

INVESTIGATING ADOLESCENT SEXTING AND ONLINE SAFETY

Olivia Bomester

ABSTRACT

Sexting is a risky sexual behaviour which is easily identifiable and very common amongst adolescents growing up in the 21st century. It is a relatively new phenomenon, however, scholarly research into this topic has definitely burgeoned over the recent years. Scholars who have researched into this field have often questioned whether sexting is detrimental or harmless to the developing adolescent. To answer this question, sexting needs to be explored in more depth. In this theoretical paper, sexting will be briefly delineated, followed by a brief discussion, whereby the following topics will be deliberated: motives relating to sexting, adolescent sexting shorthand, potential risk factors and potential ramifications for adolescents, gender considerations pertaining to sexting, and the legal ramifications with regards to sexting. Finally, a succinct discourse regarding intervention will be accentuated, whereby online safety for adolescents will be particularly underscored. The significance of this article is that it extends existing knowledge into the area under investigation.

Keywords: sexting, adolescence, ramifications, sexuality education, online safety

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to explore the relationship between adolescent sexting and online safety, therefore it is necessary that the aforementioned variables are elucidated.

Along with the emergence of smartphones, the past decade has witnessed a manifestation of adolescent sexual behaviour known as sexting (Strasburger et al., 2019). As maintained by Redmond (2010), sexting is an amalgamation of two particular English words. It is a portmanteau of *sex* and *texting*, which results in the verb: *sexting*.

Conformable to Klettke et al. (2014), sexting can be described as the sending, receiving, or forwarding of sexually explicit messages, images, or photos to others through electronic means, primarily between cellular phones. However, this definition limits sexting to explicit messages, while other definitions delineate sexting in a more defined manner, as shown in the ensuing definition. In accordance with DeMar (2015), sexting is characterised as digitally taping sexually suggestive or explicit images, followed by the distribution of these images via the internet or mobile phone applications. Lenhart (2009, as cited in Buren & Lunde, 2018) limns sexting as the generating, distributing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images through the internet. Other scholars depict sexting as the interpersonal exchange of self-produced sexualised texts, and above all, images, photos, and videos via cell phone or the internet (Bianchi et al., 2019; Walrave et al., 2015). Of particular concern today would be the sending of self-made sexually *explicit* photographs.

Essentially, the phenomenon of sexting may take the form of either active or passive sexting. Several academics have depicted active sexting to refer to the creating, showing, sending, posting or forwarding of sexual content, while passive sexting entails receiving, asking for, or being asked for sexually explicit material (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017).

Bearing these various aforementioned definitions and the active and passive forms of sexting in mind, an obvious problem arises in relation to the implications regarding sexting. In particular, parents, teachers, and social science researchers may wonder whether this phenomenon is seemingly innocuous or quite harmful to the developing adolescent.

Millions of adolescents utilise smartphones for many hours on a daily basis, and consequently parents, teachers, and researchers may require clear-cut guidelines regarding how to keep teenagers safe online. However, it is essential for the reader to have a clear understanding of what is meant by online safety.

As specified by National Online Safety (2022), online safety refers to the act of staying safe online. Online safety is also synonymous with phrases such as: internet safety, e-safety, and cyber safety. Online safety includes all technological devices which have access to the internet, such as personal computers, laptops, smartphones, and tablets.

Thus, the objective of this theoretical paper is to add a spotlight on the topic of sexting, specifically within the context of the adolescent period. Ultimately, the aim is to draw the reader's attention to specific ways in which adolescents can stay safe online, while navigating the digital world of technology, especially since the sharing of nude images may cause potential emotional, social, and legal consequences for the adolescent.

SEXTING MEDIUMS

As specified by Van Ouytsel et al. (2017), several online mobile platforms have become popular for the sending of sexually explicit photographs. In recent years, smartphones have become more popular, and with the ushering of smartphones into our daily lives, new communication applications have been designed. One such example is *Snapchat*, which is a mobile application designed for the sharing of digital text messages, photographs, and videos (Utz et al., 2015; Vaterlaus et al., 2016). Photos and videos which are sent via *Snapchat* only remain visible for approximately one to ten seconds, before they vanish from the mobile screen. As specified by Wortham (2013), *Snapchat* has received a lot of media publicity, due to the fact that teenagers were allegedly using the application for sexting purposes. According to Gewirtz-Meydan et al. (2018), the apparent reasoning for adolescents who sext via *Snapchat* is the belief that the photos will self-destruct after ten seconds and therefore there may be no actual consequences to their behaviour.

However, certain third-party developers have found a way to circumvent the media disappearing from *Snapchat*. For example, *Snapsave* is an application specifically designed for *Snapchat*. It allows individuals to actually save the photos (i.e. the

'snaps') without notifying the sender. Therefore, *Snapsave* sexts can be 'grabbed' by third-party applications (Strasburger et al., 2019). One of the other features about *Snapsave* is that users are able to see other people's snaps as many times as possible. Currently, a paucity of research seems to exist in relation to the extent to which smartphone apps are used to engage in sexting, as per Van Ouytsel et al. (2017). The latter led Van Ouytsel et al. (2017) to conduct a study several years ago on adolescent sexting, specifically pertaining to their perceptions of applications, motives, and consequences of sexting. This qualitative study was conducted in Flanders, Belgium, with 57 adolescents between the ages of 15 and 18 years old. Eleven focus group discussions were held. In terms of the mediums used for sexting, 100% of the focus group members mentioned the use of *Snapchat*; 45% mentioned the use of *WhatsApp*; and 27% mentioned the use of *Facebook Messenger*. Since there is a relative sparsity of research regarding this topic, it is clear that contemporary scholars should conduct more studies in relation to the extent to which smartphone apps are used to engage in adolescent sexting.

