Youth Sexting: A Critical Review of the Research Literature

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for the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute
August 2021

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Executive Summary

Increased development and use of internet-enabled mobile devices (e.g., smartphones) has created new modes of communication for individuals to facilitate relationship development and social network formation. These new modes of communication can include sexting by way of various forms of communication technologies (e.g., text/instant messaging and uploading content to web and social media). The development of online communication, smart phones, and social media apps is said to have contributed to the rise of sexting and sharing of explicit images among both adults and youth. While technology offers opportunities for self-expression and connection with potential and current romantic/sexual partners, it also poses challenges and risks. These include the potential for sexual exploitation, legal consequences, and duplication and spreading of sexts, which can lead to social shaming, cyberbullying, and/or revenge porn.

The purpose of this literature review is to outline the most current research findings on sexting and explore the potential positive and negative effects of engaging in it on youth sexual health, behaviours, and decision-making. The **first section** of this literature review outlines the definition and prevalence estimates of sexting among North American youth. The **second section** presents approaches to understanding sexting, including a wide range of theoretical models applied by researchers examining this topic. The **third section** examines youth attitudes and motivations related to sexting, as well as correlates and potential negative outcomes of sexting. In the **fourth section**, various aspects of sex, gender, sexuality, and relationships are considered within the context of youth sexting. The **fifth section** considers Canadian and American laws applied to youth sexting cases, while the final **sixth section** outlines research related to sexting education.

The lack of an agreed upon definition of sexting complicates our ability to make sense of the research literature, measure prevalence rates of this behaviour, and develop effective education interventions. Further, despite the growing evidence base supporting the sex-positive, developmental, normalcy perspective of sexting, much of the earlier research in this area has been dominated by the risk, deviance perspective of sexting. Overall, additional research on the effects of sexting on youth is warranted.

1. Introduction

Increased development and use of internet-enabled mobile devices (e.g., smartphones) has created new modes of communication for individuals to facilitate relationship development and social network formation (Holoyda et al., 2017). These new modes of communication can include sexting. Coined roughly in 2005 as a media term (Judge, 2012; Lee et al., 2015), "sexting" can refer to the production and distribution of sexually explicit text messages (Drouin et al., 2013; Esparza et al., 2020; Houck et al., 2014) and sexually explicit images, emojis, or videos by way of various forms of communication technologies (Challenor et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2013). Communication technologies can include text or instant messaging via cellphones as well as uploading content (e.g., photos) to web and social media sites (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014)[1]. The progress of technology and development of new means of communication, including smartphones and social media apps, is said to have contributed to the rise of sexting (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). In particular, the advancement of cellphone technology and development of smartphones with advanced cameras and mobile apps (e.g., Snapchat) has given rise to the sharing of explicit images (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, et al., 2019c). Overall, sexting has been gaining popularity among both adults and youth (Lee et al., 2013; Schloms-Madlener, 2013) as means of sexual expression and connecting in romantic/intimate relationships (Buren & Lunde, 2018). Sexting also poses challenges and risks, though, including the potential for sexual exploitation, legal consequences, and duplication and spreading of sexts, which can lead to social shaming, cyberbullying, and/or revenge porn (Buren & Lunde, 2018).

The purpose of this literature review is to outline the most current research findings[2] on sexting and explore the potential positive and negative effects of engaging in it on youth sexual health, behaviours, and decision-making. The **first section** of this literature review outlines definitions and prevalence estimates of sexting among North American youth[3]. The **second section** presents approaches to understanding sexting, including a wide range of theoretical models applied by researchers examining this topic. The **third section** examines youth attitudes and motivations related to sexting as well as correlates and potential negative outcomes of sexting. In the **fourth section**, various aspects of sex, gender, sexuality, and relationships are considered within the context of youth sexting. The **fifth section** considers Canadian and American laws applied to youth sexting cases, while the final **sixth section** outlines research related to sexting education.

Despite its popularity, many criticisms have been bestowed on the sexting research literature. Chiefly, this area of research lacks a standard definition and reliable prevalence data. Further, sexting research has been criticized for being largely descriptive and focusing primarily on cross-

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[1] Depending on the technology used, sexts may be more "permanent" in nature and require intentional deletion to be removed from an app or hard-drive (e.g., text messages, Facebook Messenger, Instagram direct messaging, etc.) or more "temporary" and designed to remain visible only for a short time (1 to 10 seconds) unless they are screen captured (e.g., Snapchat) (Geeng et al., 2020; Holoyda et al., 2017; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017a).

[2] Research was considered "current" if it was published and/or updated within the last 10 years. However, some older publications were included as necessary.

[3] Canadian and American research literature was the primary focus of this review given the relevance of this content to the audience of reports developed by the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute.

sectional/prevalence rates, correlates, and consequences of this behaviour (Gamez-Guadix & de Santisteban, 2018; Kosenko et al., 2017; Lee & Darcy, 2021; Van Ouytsel et al., 2018; Yoder et al., 2018). Small or convenience participant samples are also common, thus limiting generalizability (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2018). Longitudinal evidence is also scarce (Gamez-Guadix & de Santisteban, 2018), as well as cross-national and cross-cultural research on sexting (Ngo et al., 2017). Longitudinal designs would enable investigation of sexting and other risky sexual behaviours across the lifespan of individuals (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018). Most sexting research relies on self-reporting measures which can lead to underreporting of participant behaviours (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018). Social desirability and response biases can also result in inconsistent findings regarding sexting and various correlates (e.g., risky sexual behaviour) (Kosenko et al., 2017). The lack of theoretically informed research can also limit the ability to interpret sexting research findings (Kosenko et al., 2017; Lee & Darcy, 2021). Additionally, much of the existing research on sexting does not differentiate between consensual and non-consensual sexting behaviour or explore the nuances of consensual sexting (Cornelius et al., 2020).

