting as an integral part of a relationship in the modern world, as 'Bruce' said:

> Back in the day people had to court a lady and then get married before having sex, things have changed so much. Now you get a 'nude', you sext for a bit, then hook-up and have some fun. If that all works you hopefully get into a relationship. ('Bruce', 17-years)

However, not all participants agreed or participated in the practice, 'James' said within his interview:

> I don't think there is a time when it is acceptable. I have not ever sent any explicit images [to another boy], but on the other hand I am a human being

Table 3 Sexting practices within a relationship

	In a relationship	Passive sexting	Active: semi-naked images	Active: naked images	Active: explicit text messages	Active: not stated
Heterosexual participants	13.9% ($n=262$)	23.3% ($n=61$)	25.9% ($n=52$)	34.3% ($n=69$)	13.9% ($n=28$)	25.9% ($n=52$)
BGTQ participants	42% ($n=50$)	66% ($n=33$)	17.6% ($n=3$)	35.3% ($n=6$)	5.9% ($n=1$)	41.2% ($n=7$)

> that doesn't need to show love by sending nudes. I show it through my personality and acts. ('James', 14-years)

The sexting motivation questionnaire asked participants how they felt about receiving images using a five-point likert scale with descriptive statements of their feelings.

A minority of boys who identified as heterosexual didn't like receiving images, 0.7% ($n=3$) reporting these as an image of a female and 15.9% ($n=3$) as an image of a naked male. This supports the work by Lee and Crofts (2015) in their argument that most participants who were involved in sending and receiving sexualised messages or youth produced sexual imagery, as 'experimental' sexting, and not containing aggravated factors, did not see this as problematic.

A similar picture is seen when clustering the results for those 119 boys who identified as homosexual, bisexual or undecided; no one objected to receiving pictures of a naked male and 4.8% ($n=1$) didn't like getting a picture of a naked female. A significant rise was demonstrated to 41.7% ($n=10$) 'enjoying' aquiring a male image and in the bi-sexual and undecided groups a similar 'enjoyment' of those having a picture of a naked female to 33.3% ($n=7$).

Intent and Risk

The sexting behaviour questionnaire aimed to investigate the motivational dimensions behind active sexting, considering the need for social reinforcement around body image, sexting for sexual purpose and aggravated factors as identified in relation to differing sexual orientations.

In every interview but one within the study there was a misunderstanding of the age at which sending sexy self-generated images was allowed in law. The interviewees thought the age of consent to intercourse and the age that images were legal were the same. Once informed of the position in law they continued to demonstrate an ambivalence as 'John' identified:

> Most people aren't sure what the law is…but then what can the police do… It seems like adults are a bit out of touch with young people. ('John', 15-year)

The interview participants each felt that consensual images between two people in a relationship, where there was only a 1–2-year age difference, and both were under 18-years were acceptable and should be exempt from legal intervention. However, they felt that those self-generated images coerced or taken outside of consensual boundaries or between an adult aged over 18 and a younger teenager were unacceptable.

Each participant identified the risk of images being shared wider than the intended recipient. They each felt this would have a short term impact on the emotional health of the 'victim' and a possible impact on future careers, as born out in research by Van Ouytsel et al. (2014). 'Bruce' articulated the lack of thought process around sending a sext that he felt occurs for teenage boys:

> The problem is that boys think it is harmless, it's not just about sending a picture of your dick to someone, it's about being part of a relationship, they don't think of the crap you can get into with the police for having the pictures though. ('Bruce', 17-years)

Whilst several of the young men interviewed saw a positive boost to self confidence and morale following an image being shared and 'liked' within social media, a minority reported a negative effect. In one SBQ response a 15-year old boy wrote:

> I felt loved by someone [him]. After my pictures were shared I felt used and never really loved. I was broken and still feel ashamed for what I did…I was fooled.