MOTIVES RELATING TO SEXTING

During the adolescent period, adolescents start to develop sexually, and hence their developing sexuality steers them into a direction of experimenting, usually in the form of dating or establishing romantic relationships. Gewirtz-Meydan (2018) are of the view that engaging in sexting during the adolescent period may be considered to be developmentally normative, and may carry minimal risks on long-term consequences in later life. In pursuance with Smahel and Subrahmanyam (as cited in Walrave et al., 2018), electronic forms of intimate communication could possibly provide avenues for teenagers to achieve developmental tasks relating to their evolving sexual identities. Conformable to Schloms-Madlener (2013), researchers dissent on the potential ramifications of adolescent sexting with regard to whether the phenomenon may be innocuous or harmful for the adolescent. Either sexting is viewed as dangerous or exploitative, or it is considered safe and developmentally helpful.

In the opinion of Yeung et al. (2014), sexting is considered to be ubiquitous among youth in many Western liberal democracies. In her article entitled *SA teen sexting warning* Comins notes that South African adolescents have also joined their international counterparts in the sexting phenomenon. Zongile Nhlapo has written an article entitled *Sexting – the shocking pandemic among South African teens* (HuffPost SA, 2017). Much of Nhlapo's non-academic-based research was based on the views of Emma Sadlier, leading social media expert in South Africa. In a Facebook Live Chat on social media laws, Emma shared with the HuffPost SA (2017), that it has become a societal norm for South African teenagers to engage in sexting. One needs to pause for a moment, and ask the question: What fuels sexting behaviour amongst adolescents?

Some authors are of the view that sharing self-made sexually explicit photographs via mobile/internet applications may assist in helping teenagers explore their sexuality and their sexual identities (Smahel & Subrahmanyam, 2014; Walrave et al., 2015). Previous research studies have indicated that adolescents would commonly engage in sexting within romantic relationships, specifically for the purposes of flirting with a partner or a person of interest (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Strassberg et al., 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2014).

Some of the motives mentioned amongst the focus groups in the Van Ouytsel et al.'s (2017) study as to why adolescents sext were as follows: as a sign of love and proof of love; romantic partner requesting it; to attract attention; to flirt; as a surprise/gift to the partner; fear of losing the partner; sexual desire; as a 'glue' to keep a long-distance relationship alive; and finally to test the girl's character. Interestingly, as attested to by Lippman and Campbell (2014) and Yeung et al. (2014), adolescent males tend to collect sexting pictures of girls; these are viewed as their *trophies* to either show off to others, or as proof of their resultant success with girls.

Judith Davidson has written extensively on the topic of adolescent sexting in her book *Sexting: Gender and Teens*. Demar (2015) has reviewed this book, and points out three particular reasons as to why girls sext. On the authority of Judith Davidson's qualitative study with teenagers, three particular motivations exist for girls who engage in sexting: (1) in order to pursue and maintain a romantic relationship with a boy, girls engage in sexting behaviours; sexting is therefore seen as *essential* for girls that they may maintain a boy's attention; (2) another motivation for sexting is to vie for friends, attention from peers, social status, and lastly power at school. Especially regarding this point, girls may use sexting for the purposes of blackmail, revenge, or exhibiting popularity; (3) A final reason as to why girls sext is to assert control in a relationship, therefore sexting allows girls the agency to either initiate or avoid sexual intercourse.

Walrave et al. (2018) have noted that sexting could serve as a possible alternative for religious youth who are meant to refrain from sexual intimacy prior to marriage. Added to the latter point, some scholars point out that some adolescents may view sexting as safer than actually engaging in real life sexual activities, as it may safeguard against falling pregnant or contracting an STI (Renfrow & Rollo, 2014).

Whether one's motivation for engaging in sexting as an adolescent is for sexual purposes or body image reinforcement (Bianchi et al., 2019), a concerning motivation related to adolescents using sexting for instrumental / aggravated reasons (i.e. using sexting as an instrumental behaviour to perpetrate interpersonal violence accordant with Yopez-Tito et al. (2020).

SEXTING SHORTHAND

In this section, sexting shorthand used by adolescents will be elaborated on; this shorthand may either be textual or visual, as will be explained. From the perspective of Takeda (2011), much of the sexting done by adolescents is done through the use of code words, acronyms, and decoy words.

As per Takeda (2011), the following examples are some commonly used sexting shorthand.

Table 1.
Typical adolescent sexting ciphers

Cipher	Actual meaning
53X	Sex
8	Oral sex
CD9	Code 9; Parents are around
P911	Parent alert
PIR	Parent in room
9	Parent watching
99	Parent gone
CU46	See you for sex
GNOC	Get naked on camera
GYPO	Get your pants off
IMEZYRU	I'm easy; are you?
IWSN	I want sex now
LHU	Let's hook up
TDTM	Talk dirty to me
RUH	Are you horny?
RU/18	Are you over 18?
LH6	Let's have sex
WTTP	Want to trade pictures?

Note. Sexting acronyms every parent needs to know (Takeda, 2011) – Source






In pursuance with Thompson (2018), computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become quite prevalent in modern society. Instant-messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, and social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter are currently the most popular applications for communication (Yepez-Tito et al., 2020).