While these limitations are relevant to highlight, the existing literature on sexting should not be discounted altogether as there are many researchers who have addressed the criticisms and shared important findings. Overall, this literature review attempts to organize the current literature in a balanced way, where all sides of the issue of youth sexting are represented.

2. Sexting Definitions and Prevalence Estimates

2.1 Defining and Categorizing Sexting

There are various working definitions of sexting across the literature and little consensus among scholars (Lee & Darcy, 2021; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020a), with some scholars claiming that there is no generally accepted definition of sexting (Martinez-Prather & Vandiver, 2014). Definitions of sexting as it relates to youth can depend on the source of the information, which can include research literature, legal policy, and the voices of youth themselves (Steinberg et al., 2019). Some definitions of sexting have been critiqued for being too restrictive and legalistic (Steinberg et al., 2019), and calls have been made for more comprehensive and youth-defined operationalizations of sexting (Temple & Choi, 2014). Overall, disagreement among scholars and lack of consensus regarding defining sexting creates challenges with accurately assessing the prevalence and correlates (Van Ouytsel et al., 2020a).

A 2017 literature review by Barrense-Dias and colleagues highlighted the various dimensions of the definition of sexting, including content, actions, transmission mode, and sexual characteristics. In this review, **content** included text only, images/photos only, videos only, or a combination of the three. **Actions** referred to active sexting (i.e., creating, showing, posting, sending, or forwarding) and passive sexting (i.e., asking, being asked, or receiving). **Transmission mode** referred to sexting activity that is online, electronic, or virtual via the internet and/or mobile devices, with a distinction between posting content publicly online via the internet or sending it directly to a recipient. Finally, **sexual characteristics** encompassed a wide range of

terms including variations of sex/sext/sexy and nude/naked, as well as reference to specific body parts (e.g., breasts, genitals) and sexual behaviours (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). Similarly, Hudson and Marshall (2016) distinguished sexting content by sexual images (semi-nude or nude), sexual messages (explicit language about sex acts, insinuation of sex, plans to meet to engage in sex acts), and risk reduction sexts (discussions about STI testing, contraception use, and number of sexual partners).

Sexts can be distributed by the original content creator or forwarded by intended, or even non-intended, recipients (Lenhart, 2009). "Primary sexting" refers to (generally consensual) self-production of content, whereas "secondary sexting" involves forwarding content with or without consent from the original image or text creator (Calvert, 2009; Lievens, 2014). Differentiations have also been made between "experimental sexting", which takes place within an established romantic relationship or as a means for generating romantic interest, and "aggravated sexting", which relates to criminal or abusive behaviour where adults come into possession of sexting content from minors, often coercively (Bianchi et al., 2018; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2012). To account for situations where individuals share online sexts from former partners without permission, Calvert (2013) suggested another sexting term – revenge sexting. Drouin and Tobin (2014) also highlight the concept of unwanted but consensual sexting, where an individual faces pressure to send a sext and feels obligated to do so.

Some researchers have stated that differentiating between distinct sexting behaviours rather than grouping them together is important for understanding the motivations and correlates of sexting among youth (Casas et al., 2019; Foody et al., 2021). For example, Foody et al. (2021) asked research participants about the following distinct sexting behaviours: 1) Have you been asked to send naked pictures of yourself (a sext) through text, email, or applications like Snapchat?; 2) Have you sent naked pictures of yourself (a sext) through text, email, or applications like that?; 3) Has someone sent a sexually explicit image (a sext) of themselves to you after you have asked for them?; and, 4) Have you ever received a sexually explicit image (a sext) when you really didn't want to?.

More recently, Dodaj and Sesar (2020) developed a taxonomy of four distinct forms of sexting based on their review of the literature and theories related to sexting. The four categories include: **relational sexting** – sexting to initiate or maintain intimacy with an existing or potential partner; **reactive sexting** – an opportunistic form of sexting done so with intent, as a means for self-expression or to explore one's sexual identity through experimentation; **forced sexting** – sending sexts due to pressure or to be compliant; and **violent sexting** – similar to Wolak and Finkelhor's (2011) definition of "aggravated sexting" where sexting is often paired with additional criminal or abusive behaviour (Dodaj & Sesar, 2020).

Sexting has also been defined from a moral point of view, with "good" sexting serving as a means to enhance intimacy, operate as flirtation, or encourage sexual expression; and "bad"

sexting relating to exploitation and deliberate use of content to shame or cause harm to others (Slane, 2013). Distinctions have also been made regarding the type of sexting that occurs through various message-exchanging technology. Given social media community guidelines (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) which restrict posting of sexually explicit and nude content, "sexy self-presentation" via these sites often takes the form of wearing revealing clothing and/or posing in lingerie, underwear, or swimwear (Van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2017).