Body Image

Participants were given three statements within the SBQ relating to (1) a perception of attractiveness, (2) whether their body was perceived as 'normal' and (3) if they were sexually attractive. Looking at the responses to these motivations in aggregate the results show that 2.8% ($n=100$) of those boys identifying as heterosexual and 9.8% ($n=20$) of those who identified as bi-sexual relied on sexting as a means of social confirmation,

> Like, when you've started to become a man and you've got a topline [pubic hair] and you've got a big willy you want to show it off. ('Felix', 16-years)

A small number of boys ($n=19$) did report sexting as a means of 'banter', showing self-generated images to their friends either for a 'joke' or to show muscular definition as a means of boasting. However, a larger percentage of boys who identified as homosexual used sexting as a means to achieve acceptance of body adequacy (28.5% $n=9$). This significant difference between the heterosexual and homosexual responses was identified by all those interviewed as they talked about the limited pool of people within their social circle who were available to form a relationship. 'James' illustrated this difference in social agency:

> People who I know who are Gay and Bi worry a lot more about their body and what they look like. I think straight boys have more confidence about how they look because they have a lot of people to tell them. Whereas if you don't have people to go to then you must find out other ways.
> ('James', 14-years)

The lack of visibility of potential partners of teenagers who identify as 'other than heterosexual' meant that participants did not get feedback on their physique and looks as a matter of course, and so sought reinforcement from the on-line community. These findings would seem to support the theories put forward by Hertlein et al. (2015) who postulate that identification with a like-minded gay community can be seen to promote self-esteem, create intimacy and a sense of group belonging.

Sexual Purpose

The sexting motivation questionnaire presented five statements that related to sexual agency; (1) as a means of flirting, (2) gaining intimacy and (3) passion, (4) feeling wanted and (5) feeling aroused. Of the motivational dimension statements relating to sexual purpose within the questionnaire results, 7.2% ($n=300$) of heterosexual boys reported sexting helped to develop their sexual relationship. The results for the homosexual and bi-sexual groups mirrored each other with 18.8% ($n=36$) feeling they sexted with the intention of improving their sexual relationships. 23.8% ($n=13$) of those who identified as Gay said that they sexted to feel 'wanted' compared to 1.7% ($n=32$) of straight boys.

Of the homosexual boys, 23.8% ($n=17$) identified sexting as a means to flirt with another boy. Within his semi-structured interview, 'Daniel' described a complex categorisation of relationships that all started with flirting via the phone:

> Well first you are just interested in someone, but there's no name for that. Then you start flirting with them and texting – that would be 'Talking to them'. The next bit is just before you are going out with them you are 'On it' or 'chirpsing', that's when you just know where it's going to head. Well it might involve pictures, just a few and not fully naked but in your boxers and stuff. But, you can never ever send pictures when you're not hard, even if you are in your boxers, no one would send a picture with a flop on [not erect]. After that you are 'going out' and then you might be kissing or holding hands and that sort of thing. ('Daniel', 15-years)

All the boys interviewed reported sexual arousal leading to masturbation and ejaculation as a key element in sending and receiving sexually explicit messages and images, as exemplified in the interview with 'Boris':

> Most boys are hoping for a reply, just to get themselves off, they don't see the risk, they just want to acquire an image and ejaculate. ('Boris', 18-years)

The SBQ research data however does not fully support this view. Only 47.6% ($n=143$) of heterosexual boys who responded to this question reported sexual arousal as a determinant, compared to 38.8% ($n=14$) of BGTQ responses. This may be an issue related to under reporting or a misunderstanding of the wording on the SBQ by participants, but the findings mirror work undertaken by Anastassiou (2017) who challenged the notion that young people engaged in sexting purely for sexual arousal; that humour, bonding with peers and the technical process of editing images play a part in the overall sexting dynamic.

Aggravated Factors

The final choice of statements within the sexting motivation questionnaire covered those potentially harmful and aggressive intentions. Analysis of the motivational dimension statements mirror those of Bianchi et al. (2016) with low numbers

of respondents declaring these factors as influences within their life. Of the 1898 participants who identified as heterosexual 1.6% ($n=31$), and 3.3% ($n=4$) of the GBTQ respondents said that they had sexted in return for a favour or in exchange for something. Where a narrative was included, these favours and exchange were explained as a prelude to sexual intercourse with their partners. It was unclear from their responses the degree to which the messages were used to coerce sexual activity or as a framing device within romantic, consensual foreplay.

Conclusion

Analysis of the complex issues surrounding sexting reveals two co-existing but conflicting paradigms:

> The first is an argument, supported by the participant interviews, that the practice, when not abusive, should be viewed within the individual rights of sexual citizenship and part of an emerging cultural shift in the taxonomies of sexual identity. The argument made is that this generation integrate the use of communication technology, social media platforms and digital expertise into their life and this familiarity also extends to the development of the 'teenage human curriculum of sexuality' (Davidson 2014).
> The second paradigm argues that sexting is risk laden, abusive and symbolic of the problematised adolescent that presents a new challenge for those professionals involved in safeguarding vulnerable young people, where the on-line world has a direct influence on the real-time day.