As can be seen in the table, today's adolescents have found unique encrypted ways of communicating messages to each other. As claimed by Plumb (2013), it is considerably challenging to interpret CMC, as opposed to face-to-face communication. CMC generally can be complex to interpret at times, due to body language, facial expression, and vocal intonation missing from the communication (Thompson, 2018). As a result, emoticons and emojis have been devised to compensate for the lack of non-verbal communication (Chatzichristos et al., 2020).

Interestingly, *emoji sexting* is another new area of research which scholars are only beginning to understand. Research into the field of sexual emoji usage is still in its infancy Thompson (2018). Before discussing this subsection pertaining to sexting, it is essential to understand the particular lexicon, which will be explained shortly. *Emoticons* and *emojis* are terms which are sometimes contemporaneously used interchangeably. However, a clear distinction exists between the two.

The word *emoticon* is a hybrid neologism, which has been derived from the words: *emotion* and *icon* (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005, as cited in Thompson, 2018). From the perspective of the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2022), an *emoticon* refers to a group of keyboard characters which archetypally are representative of certain facial expressions or attitudes. The emoticon was developed in 1982 in an endeavour to enhance the emotional demeanour of CMC. Accordant with the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2022), an *emoji* refers to a variety of small images, symbols, or icons used especially with electronic communication, such as text messages, email, and social media, with the purpose of expressing emotional attitudes, conveying information succinctly, or communicating messages playfully. Essentially, emoji offer individuals a broad range of possibilities to express oneself visually (Walrave et al., 2018). Sexual emoji refers to icons/images/symbols that are generally accepted as having sexual connotations (Thompson, 2018). Put another way, certain icons connote visual sexual metaphors (Woodward et al., 2017). Many adolescents are well acquainted with the 'basics' of emoji sexting ciphers, but for the purposes of clarity, these emojis will be explained as follows:







Table 2.
Emojis used in sexting

Description	Emoji	Representation
The peach		The buttocks
The taco		The vagina
The eggplant		The penis
The tongue		Oral sex
Sweat droplets		Sweating due to sex

Note. A beginners guide to sexting with emoji (Bond, 2016) – Source

Once adolescents have become accustomed to the essential emojis used in sexting, they then may use the icons to create narratives regarding what they want pertaining to sex. Thus, as can be seen from the table, emoji can therefore be manipulated to communicate sexual language using these icons as visual metaphors.

Table 3.
Some common sexual emoji narratives

Emoji configuration	Narrative
	Booty smack
	Penetration
	Booty call
	I'd like to put my hands on your breasts
	I'd like to be Eiffel Towered by you and a friend
	I would like you to chain me up for a *BDSM experience (*Bondage / Discipline / Sadism / Masochism)

Note. A beginners guide to sexting with emoji (Bond, 2016) – Source

The researcher has judiciously selected only several sexual emoji narratives, as illustrated in the above table. Her personal reaction to some of the other narratives was shock. Some narratives bordered on being quite salacious/obscene in nature, in her personal view as a parent and as a researcher. A parent or a teacher, for example, may be completely incognisant of some of the stories which can be creatively produced with the use of sexual emojis. By way of illustration, a parent may be stunned to know the real meaning behind the fifth configuration in the above-mentioned table. Here, a girl is essentially asking to be Eiffel Towered by two boys. This refers to her being in a *doggy-style* sexual position. While on all-fours, she performs fellatio on the one boy, while the other boy penetrates her; all the while, the two boys are holding hands above her, in an Eiffel Tower formation.

Based on the sexting ciphers and emojis illustrated in the aforementioned tables, there is a serious need for adolescents to be guided pertaining to safe online etiquette, especially as online apps play such a pivotal role in shaping adolescent's sexuality these days. There is no doubt that sexting does provide a novel way of sexual expression amongst adolescents, but one needs to consider the potential risks and consequences accompanying sexting.

POTENTIAL RISK FACTORS AND RAMIFICATIONS

Even though sexting is considered to be a relatively new phenomenon, certain researchers have delved into this field of study to better understand possible risk factors and consequences associated with sexting. As believed by Albert and Steinberg (2011), adolescents are less likely to think about the long-term effects of online sexual disclosures, because the short-term rewards are considered to be more enticing. In this research study, it was discovered that there are psychosocial, educational, and legal concerns associated with sexting. However, some researchers do not believe that these concerns are really noteworthy. For example, Chalfen (2009) believes that sexting actually provides adolescents with an innocuous *high* (similar to a drug addict's high), which does not result in the typical possible physical consequences of risky sexual behaviour (such as pregnancy, or HIV/STI transmission). When it comes to adolescent sexting, the risks and consequences associated with sexting are not necessarily limited to physical consequences to what may occur to one's body, but are more relational or emotional in nature.

As attested to by a number of authors, numerous psychosocial consequences resulting from sexting may exist, to be precise, for example embarrassment, shame, friendship marginalisation, sexual solicitation, increased risk of online sexual victimisation, school suspension, school transfer, depression, anxiety, or even suicide (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Chalfen, 2009; O'Keeffe & Clark-Pearson, 2011).

Accordant with the respondents in the focus groups in the Van Ouytsel et al.'s (2017) study, the following responses were elicited as perceived consequences of sexting behaviour: forwarding the photograph or publishing it on a social networking site; showing the photograph to others; exposing the photograph as revenge after a break up; and blackmailing the sender of the photograph. One of the major obstacles associated with sexting is the power that the receiver of the sext has, in that he or she may freely distribute the image or text to others, thereby intensifying the probability of social shaming, cyberbullying, and revenge pornography (Wilkinson et al., 2016; as cited in Buren & Lunde, 2018; Walrave et al., 2018).