2.2 Prevalence Estimates of Sexting Among Youth

Prevalence estimates of sexting are dependent on how the behaviour is defined (Steinberg et al., 2019; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, et al., 2019c), as well as study demographics (e.g., age, race, gender), sampling techniques used (e.g., convenience vs. random sample), and data collection methods employed (e.g., anonymous online questionnaires, interviews, etc.) (Klettke et al., 2014; Steinberg et al., 2019; Strassberg et al., 2017). Due to varied definitions of sexting within the peer-reviewed research literature, comparisons of reported prevalence rates are challenging (Cooper et al., 2016; Villacampa, 2017). Further, social desirability and response biases can skew prevalence rates (Kosenko et al., 2017; Ringrose et al., 2012). Nonetheless, based on a 2018 meta-analysis, worldwide prevalence estimates of sending and receiving sexts among youth (mean age of 15 years, range of 12 to 17 years) are 14.8% and 27.4%, respectively (Madigan et al., 2018). Prevalence rates increased with age, year of data collection (i.e., prevalence rates increased over time), and sexting method (higher prevalence when mobile devices are used compared to computers[4]) (Madigan et al., 2018). Among youth aged 10-19 years, estimates from a 2014 meta-analysis suggest that 10.2% to 11.96% of individuals have sent a sext (Klettke et al., 2014). Adolescents seem to receive sexts more often than they send them (Klettke et al., 2014; Strassberg et al., 2013) and are more likely to know someone who has sent a sext than having been the sender of one themselves (Rice et al., 2012).

Results from another ongoing meta-analysis suggest that sexting rates have been progressively increasing in the past 10 years (Molla-Esparza et al., 2020). Further, sexting rates seem to increase as youth reach young adulthood (Madigan et al., 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020a), with many researchers reporting that about 50% of young adults sext (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Drake et al., 2012; Klettke et al., 2014; Madigan et al., 2018). Overall, sexting appears to be more widespread among adults than youth (Benotsch et al., 2013; Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014; Gordon Messer et al., 2013).

Due to the inherently higher risks with sending sexually explicit images (i.e., unauthorized distribution, reputational damage), some researchers focus solely on this aspect of sexting compared to text only (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, et al., 2019c). Considerably less research attention has been given to non-consensual sexting image forwarding and pressured sexting behaviours compared to acts of sending and receiving sexts (Madigan et al., 2018). Nonetheless, an

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[4] Mobile devices/smartphones offer more portability, privacy, and convenience compared to computers, and smartphone ownership has become increasingly ubiquitous (Choi et al., 2017; Song et al., 2018).

estimated 12% of youth have forwarded a sexting image non-consensually (Madigan et al., 2018). Other researchers have reported that nearly 50% of their adolescent sample experienced a photo being released without their consent (Englander & McCoy, 2017).

3. Approaches for Understanding Sexting

3.1 Perspectives on Sexting

Traditionally, the most common approach to sexting has been to frame (or "demonize"; Barrense-Dias et al., 2017) it as a deviant or risky behaviour that can lead to "moral panic" (Crofts et al., 2015; Hasinoff, 2015d) and negative consequences (e.g., cyberbullying, harassment, legal ramifications) (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Brinkley et al., 2017; Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Kosenko et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2012; Steinberg et al., 2019). This frame of sexting stems from the position that sexual images of youth under the age of 18 are exploitative (Lee & Darcy, 2021) and that there is inherent danger in sharing content online (Villacampa, 2017). Some also believe that youth are unable to distinguish between sexually appropriate and sexually indecent behaviours (Lee & Darcy, 2021) and that sexting is associated with risky sexual behaviour and substance use (Villacampa, 2017). Further, youth are presumed to feel pressure to sext due to the belief that "everyone is doing it" (Geeng et al., 2020).

Supporters of the deviant view of sexting tend to stress the importance of intervention, prevention, and abstaining from this behaviour to avoid potential victimization, abuse, and/or legal consequences (Kosenko et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2016; Villacampa, 2017). Some researchers have also suggested that adult sexting should be included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) as a "deviant behaviour" (Wiederhold, 2011). Abstinence-based approaches to sexting have been critiqued for not distinguishing between consensual and non-consensual sexting and for perpetuating sexual double standards by typifying women as victims and men as perpetrators (Lim et al., 2016). Further, there is some evidence that youth may reject messages perceived as "scare tactics" (Lim et al., 2016) or victim blaming (Holoyda et al., 2017). Overall, abstinence-only approaches to sexting that include fear-based messaging are not effective for decreasing engagement in the behaviour or reducing potential harms (McEllrath, 2014; Patchin & Hunduja, 2019; Strohmaier et al., 2014).

A more sex-positive approach to sexting is to frame it as a harmless, normative, developmental aspect of identity, sexuality, and intimacy exploration in the digital age when practiced consensually (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Bianchi et al., 2017; Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014; Doring, 2014; Hasinoff, 2012; Levine, 2013; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Madigan et al., 2018; McDaniel & Drouin, 2015; Steinberg et al., 2019; Walrave et al., 2015). Sexting is also seen as a means for practicing and maintaining romantic/intimate relationships as well as fulfilling needs for sexual expression, self-presentation, and sexual experimentation (Doring, 2014; Lee & Darcy, 2021; Steinberg et al., 2019). Additionally, sexting can lead to positive effects on relationship satisfaction and improve "sexual norms around explicit communication and consent" (Geeng et al., 2020, p. 128). Some researchers have noted that this viewpoint emphasizes the need for

sexting education to include discussions of sexual exploration and identity formation (Madigan et al., 2018; Walrave et al., 2015), acknowledging both vulnerability and sexual agency (Doring, 2014). Many scholars and educators recommend adopting a comprehensive, harm-reduction approach to sexting education that aims to help youth make informed decisions about their intimate lives and reduce risk when/if they engage in sexting (Jørgensen et al., 2019; Patchin & Hinduja, 2019).