Despite existing school curriculum and health education materials stressing the legal issues and risks associated with sexting, this study shows that male sexting practice increases with age, and sexting prevalence by sexual orientation showed an increased access by different groups. The average percentage of 14–17 year olds sexting was demonstrated at 43.9%, and for those boys who self-reported as homosexual, bi-sexual or undecided, the percentage who engaged in sexting practices was 63%.

Each episode of sexting presents a potential risk to the individual, particularly where this involves images sent to a stranger. This study has shown that, when viewed within a heteronormative framework, the 5.9% of those who identify as GBTQ place themselves at increased vulnerability because 33.3% of these young men admitted to sending images to people they did not really know compared to 13% of the self-identified heterosexual sexters.

What became clear from the data and participant interviews is the view that sexting was seen to have a positive benefit within long distance relationships for GBTQ adolescents where the pool of available partners is limited and on overall self-esteem and confidence when an image is 'liked'. All of the research participants, both heterosexual and GBTQ who declared they were in a relationship admitted to sexting.

Within the United Kingdom the proposed new school curriculum guidance for relationships, health and sex education (Department for Education 2018) advises

that all pupils should feel that the curriculum content is relevant to them and their developing sexuality. The document proposes that sexual orientation and gender identity should be explored, recognising that young people may be discovering or coming to terms with their sexual orientation or gender identity. But, it gives the responsibility to set the curriculum content to staff in consultation with parents and governing bodies but does not direct any consultation with the students themselves.

The opportunity to marginalise GBTQ issues continues to exist if adults do not recognise the divergent identities of their children. All the interview participants felt the current school environments did not easily acknowledge the issues around sexual orientation. This was best summed up by 'Edward' in his interview:

> [Lessons] have been really difficult for me, the only mention of LGBT issues was last year when there was a sentence at the bottom of the page that said, 'at this age some people may have gay feelings, but this is usually' just a phase'. This just left me cold, it didn't acknowledge my reality or my experiences and in fact belittled them. ('Edward', 15-years)

This study has only partially upheld the associations between sexting and risk-taking behaviours as found in the literature and has shown that the participants had little regard for risk in their practice. Whilst curriculum materials need to outline the legal restrictions around the age of consent and the different age that explicit images, including self-generated images, may be produced and disseminated, lesson plans need to reflect the need to develop and maintain intimacy within a relationship if they wish to affect sexting practice. The arising themes from the sexting behaviour questionnaire and the dependent connections within the interview responses support the conclusion by Klettke et al. (2014, p. 52) that, whilst sexting is associated with risk-taking behaviours it is not 'suggested that there is a causal relationship between sexting and these behaviours', rather that sexting may represent a behavioural marker of normal adolescent development.

The increased availability of digital network spaces presents a challenge particularly within education, where teachers seek to meet the needs of young people, but the pupil's 'on-line' world spills into the school day; where innovative use of digital technology, including students using their own devices, is relied on in the classroom. The increasing prevalence of sexting means that schools should be required to have adequate filtering and monitoring software on equipment and clear systems for dealing with episodes that occur. Staff, when dealing with a disclosure should use it as an opportunity to support, educate and develop the young person rather than seeing sexting and the GBTQ youth as a problem to be dealt with.

For a school to meet its responsibilities, there must be a culture where young people can ask for help, without reference to parents, and staff can be confident to 'think the unthinkable' and challenge where they suspect a need is arising based on an ethos of care, trust and a genuine desire to see the young person grow, learn and develop. Whilst staff need to be aware of the legal and ethical issues involved they must also be cognisant of the social norms within which teenagers now exist.

This study indicates that a curriculum programme based solely on the legal framework of the production and distribution of explicit images will not address the social construct in which sexting now seems to occur and will therefore not have

a meaningful impact on young people's actual practice. It is inevitable of course that young people will continue to use digital and other sources of information. The United Kingdom Department for Education warns that 'given the ease of access to the internet, children whose questions go unanswered may turn to inappropriate sources of information' (Department for Education 2018, p. 18). A school that does not have a comprehensive, fully inclusive approach to sex and relationship education may put its pupils at increased risk.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declare that he has no conflict of interest.

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