As reported by Gewirtz-Meydan et al. (2018), research studies have found that sexting is correlated with having vaginal sex (Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2014), anal and oral sex (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014), and having unprotected sex (Rice et al., 2012). Other authors have also pointed out that sexting has been linked to emotional problems, including but not limited to depression, (Yeung et al., 2014), and alcohol usage (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Broad consensus exists with regard to the correlations between sexting and other variables. For example, conformable to Temple et al. (2014), AOD usage could possibly impede adolescents' decision-making abilities, thereby possibly resulting in engaging in risky sexual behaviours. In the Ševčíková (2016) study which drew data from 17 016 11-16 years old adolescents in the EU Kids Online II project, it was found that teenage sexting was linked to emotional problems and alcohol usage.

Academic opinion suggests that adolescents may seem naïve regarding the fact that their online interactions create digital footprints (O'Keeffe & Clark-Pearson, 2011; Walker et al., 2011). Thus, adolescents' sexting history may produce inadvertent

implications within an educational context. For example, study/career opportunities may be jeopardised. Another example would be that these individuals may not be able to be employed at tertiary educational institutions, due to their former sexting history.

In an extant study conducted by Gewirtz-Meydan et al. (2018), researchers were determined to unpack the current and future impact of sexting on adolescents. They conducted research in August 2010 and January 2011 on a nationally representative sample of 1560 internet users between the ages of 10 and 17. Some of the results from this study are as follows: 86% of youth noted that sexting under the age of 18 is regarded to be a crime; 71% of these youth noted that sexting would most likely cause them to experience ramifications at school; 59% of these youth observed that they may get into trouble with the police. It was interesting to note that an attitudinal difference existed amongst youth who engaged in sexting as opposed to those who did not. Those who did, generally held beliefs that sexting would negatively impact their chances of getting a job; and cause emotional damage to friendship, romantic relationships, and family relationships.

As per Walker et al. (2011), sexting also plays a role in objectifying females; the aforesaid authors mention that sexually charged images are typically of women, and are usually forwarded by males. However, as claimed by Brown and L'Engle (2009), girls can also become part of their own objectification when they self-generate sexualised pictures. Consequently, they learn to treat themselves as objects of desire to be valued solely for their appearance. In pursuance with Walrave et al. (2018), girls in particular are oftentimes seen as the victims of sexualisation with popular media content. In light of this, Spooner and Vaughn (2016) claim that a great deal of effort needs to be made to convince girls (i.e. potential sexters) not to engage in sexting because this may lead to two possible problems: (1) girls therefore being the authors of sexualised content; and (2) sexting could eventually be used against them.

Sexting under the age of 18 years old is considered to be illegal, however it is still a phenomenon which occurs with younger teens, even though it may not necessarily be as prevalent as with older teens (Buren & Lunde, 2018).

Another worrying consequence is that compromising sexual photos/videos of children under the age of 18 years old may also be accessible to paedophiles (Badenhorst, 2011). As attested to by the aforementioned scholar, an unintended consequence of sexting is that it may be viewed as pornography. Sending sexts may therefore result in children being criminally prosecuted for behaviour that they may not necessarily deem wrong or illegal (Badenhorst, 2011).

It can be argued that more emphasis needs to be applied with regard to adolescents' online etiquette, especially pertaining to sexting. Instead of propagating the silence in relation to sexting, stakeholders should be educating adolescents regarding the risks and consequences associated with sexting (Schmitz & Siry, 2011). While the phenomenon of sexting may appear to be innocuous, many contemporary studies have reported that adolescents may suffer from various types of online abuse, control, or harassment in interpersonal relationships, which take the form of cyberbullying, cyberstalking, grooming, and cyber dating abuse – all of which may have both legal and health implications (Gomez et al., 2017; Morelli et al., 2018).

GENDER CONSIDERATIONS PERTAINING TO SEXTING

Studies which focus on the gender differences pertaining to sexting have found that males in general have more favourable attitudes towards sexting (Lim et al., 2016; Rodriguez-Castro et al., 2018). However, another study revealed that those who usually display favourable attitudes towards sexting usually have less knowledge concerning sexual health, tend to use condoms inconsistently with casual partners, and tend to use alcohol excessively on a weekly basis (Lim et al., 2016).

Regardless of the motives behind sexting, an important point to note is that of the sexual double standard which plays out especially during the adolescent period. In general, it was found that boys who sext usually receive increased social status and gain popularity, while girls are prone to negative name-calling and damage to their reputations (Ringrose et al., 2013). This is in line with what other scholars have found in their research. As claimed by Lippman and Campbell (2014), and Walker et al., (2013), adolescent girls customarily tend to receive more criticism than their counterparts, should they refuse to sext. On the other hand, boys seem to be regarded in a more positive light if they engage in sexting behaviours.

In a mix-methods research study conducted by Bomester (2021), the researcher performed face-to-face interviews with eleven South African adolescents from two local secondary schools in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. Two common threads which emerged from the data were the sending of photos of male genitalia (i.e. dick pics), and adolescent boys exploiting girls through the transmission of nude images.