Although the evidence base supporting the normalcy perspective of sexting is growing (Cooper et al., 2016) and shifts in perception have occurred among researchers who previously viewed sexting as deviant (e.g., Wiederhold, 2011, 2015), most of the research (e.g., 66%, according to Doring, 2014) has historically adopted a deviance perspective (Kosenko et al., 2017; Steinberg et al., 2019). As such, additional research that adopts the normalcy or sex-positive approach is required.

3.2 Theoretical Models for Understanding Sexting

A theory can be understood as "a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena" (Kerlinger and Lee, 2000, p. 11). Based on the literature, it is unclear if there is a "better" or "most appropriate" theory for examining sexting. This may be due in part to the relatively new scholarly interest in sexting, the complex nature of sexting and various facets related to the phenomenon, and/or the strengths and limitations of the various employed theories. Several scholars emphasize the need for theory testing and building the theoretical literature on sexting (Kosenko et al., 2017). The following table presents some of the theories that have been adopted for understanding sexting behaviour among youth.

Table 1. Theories for examining and understanding sexting

Theory and authors	Description and relation to sexting
Sexual scripting theory (Gagnon & Simon, 2005)	Sexting is considered "scripted", guided, or informed by social and gender norms for how to engage in this behaviour in varying contexts (Symons et al., 2018).
Self-perception theory (Bem, 1972)	When engaging in self-presentation, people infer beliefs about "the self" by observing themselves from the perspective of audience members. This can lead to increased salience of certain characteristics for an individual's sense of self, which can guide their subsequent behaviour. For example, if a person presents themselves as sexy online, they may observe themselves as sexually adventurous and outgoing, which may increase their willingness to be sexually adventurous and engage in sexting (van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2017).

Theory and authors	Description and relation to sexting
Prototype willingness model (PWM) (Gerrard et al., 2008; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995; Gibbons et al., 1998)	An individuals' willingness to engage in sexting is associated with the mental images they have of other people sexting (i.e., prototypes). This framework is thought to contribute to explanations about why youth engage in sexting (e.g., more likely to sext when they believe everyone else is doing it) (Walrave et al., 2015).
Theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991)	The higher an individuals' intentions to engage in sexting, the higher chance there is that they will perform that behaviour. With the TRA, intentions related to sexting are influenced by two underlying factors: attitudes and subjective norms about sexting. The TPB expands on the TRA by also considering how perceived control of sexting behaviour influences intentions and subsequent behaviour (Walrave et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2021).
Social learning theory (Akers & Jennings, 2009; Sutherland, 1947)	Deviant behaviour (e.g., sexting) is learned by interacting with and imitating role models (e.g., parents, peers, etc.). With sexting, individuals are more likely to engage in this behaviour when they: 1) believe that sexting is favourable or justified; 2) associate with others who engage in sexting or hold favourable opinions towards it; 3) anticipate that rewards for sexting outweigh potential punishments; and 4) are more exposed to sexting (Dodaj & Sesar, 2020; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017a).
Social exchange theory (Laursen & Jensen-Campbell, 1999; Thibaut & Kelley, 1965)	Sexting between individuals occurs through negotiations of rewards and costs (Gibson, 2016).
Problem behaviour theory (Jessor & Jessor, 1977)	Different problem behaviours (e.g., sexting) stem from similar causes, and individuals who engage in one problematic activity are more likely to engage in other problematic behaviours. For example, some believe that sexting is linked to risky sexual practices (Kosenko et al., 2017).
Catharsis theory (Harris & Scott, 2002)	The catharsis argument suggests that "consuming sexual media relieves sexual urges, with the magazine or video acting (perhaps in conjunction with masturbation) as a sort of imperfect substitute for the real behavior" (Harris & Scott, 2002; p. 312). In the context of sexting, catharsis theory would predict that those who send or receive sexts would be less likely to engage in sexual activity (Kosenko et al., 2017).

Theory and authors	Description and relation to sexting
Self-control theoretical model (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990)	Individuals with low self-control are more likely to engage in riskier behaviours such as sexting (Dodaj & Sesar, 2020).
Crime opportunity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Cohen et al., 1981; Hindelang et al., 1978)	Use of online technologies, time spent engaged in these activities, exposure to sexting, being in a romantic relationship, organizational membership (e.g., fraternities, sororities, athletic teams), and substance use may facilitate engagement in sexting (Dodaj & Sesar, 2020).
Evolutionary theory (Ploharz, 2017)	Sexting helps fulfill short-term mating strategies as a means for attracting a mate (Dodaj & Sesar, 2020).
Multiple goal theory (Harris, 2017)	Individuals may have multiple goals with sexting interactions that can facilitate desirable communication and other intended outcomes. Goals can include intimacy, connection, attraction, playfulness, behaviour engagement, and conversational reciprocation (Dodaj & Sesar, 2020).
Objectification theory (Aubrey, 2006; Peluchette & Karl, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2013; Thiel-Stern, 2009; Ward et al., 2016)	Girls and women experience pressure to present themselves in a sexualized way online and via sexting (Maas et al., 2018).
Routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Reyns et al., 2014)	Technology creates vulnerabilities for sexting among college aged students; unstructured opportunities, together with low self-control, may be an antecedent to sexting (Yoder et al., 2018).
Triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1997; Sumter et al., 2013)	Applied to online behaviours whereby positive associations have been found between the amount of romantic selfie posting and level of commitment (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, et al., 2019a).
Social ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994)	Sexting is influenced by the ecological environment containing multiple, interrelated systems (Hunter et al., 2021).
Feminist perspective (Ringrose et al., 2013)	Posits that social media facilitates the sexual objectification of girls and negatively affects young women's sexual agency, which can pressure them to engage in sexting. Further, this perspective acknowledges the sexual double standard (i.e., women as victims and men as perpetrators; Lim et al., 2016) that exists with sexting (Garcia Gomez, 2017).

4. Sexting Attitudes, Motivations, Correlates, and Potential Consequences

4.1 Youth's Attitudes About Sexting

Before presenting this area of literature, it should be noted that attitudes are not always aligned with actual behaviour as indicated by research findings (Gewritz-Meydan et al., 2018) and theories such as the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Further, beliefs are thought to underly and inform the development of attitudes (Ajzen, 1991). Nonetheless, understanding youth perceptions of sexting is an essential aspect of developing effective education curricula, interventions, and policies (Lim et al., 2016). More specifically, examining attitudes towards sexting enables development of education programs that resonate with youth, meet their expectations, and align with their attitudes (Lim et al., 2016). Behaviour change is also contingent on attitudes; therefore, understanding sexting attitudes is required if one wishes to change sexting behaviours (Lim et al., 2016).

Attitudes regarding sexting tend to be ambivalent (i.e., mixed or contradictory) among youth (Gewritz-Meydan et al., 2018). Positive beliefs of sexting include viewing it as fun, flirty, hot, and exciting, while negative beliefs include perceiving it as dangerous, risky, stupid, immoral, slutty, inappropriate, damaging, and illegal (Gewritz-Meydan et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2015). Being male, having less sexual health knowledge, inconsistent use of condoms with casual partners, engaging in sexting, and engaging in more frequent alcohol consumption (i.e., six or more standard alcoholic drinks in a single session weekly or more often, binge drinking) are all associated with more favourable attitudes toward sexting (Gewritz-Meydan et al., 2018). Other reported sexting-related beliefs among youth include believing that their peers are sexting, passing sexts without permission should be illegal, sexting should be illegal for those under age 18, and it is riskier for girls compared to boys to send naked images of themselves (Lim et al., 2016). More youth report that they would share a sext from a new, less familiar partner compared to sharing one from a regular, well-known partner; girls are just as likely as boys to make this distinction in behaviour (Lim et al., 2016).

A recent examination of 808 Swedish adolescents indicated that while many individuals believed that their peers approve of sexting within trusted relationships and when everything is consensual, many youth also believed that their peers were non-accepting of sexting because of the inherent risk of content spreading to others (Buren et al., 2021). Youth from this sample viewed sexting as a gendered phenomenon containing sexual double standards, with girls being more at risk for experiencing negative consequences (Buren et al., 2021).

Youth make clear distinctions between consensual sexting and non-consensual sexting, with the latter being viewed as wrong and a violation of trust (Lim et al., 2016). Youth report that the dissemination of images without consent of the person depicted is the most serious negative outcome of sexting as it can lead to social shame, stigma, harassment, and subsequently mental

health problems (Lim et al., 2016). Additionally, Hasinoff and Shepherd (2014) noted that young adults in their sample believed that keeping sexts private was an expected social norm and that third parties who received a forwarded sext were obligated to not share the content onward.

4.2 Motivations for Sexting

Given that the growing literature on adolescent sexting suggests that this behaviour has both positive and negative aspects associated with it, some researchers suggest that sexting should be "contextualized with attention to motivations, the relationship between participants, individual characteristic, and other social factors" (Reed et al., 2020, p. 2). In line with this, some researchers have distinguished between consensual or experimental sexting and non-consensual, pressured, and coercive sexting (Reed et al., 2020). The experience of sexting and its outcomes can differ depending on the motivations for engaging in it (Bianchi et al., 2018; Morelli et al., 2016a, 2016b). Further, sexting experiences and motivations can also differ depending on who receives the sext (e.g., stranger, dating partner) (Buren & Lunde, 2018; Rice et al., 2012). Among adolescents, most sexting occurs between romantic partners (Cooper et al., 2016; Strassberg et al., 2014), but it can also occur with strangers, acquaintances, peers, and potential partners (Burkett, 2015).

Sexting motivations can include a desire to be fun, flirtatious, and sexy; gain attention from a partner; "joke around"; gain status with peers; self-expression; sexual experimentation; and/or pressure and coercion (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Burkett, 2015; Choi et al., 2016; Drouin et al., 2013; Englander, 2015; Goggin & Crawford, 2011; Henderson & Morgan, 2011; Kernsmith et al., 2018; Ringrose et al., 2012). Within romantic relationships specifically, sexting can be used for relationship maintenance or to create intimacy in long distance relationships (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Esparza et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2013). Sexting may also provide a more comfortable means for adolescents to express their feelings and sexual desires compared to in-person communication (Le et al., 2014). For some adolescents, sexting may be a precursor to sexual activity or a first step in a sexual relationship (Temple, 2015; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020b). Indeed, sexting often leads to physical sex (Kosenko et al., 2017), but it can also be used as an alternative method for expressing sexual interest or as a substitute for sexual activity among youth abstaining from sexual contact (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). The risk-taking aspect and illegality of sending nude photographs in some countries can also make sexting an enticing behaviour (Walker et al., 2013). Other potential motivations for sexting can include boredom, self-expression/representation, and to arouse the recipient (Kopecky, 2011).