Dick pics (DPs) would fall under the categorisation of self-made sexually explicit photographs (Klettke et al., 2014). As mentioned by Waling and Pym (2019), the dick pic has become a growing cultural phenomenon in the digital realm. Stated differently, DPs are self-taken pictures of penises sent by males via electronic devices (Mandau, 2020). The aforementioned author conducted a study exploring the receiving and sending of unsolicited DPs. From his data collected from seven focus group interviews, it was found that girls experience unbidden dick pics as invasive. The aforesaid author explains that girls view the sending of DPs as misguided attempts at flirting, while boys regard this as a way of showing off, complimenting, hooking up with, or getting nude pictures in return from girls (Mandau, 2020). It is interesting to note how quickly an online conversation via WhatsApp can accelerate from a casual discourse for the boy to him sending a DP to the girl, as was shared by several participants in the Bomester (2021) study. Perhaps the teenage boy in this case was showing off, or wanting to hook up with the girl. Alternatively, he may have wanted her to reciprocate his gesture, by sending a nude to him. Perhaps his motive could be to titillate the recipient (Walrave et al., 2015).

Scholars are not in agreement regarding whether this type of sexting may be innocuous or harmful for the adolescent (Schloms-Madlener, 2013). The researcher believes that one should not be too overly critical of young boys who engage in this form of sexting. Congruous to some authors, the sharing of self-made sexually explicit photographs via mobile/internet applications may assist in helping teenagers explore their sexuality and their sexual identities (Smahel & Subrahmanyam, 2014; Walrave et al., 2015). However, it must be added that while this behaviour may possibly be considered as normative, it does not mean that this phenomenon does not have consequences.

The spontaneous sending of DPs is without a doubt a form of sexual harassment and violence against women claims Waling et al. (2019). Regardless of whether or not the reader concurs with the latter view, what is evident is that DPs do not tend to go viral as the nudes of females. Several participants in the Bomester (2021) study expressed opinions regarding boys who

exploit girls through the transmission of their nudes. This view was echoed in studies by Lippman and Campbell (2014) and Yeung et al. (2014), who believe that adolescent boys collect nudes of girls and consequently view the nudes as their trophies to possibly show off to others. It is true that sexting does not result in physical ramifications such as pregnancy or HIV/STI transmission (Chalfen 2009) yet the emotional repercussions are quite real. In pursuance with Bomester (2021), one participant explained how a nude image of an adolescent female was uploaded onto Instagram, and that she felt embarrassed upon making this discovery. A number of scholars discussed the emotional consequences as a result of sexting, embarrassment being one of them (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Chalfen, 2009; O'Keeffe & Clark-Pearson, 2011). One of the major obstacles associated with sexting is the power that the receiver of the sext has, in that he or she may freely distribute the image or text to others, thereby intensifying the probability of social shaming, cyberbullying, and revenge pornography (Wilkinson et al., 2016; as cited in Buren & Lunde, 2018; Walrave et al., 2018). It is the researcher's view that adolescent males may exploit the nudes of girls, thereby placing them in very disempowering positions, hence, unfortunately it is oftentimes adolescent females who bear the brunt of social shaming online. On the one hand, nudes may play a role in objectifying females (Walker et al., 2011). On the other hand, girls can also become part of their own objectification when they self-generate sexualised pictures (Brown & L'Engle; 2009). Consequently, they learn to treat themselves as objects of desire to be valued solely for their appearance. In pursuance with Walrave et al. (2018), girls in particular are oftentimes seen as the victims of sexualisation with popular media content. In light of this, Spooner and Vaughn (2016) claim that much effort needs to be made to convince girls (i.e. potential sexters) not to engage in sexting because this may lead to two possible problems: (1) girls therefore being the authors of sexualised content; and (2) sexting could eventually be used against them.

LEGAL RAMIFICATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH SEXTING

Badenhorst (2011), author of an article entitled *Legal responses to cyberbullying and sexting in South Africa*, states that the relatively new phenomenon of sexting has emerged over recent years, and because it is so unfamiliar to parents, many are unsure of how to prevent and deal with this behaviour. In addition, as specified by Albury and Crawford (2012), very few teenagers seem to be cognisant of the legal repercussions associated with sexting. Internationally, sexting – which includes the non-consensual dissemination of sexual images – carries the risk of prosecution in many countries (Strasburger et al., 2019). Within the South African context, there appears to be general ignorance pertaining to anti-child pornography laws in South Africa. Sexting explicit sexual images of adolescents under the age of 18 years old is considered to be child pornography, therefore creating and/or distributing of sexting images is considered to be a criminal offence. Parenthetically, a child is described as a person under the age of 18 years old (Sauter, 2015). Section 19 of the Criminal Law regarding Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act of 2007 provides guidelines regarding actions which may be taken regarding adolescent sexting. Existing criminal law responses to this phenomenon in South Africa include: (a) crimen injuria; (b) assault; (c) criminal defamation; and (d) extortion. Arguably, these forms of criminal law prosecutions may be devastating and costly to both adolescents and their families (Strasburger et al., 2019). Certain researchers are of the view that formal laws within the criminal justice system should not be seen as a solution for adolescent sexting incidents, as teenagers typically tend not to be discouraged by rules.

Badenhorst (2011) does caution that these legal ramifications may be inappropriate for children under the age of 18 years old though. Rather, she points out that a minor involved in sexting be legally dealt with, with reference to the Child Justice Act (CJA).

ONLINE SAFETY GUIDELINES

As attested by Michaud and Free (2017), today's adolescents are growing up with access to digital tools, and they frequently make use of information and communication technologies. Accordant with Cohn (2009), the electronic world has transformed the way 21st century adolescents are growing up, as well as changing the skills which caregivers need to help teenagers circumnavigate this world. While technology may be advantageous in a myriad of ways, it can have important risks if misused or overused (Yepez-Tito et al., 2020). How then do adults, be they parents or educators, intervene when it comes to sexting?