Kopecky (2015) identified five main categories of motivators for sexting: 1) part of a sexual/romantic relationship to get attention, strengthen trust, or build intimacy; 2) means of distraction; 3) social pressure from peers; 4) self-expression; and 5) revenge, particularly between ex-partners. Cooper et al. (2016) identified four primary sexting motivators: 1) flirting and attempting to gain attention from a potential romantic partner; 2) expressing normal sexuality within a dating relationship; 3) experimenting with sexuality and identity; and 4) responding to pressure from others to conform to perceived normal behaviour in a peer group.

Bianchi and colleagues (2018) more recently developed a model of three primary forms of sexting motivation that includes: 1) sexual purposes – sexual expression and exploration; 2) body image reinforcement – looking for feedback on body in relation to others or social standards; and 3) instrumental/aggravated reasons – exploitation of sexual content. However, this model has been critiqued for not accounting for "joking", bonding, or status-gaining sexting motivations (Reed et al., 2020).

If youth are under the impression that sexting is normative among their peers and they need to engage in it to gain attention from others, they may feel pressure to engage in this behaviour (Walker et al., 2013). Indeed, researchers who have applied the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Walrave et al., 2014), the Social Learning Theory (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017), and the Prototype Willingness Model (Walrave et al., 2015) have found that perceived social norms of peers is the most important predictor of adolescents' intentions to sext (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017b). In their 2015 article, Lee and Crofts outlined three main forms of pressure people can face with respect to sexting: 1) individual pressure that occurs within relationships between sexting participants (senders and receivers) and is most likely to become coercive; 2) peer group pressure that can occur among particular peer or social groups and relates to more normative sexting behaviours and beliefs; and, 3) socio-cultural pressure described as general normative pressures influenced by cultural and social contexts.

With respect to non-consensual sexting motivations, Clancy et al. (2019) found that being sexually active, having received a disseminated sext, and more strongly normalizing sexts as being funny were all likely to predict increased likelihood of forwarding a sext without consent. Having personally experienced negative consequences from sending sexts was associated with a decreased likelihood of disseminating sexts non-consensually (Clancy et al., 2019). Pressure or coercion have been reported as the most salient motivators for sexting, particularly for girls (Englander, 2012; Kropecky, 2011). Pressure to send sexts may result from factors such as relationship anxiety, which can include anxiety about dating and fear of being single (Weisskirch et al., 2017). In a study by Drouin et al. (2015), men reported experiencing tactics from their partners such as withholding resources, or threatening to do so, to coerce them into sexting, while women reported that their partners threatened their relationship commitment to coerce them into sexting. Beyond external pressure, individuals may also feel the need to engage in sexting due to various internal pressures and psychological factors. For example, negative urgency (i.e., the tendency to act rashly in response to negative emotions in relationships) has been found to be associated with sexting (Dir et al., 2013).

Research on motivations for non-consensual sharing of sexts is scarce, and largely focuses on the victims' rather than the perpetrators' perspective (Barrense Dias et al., 2021). Some research has noted that there are associations between non-consensual sext sharing and anxiety, depression, substance use, and offline dating violence (Barrense Dias et al., 2021). Additional research in this area is warranted (Barrense Dias et al., 2021).

4.3 Correlates of Sexting

Much of the research literature on sexting has focused on variables that correlate with, and oftentimes predict, sexting behaviour (Galovan et al., 2018; Kosenko et al., 2017). Correlational research is limited, though. Firstly, correlations do not equate to causation (McLeod, 2020). In other words, just because two variables (e.g., behaviours) are associated with each other does not mean that one causes the other. Secondly, a correlation found at one time point and in one context does not mean that the same relationship will occur at another time and context, which is why replication and longitudinal research are often required (McLeod, 2020). Correlational research on sexting has also been criticized for demonizing this behaviour through primarily examining its relationship to risk behaviours (Gomez & Ayala, 2014). Overall, though, understanding correlates and predictors related to sexting can lead to the development of more effective educational efforts (Gamez-Guadix & de Santisteban, 2018; Kosenko et al., 2017).

Age is considered a significant factor that can influence sexting behaviour (Galovan et al., 2018; Reed et al., 2019). Overall, higher rates of sexting are reported among older adolescents and adults compared to younger adolescents (Dake et al., 2012; Klettke et al., 2014; Madigan et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2012; Stassberg et al., 2013), with some researchers who have noted higher rates among younger adults compared to older adults (Wysocki & Childres, 2011). Compared to adults, adolescents may be more vulnerable in sexting contexts due to the physical, cognitive, and social developmental changes they experience, particularly during puberty (Buren & Lunde, 2018). For example, "adolescent egocentrism" has been used to describe adolescents' tendency toward feeling more self-conscious and sensitive to the opinions and feedback of others (Alberts et al., 2007). Adolescence is also characterized by omnipotence, which relates to feelings of invulnerability and the propensity for risk-taking (Buren & Lunde, 2018).

Adolescent sexting occurs most commonly between romantic partners compared to sexting with strangers, acquaintances, peers, and potential dating partners (Cooper et al., 2016; Strassberg et al., 2014). Individuals who are aware of legal consequences of sexting are significantly less likely to engage in underage sexting than their peers who were not aware of the consequences (Strohmaier et al., 2014). Positive or permissive sexting attitudes have been associated with a history of sexting, which supports the theory that attitudes are related to behaviour (Lim et al., 2018). Attachment style (i.e., anxious and avoidant insecure attachment) has also been linked with engagement in sexting (Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; McDaniel & Drouin, 2015; Trub & Starks, 2017; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011).

Links to sexting[5] have also been found with general texting frequency and/or overall use of technology (Benotsch et al., 2013; Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Kimberly et al., 2017; McDaniel &

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[5] Definitions of sexting in the literature cited in this section include "sending or receiving sexually explicit or suggestive photos via text message" (Benotsch et al., 2013); "sending a text message that contained sexually explicit words, images, or videos" (Kimberly et al., 2017); "sending sexy messages, talking about sex/intimacy, or sending nude or semi-nude photos via mobile device" (McDaniel & Drouin, 2015); "sending or receiving sexually suggestive or provocative messages/photos/videos via mobile phone and/or Facebook or other Internet social

Drouin, 2015), pornography viewing and online chatting with strangers (Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014), internet addiction, sex site usage (Drouin & Miller, 2016), and online victimization (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2015; Morelli et al., 2016b). Sexting has also been linked to a normalized culture of sexual violence in secondary schools (Ringrose et al., 2012; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017b), as well as sexual harassment of girls and gendered sexual violence (Drouin et al., 2015; Ringrose et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2013). Relationships have also been observed between sexting and name-calling, largely targeting female youth (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2012; Ringrose et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013), and prior experiences of bullying and emergent bullying (Walrave et al., 2015; Woodward et al., 2017).

Among young adults (aged 18 to 25), sexting has been linked with recent substance use (Benotsch et al., 2013; Van Ouytsel et al., 2018), including cigarette smoking, cannabis use, and alcohol use (Dake et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2014). To date, researchers have only confirmed correlations among sexting and substance use, with no causal links having been established yet. Further, research on substance use and sexting among youth under the age of 18 is scant. Additional research may improve our understanding of this relationship, but in the meantime, caution should be used when interpreting the current body of literature on sexting and substance use.

While some researchers have linked sexting to outcomes such as sexual risk behaviours (e.g., lack of contraception use, engaging in sex while under the influence of substances), depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation (Dake et al., 2012; Klettke et al., 2014; Morelli et al., 2017; Temple et al., 2014), others have found no correlation between sexting and these outcomes (Hudson & Fetro, 2015; Morelli et al., 2016b). Other researchers have found that depression and low self-esteem can significantly predict engagement in sexting (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Underlying explanations for these findings include the idea that individuals with depression and low self-esteem may engage in sexting to feel considered and desired or may lack necessary coping skills to resist peer pressure to engage in sexting (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017).

While the literature focused on distinctly negative forms of sexting behaviour is limited, having a sexual photo shared without consent has been found to be significantly related to acts of interpersonal violence (i.e., rape, physical dating violence, cyber or in-person bullying), depression, and suicidal thoughts (Pampati et al., 2020). Girls, non-minority adolescents, and non-sexual minority adolescents have also been found to experience greater depressive symptoms and non-suicidal self-harm when pressured to sext (Wachs et al., 2021). Sharing sexts without consent has been found to be more common among males, non-heterosexual

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networking sites" (Morelli et al., 2016); and "how many times have you sent sexually-explicit picture messages to people you have only known online/never met in person?" (Drouin & Miller, 2016). Distinctions between more positive and negative/abusive forms of sexting are not often presented, likely due to the lack of consensus on how to define sexting and lack of control for type of sexting within the research literature.

individuals, those who have sent one's own intimate image previously, and those receiving an intimate image of someone unknown to the recipient (Barrense-Dias, 2020; Boer et al., 2021). Frequent social media usage, being aged 12-14 years, watching online porn, and sexual experience have also been found to be associated with sharing sexts without consent (Boer et al., 2021).

A summary of additional correlates and predictors of sexting has been provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Correlates and predictors examined within sexting research

Sexting correlates/predictors	Examples of researchers who have examined these variables
Higher level of impulsivity and negative urgency (i.e., a tendency to act rashly when distressed)	Alonso & Romero, 2019; Champion et al., 2015; Dir et al., 2013a; Dir et al., 2013b; Scholes-Balog et al., 2016; Temple et al., 2014
Depressive symptoms and low self-esteem	Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Barrosso et al., 2021; Jasso et al., 2017; Wachs et al., 2021; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014
Big Five Personality traits: higher extraversion, neuroticism, and low agreeableness; low conscientiousness, higher extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism; lower conscientiousness and higher extraversion	Delevi et al., 2013; Guadix et al., 2017; Gamez-Guadix & de Santisteban, 2018
Sexual risk behaviours, substance use, suicidal ideation	Bianchi et al., 2017; Dake et al., 2012; Klettke et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2014
Pornography consumption and watching sexually explicit music videos	Van Ouytsel et al., 2014
Favourable attitudes towards sexting	Klettke et al., 2014; Walrave et al., 2014
Perceived social pressure	Walrave et al., 2014
Early sexual debut, sexual-risk behaviour, substance use, and cyberbullying victimization	Kerstens & Stol, 2014; Rice et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014
Digital dating violence	Bianchi et al., 2018; Dake et al., 2012; Drouin et al., 2015; Morelli et al., 2016a, 2016b; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016; Zweig et al., 2014
Prior experiences of bullying and emergent bullying	Walrave et al., 2015; Woodward et al., 2017
A perceived need to seek popularity, participating in cybergossip, and social competence	Abeele et al., 2014; Bauman, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013