In terms of intervention within a school context, Chalfen (2009) states that educators should be empowered to deal effectively with sexting, and care should be taken not to cause secondary trauma to the individuals involved. Conformable to Hinduja and Patchin (2008), it is vital for all schools (especially secondary schools) to have well-defined anti-sexting policies. The researcher concurs with Hinduja and Patchin (2008) who argue that school sexting education strategies are imperative. These strategies could encompass assemblies (for information-dissemination); staff development for educators and online resources to be shared with parents via the schools' electronic communicating apps.

Online safety also needs to be incorporated into effective sexuality programmes for adolescents within the school context. Adolescents do need to be taught about the potential risk factors and ramifications appertaining to sexting, especially the exchange of nude photographs and videos. It would be advisable to provide adolescents with adequate knowledge regarding the health and legal ramifications associated with sexting.

Scholms-Madlener (2013) believes that parents and educators should undoubtedly keep abreast with social media, and become more involved in the monitoring of their children's use of social media. Parents, in particular, should be playing a more active role in ensuring that their adolescent children are practically skilled in relation to staying safe online.

Sadlier (2019), a leading social media expert in South Africa (as previously mentioned) and the founder of *The Digital Law Company* endorses ten simple general guidelines which should be followed as teenagers voyage through the online world:

1. *Remember the billboard test* – if an adolescent is not comfortable putting the prospective message on a billboard with one's face and biographical details, then it is not a good idea to put the message online.
2. *Manage one's digital CV* – it is crucial that adolescents are aware of the fact that potential universities or employers may Google their names, and they reserve the right *not* to hire or accept an application based on adolescents' digital footprints. Therefore, teenagers need to be cognisant of the reputations which they are building online.

3. *Use privacy settings* – parents and educators also need to teach the youth about the importance of privacy settings, as having open accounts can be accessible for anyone online. This could be potentially quite precarious.
4. *Keep passwords safe* – adolescents need to be guided to create exceptionally strong passwords for their devices; these passwords need to be shared by legal guardians or parents though.
5. *Be aware of stranger danger* – oftentimes, people are not who they claim to be online. In reality, these individuals may have a hidden agenda for wanting to be in contact with young people. Thus, teenagers are cautioned to not message, telephone, or ‘add’ anyone that they (and their legal guardians/parents) have not personally met in reality.
6. *Do not share personal information online* – any form of demographic information sharing should be strongly discouraged, as adolescents may not only place their own lives in danger, but also their family’s lives.
7. *Disable location services* – another helpful recommendation is for adolescents to turn off their location settings for all social media applications, as location sharing may place their lives and their family’s lives at risk.
8. *Nudes are never a good idea* – within the context of this theoretical paper, this guideline is particularly beneficial, in that adolescents should never send, take or ask for nude pictures. Remember that if they are the subjects of the nudes, their actions are considered to be criminal offences relating to child pornography.
9. *Do not open any suspicious links or attachments* – it is prudent to remember this vital guideline in order to be safe online.
10. *Always alert a trusted adult* when one receives suspicious phone calls; or harassing, threatening, disturbing, offensive, illegal, or inappropriate content (Sadlier, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Operating within the online space is something which many individuals, including adolescents, do subconsciously. Sexting, for example, may appear to be harmless fun to engage in during the adolescent period. However, teenagers need to be aware of the potential ramifications associated with this kind of online behaviour. In this theoretical paper, the topic of sexting was comprehensively discussed, followed by several practical recommendations for ensuring online safety for adolescents.

REFERENCES

- Albert, D., & Steinberg L. *Peer influences on adolescent risk behavior*. In: Bardo, M.T., Fishbein, D.H., Milich, R., (Eds.) (2011). *Inhibitory Control and Drug Abuse Prevention: From Research to Translation*. New York: Springer.
- Albury, K., & Crawford, K. (2012). *Sexting, consent and young people’s ethics: Beyond Megan’s Story*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2012.665840>.
- Badenhorst, C. (2011). *Legal responses to cyberbullying and sexting in South Africa*.
- Barrense-Dias, Y., Berchtold, A., Suris, J. C., & Akre, C. (2017). Sexting and the definition issue. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 61, 544–554. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.05.009.
- Bianchi, D, Morelli, M, Baiocco, R, Cattelino, E, Laghi F, & Chirumbolo, A. (2019). Family functioning patterns predict teenage girls’ sexting. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*. 2019;43(6):507-514. doi:10.1177/0165025419873037.
- Brown, J. D., & L’Engle, K. L. (2009). X-rated: Sexual attitudes and behaviors associated with US early adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit media. *Communication Research*, 36(1), 129-151.
- Bond, A.(2016). *Sexting With Emojis: A Beginner’s Guide to the Hottest Emoji Combinations*. <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/sexting-emoji/>.
- Bomester, O. (2021). Exploring intrinsic religiosity as a means to militate against risky sexual behaviour in adolescents from Christian faith-based schools. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of the Western Cape, Bellville.
- Burén, J., & Lunde, C. (2018). Sexting among adolescents: A nuanced and gendered online challenge for young people. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 85, 210–217. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.02.003>.
- Chalfen, R. (2009). ‘It’s only a picture’: Sexting, ‘smutty’ snapshots and felony charges. *Visual Studies*, 24, 258-268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725860903309203>.
- Chatzichristos C, Morante M, Andreadis N, Kofidis E, Kopsinis Y, Theodoridis S (2020) Emojis influence autobiographical memory retrieval from reading words: An fMRI-based study. *PLoS ONE* 15(7): e0234104. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0234104>.
- Cohn, D. (2009). Teens, sex and the Internet: A pilot study on the Internet and its impact on adolescent health and sexuality. Unpublished Master’s thesis: Drexel University School for Public Health.
- Dake, Joseph A., James H. Price, Lauren Maziarz, & Britney Ward. (2012). Prevalence and Correlates of Sexting Behavior in Adolescents. *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 7 (1): 1–15. doi:10.1080/15546128.2012.650959.
- DeMar, J. (2015). Sexting: Gender and Teens. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 44(12), 2377–2380. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0363-4>.
- Gewirtz-Meydan, A., Mitchell, K. J., & Rothman, E. F. (2018). What do kids think about sexting? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 86, 256–265. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.04.007>.
- Gómez, P., Harris, S., Barreiro, C., Isorna, M., & Rial, A. (2017). Profiles of Internet use and parental involvement, and rates of online risks and problematic Internet use among Spanish adolescents. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 75, 826-833. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.06.027>.
- Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. W. (2008). Personal information of adolescents on the Internet: A quantitative content analysis of MySpace. *Journal of Adolescence*, 31, 125–146. doi: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2007.05.004.
- Huffaker, D. A., & Calvert, S. L. (2005). Gender, identity, and language use in teenage blogs. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00238.x>.

- HuffPost SA. (2017). A Brief History Of “F**kboy,” The Internet’s Favorite New Man-Bashing. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/f-kboy-definition-take-that-haters_n_7471142.
- Klettke, B., Hallford, D. J., & Mellor, D. (2014). Sexting prevalence and correlates: A systematic literature review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 34, 44-53. doi: 10.1016/j.cpr.2013.10.007.
- Lenhart, A. (2009). Teens and sexting: How and why minor teens are sending sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images via text messaging. Retrieved from Pew Research Center website: http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2009/PIP_Teens_and_Sexting.pdf (Accessed 25 September 2017).
- Lim, M. S. C., Vella, A. M., Horyniak, D. R., & Hellard, M. E. (2016). Exploring attitudes towards sexting of young people: A cross-sectional study. *Sexual Health*, 13, 530e535. <http://doi.org/10.1071/SH16029>.
- Lippman, J. R., & Campbell, S. W. (2014). Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don’t...If You’re a Girl: Relational and Normative Contexts of Adolescent Sexting in the United States. *Journal of Children and Media*, 8(4), 371–386 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2014.923009>.
- Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. (2022). Emoji. In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/emoji>.
- Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. (2022). Emoticon. In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/emoticon>.
- Michaud, P., & Free, C. (2017). Alice in Wonderland: Adolescents and Digital Technologies.
- Mandau, M. B. H. (2020). “Snaps”, “screenshots”, and self-blame: A qualitative study of image-based sexual abuse victimization among adolescent Danish girls. *Journal of Children and Media*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2020.1848892>.
- Morelli, M., Bianchi, D., Chirumbolo, A. & Baiocco, R. (2018). The cyber dating violence inventory. Validation of a new scale for online perpetration and victimization among dating partners. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 15(4), 464-471, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2017.1305885>.
- O’Keeffee, G. S. & Clarke-Pearson. (2011). The impact of social media on children, adolescents, and families. *Pediatrics*. 127, 800. doi:10.1542/peds.2011-0054.
- Plumb, M. D. (2013). *Non-verbal communication in instant messaging* (Unpublished Master’s Thesis), Southern Utah University, Cedar City, Utah. Retrieved from <https://www.suu.edu/hss/comm/masters/capstone/thesis/plumb-mi.pdf>.
- Redmond, T. (2010). *Ringwood community addresses sexting*. North Jersey Media Group.
- Renfrow, D.G., & Rollo, E.A., (2014). Sexting on Campus: Minimizing Perceived Risks and Neutralizing Behaviors. *Deviant Behavior*, 35 (11): 903–920. doi:10.1080/01639625.2014. 897122.
- Rodríguez-Castro, Y., Alonso-Ruido, P., Lameiras-Fernández, M., & Faílde-Garrido, J. M. (2018). Del sexting al cibercontrol en las relaciones de pareja de adolescentes españoles: análisis de sus argumentos. *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicología*, 50(3), 170-178. <https://doi.org/10.14349/rlp.2018.v50.n3.4>
- Sadlier, E. (2019). Ten tips for staying safe online. *The Digital Law Company*. <https://www.thedigitallawco.com/online-safety/ten-tips-for-staying-safe-online/>
- Sauter, E. (2015). The constitution of South Africa. *The Journal of International Communication*, 21(2), 189–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2015.1052533>.
- Schmitz, S., & Siry, L. (2011). Teenage folly or child abuse? State responses to “sexting” by minors in the U.S. and Germany. *Policy Internet* 3, 25–50. doi: 10.2202/1944-2866.1127
- Scholms-Madlener, K.C. (2013). The prevalence and characteristics of sexting behaviours among adolescents and adults in Cape Town, South Africa. (Unpublished Master’s thesis). University of Cape Town, Cape Town.
- Ševčíková A. Girls’ and boys’ experience with teen sexting in early and late adolescence. *J Adolesc*. 2016 Aug;51:156-62. doi: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.06.007. Epub 2016 Jul 6. PMID: 27391169.
- Spooner, K., & Vaughn, M. (2016). Youth Sexting: A Legislative and Constitutional Analysis. *Journal of School Violence*, 15(2), 213–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2014.974245>.
- Šmahel, David, and Kaveri Subrahmanyam. 2014. “Adolescent Sexuality on the Internet: A Developmental Perspective.” In *Adolescent Sexual Behavior in the Digital Age*, edited by F. M.
- Snyman, C.R. (2008). *Criminal Law*. Durban: LexisNexis.
- Strasburger, V. C., Zimmerman, H., Temple, J. R., & Madigan, S. (2019). Teenagers, sexting, and the law. *Pediatrics*, 143(5). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-3183>.
- Strassberg, Donald S., Jordan E. Rullo, and Julia E. Mackaronis. (2014). “The Sending and Receiving of Sexually Explicit Cell Phone Photos (‘Sexting’) While in High School: One College’s Students’ Retrospective Reports.” *Computers in Human Behavior* 41: 177–183. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2014.09.008.
- Rice, E., Rhoades, H., Winetrobe, H., Sanchez, M., Montoya, J., Plant, A., et al. (2012). Sexually explicit cell phone messaging associated with sexual risk among adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 130, 667e673. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-0021>.
- Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R., & Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen Girls, Sexual Double Standards and ‘Sexting’: Gendered Value in Digital Image Exchange. *Feminist Theory*, 14 (3): 305– 323. doi:10.1177/1464700113499853.
- Takeda, A. (2011). *Sexting Acronyms Every Parent Needs to Know*. *Everyday Health*. <https://www.everydayhealth.com/kids-health/sexting-acronyms-every-parent-needs-to-know.aspx>.
- Temple, J. R., Le, V. D., Van Den Berg, P., Ling, Y., Paul, J. A., & Temple, B. W. (2014). Brief report: Teen sexting and psychosocial health. *Journal of Adolescence Journal*, 37, 33e36. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2013.10.008>.
- Thomson, S., Kluftinger, E., & Wentland, J. (2018). Are you fluent in sexual emoji?: Exploring the use of emoji in romantic and sexual contexts. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 27(3), 226–234. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.2018-0020>.
- Utz, S., Muscanell, N., & Khalid, C. (2015). Snapchat elicits more jealousy than Facebook: A comparison of Snapchat and Facebook use. *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour and Social Networking*, 18, 141-146. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2014.0479>.

- Van Ouytsel, J., Van Gool, E., Walrave, M., Ponnet, K., & Peeters, E. (2017). Sexting: adolescents' perceptions of the applications used for, motives for, and consequences of sexting. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(4), 446–470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1241865>.
- Vaterlaus, J., Barnett, K., Roche, C., & Young, J. (2016). “Snapchat is more personal”: An exploratory study on Snapchat behaviours and young adult interpersonal relationships. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 62, 594-601. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.04.029>.
- Waling, A., & Pym, T. (2019). ‘C’mon, No One Wants a Dick Pic’: exploring the cultural framings of the ‘Dick Pic’ in contemporary online publics. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(1), 70–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1394821>.
- Walker, S., Sanci, L., & Temple-Smith, M. (2011). Sexting and young people: Experts' views. *Youth Studies Australia*, 30(4), 8-16. Retrieved from: <http://rodolfoamirez.pbworks.com/w/file/attach/60412955/Bullying%20Article%202.pdf>.
- Walrave, M., Ponnet, K., Ouytsel, J. V., Gool, E. V., Heirman, W., & Verbeek, A. (2015). Whether or not to engage in sexting: Explaining adolescent sexting behaviour by applying the prototype willingness model. *Telematics and Informatics*, 32, 796e808. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2015.03.008>.
- Walrave, M., Ouytsel, J. Van, Ponnet, K., & Temple, J. R. (2018). Sexting. *Sexting*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71882-8>.
- National Online Safety. (2022). What is online safety? <https://nationalonlinesafety.com/wakeupwednesday/what-is-online-safety>.
- Wilkinson, Y., Whitfield, C., Hannigan, S., Ali, P. A., & Hayter, M. (2016). A qualitative meta-synthesis of young peoples' experiences of 'sexting'. *British Journal of School Nursing*, 11,183-191. doi: 10.12968/bjsn.2016.11.4.183.
- Woodward, V. H., Evans, M., & Brooks, M. (2017). Social and Psychological Factors of Rural Youth Sexting: An Examination of Gender-Specific Models. *Deviant Behavior*, 38(4), 461–476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2016.1197020>.
- Wortham, J. (2013). “A Growing App Lets You See It, Then You Don’t.” *New York Times*, February 8, 2013.
- Ybarra, M. L., & Mitchell, K. J. (2014). “Sexting” and its relation to sexual activity and sexual risk behavior in a national survey of adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 55(6), 757e764. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.07.012>
- Yépez-Tito, P., Ferragut, M., & Blanca, M. J. (2020). Sexting in adolescence: The use of technology and parental supervision. *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicología*, 52(1), 115–130. <https://doi.org/10.14349/rlp.2020.v52.12>.
- Yeung, T. H., Horyniak, D. R., Vella, A. M., Hellard, M. E., & Lim, M. S. C. (2014). Prevalence, correlates and attitudes towards sexting among young people in Melbourne, Australia. *Sexual Health*, 11(4), 332. <https://doi.org/10.1071/SH14032>.

Olivia Bomester
Helderberg College of Higher Education
27 Annandale Drive, Helena Heights, Somerset West, 7130, South Africa
Email: bomestero@hche.ac.za