Sexting correlates/predictors	Examples of researchers who have examined these variables
Early life domestic adversity and physical abuse was associated with more frequent sexting outside of dating relationships	Yoder et al., 2018
High self-esteem was associated with reduced odds of sending nude photos/videos	Scholes-Balog et al., 2016; Wachs et al., 2017
Multiple sexual partners, lack of contraception use, delinquent behaviour, anxiety/depression, alcohol use, drug use, and smoking behaviour	Mori et al., 2019
Online risk taking (e.g., disclosing personal information, interacting with strangers, being offensive to others)	Baumgartner et al., 2010; Wolak et al., 2008
Physical maturity and puberty	Baams et al., 2015; Houck et al., 2014; Skoog et al., 2013

4.4 Potential Negative Outcomes of Sexting

While sexting can be a normal aspect of intimate expression and communication with positive aspects and outcomes[6], there are a variety of potential negative consequences people can experience when engaging in this behaviour. As youths' decision-making skills and ability to recognize long-term consequences of sharing sexual content online are still developing, many researchers, educators, and caregivers are particularly concerned with their sexting behaviour (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Sexting in and of itself is not necessarily harmful; the harm generally results from sexts being shared, whether consensually or not. In cases where sexts are consensually shared, there is a chance that they can still end up being seen or shared with non-intended recipients (Dekker & Thula, 2017). Bullying in the form of name-calling, harassment, reputational damage, and threats can still ensue (Dake et al., 2012; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2012; Ringrose et al., 2013; Strassberg et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017b; Walker et al., 2013; Walrave et al., 2015). If the youth who are engaged in sexting are underage, various legal consequences can arise (see Section 6 below for more information on the legality of sexting).

Public sharing of sexts can also lead to victim-blaming of the person depicted in the shared content (Hasinoff, 2014) and a lack of guilt or blame attributed to the person who forwarded the content without permission (Bianchi et al., 2018). Sexting content may be misused or exploited as a means for revenge or as a joke, with or without full knowledge of the consequences (Bianchi et al., 2018). Researchers have found that perpetrators of in-person and online bullying are more likely to send, receive, and forward sexts without consent (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2019;

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[6] For example, consensual sexting may serve to strengthen relationships; allow youth to connect and explore their sexuality/identities safely; be harm reductive; and reduce risks for sexually transmitted infections, discrimination, and potential physical or sexual violence.

Van Ouytsel et al., 2019). Additional predictors of engagement in sexting that have been found by some researchers include being sexually active, involvement in substance use, having unprotected sex, engaging in web-based chatting with strangers, viewing adult pornography, and personality variables of neuroticism and low agreeableness (Smith et al., 2014).

Sexting has even been labelled a new form of sexual offending, particularly when it relates to sexual harassment of girls and gendered sexual violence (Drouin et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2013). Some researchers believe that features of online environments, including a false sense of privacy and lack of restraint, facilitate aggressive behaviour and sexual harassment (Henry & Powell, 2015; Powell & Henry, 2016; Suler, 2004). As such, people often behave differently when interacting online (Suler, 2004). Dating violence can precipitate or follow engagement in sexting behaviour (Wood et al., 2015), including physical forms of dating violence (Dake et al., 2012), coercive sexting (Drouin et al., 2015), and cyber dating abuse (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016; Zweig et al., 2014). Boys' perpetration of sexual coercion and abuse as well as sending sexts has been correlated with regular viewing of online porn (Stanley et al., 2018). Sexting has also been associated with being hit by a boyfriend or girlfriend and being forced to have sexual intercourse (Dake et al., 2012).

Research findings on the emotional well-being of youth who engage in sexting have been somewhat inconsistent (Alonso & Romero, 2019; Gasso et al., 2019; Morelli et al., 2016b). While some researchers have cited relationships between sexting, depression, anxiety, and suicide attempts (Dake et al., 2012; Jasso-Medrano et al., 2018; Mori et al., 2019; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014), others have not found associations between sexting and psychological distress (Hudson, 2011; O'Sullivan, 2014; Temple et al., 2014). Negative outcomes of sexting appear to be more common among young teenagers or pre-teenagers, as well as individuals who feel pressured or coerced to sext (Rice et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2019a). Some teen creators and recipients of sexually explicit images have reported feeling very or extremely upset, embarrassed, or afraid because of their behaviour (Mitchell et al., 2012). Another study found that youth who were younger, female, less sensation seeking, had pre-existing psychological difficulties, and used the internet less were more likely to feel uncomfortable, upset, or feel that they should not have seen a sext (Livingstone & Gorzig, 2014). Targets of cyberbullying and harmful sexting (i.e., messages or images intended to inflict harm, humiliation, or embarrassment) have also been found to have higher rates of suicidal thoughts and high-risk behaviours (e.g., substance use, stealing) (Bauman, 2015). A relationship between sexting and depression has also been found, whereby more depressive symptoms predicted more engagement in sexting among adolescents (Gamez-Guadix & de Santisteban, 2018).

In summary, while clear links between sexting and negative outcomes for youth have not always been established within the research literature, there is still the *potential* for negative emotional impacts and consequences. The underlying reasons sexting can lead to negative impacts is largely due to the transgression of sexual boundaries and non-consensual distribution of sexual content to unintended recipients (Del Rey et al., 2019). Unfortunately, relatively few studies

have examined the relationship between negative mental health outcomes and sexting (Gasso et al., 2019). Additional research in this area is warranted given its importance.

5. Sex, Gender, Sexuality, and Relational Aspects of Sexting

5.1 Sex and Gender Aspects of Sexting

Research findings on sex/gender differences in sexting are mixed, with some findings suggesting prevalence rates are similar for boys and girls (e.g., Campbell & Park, 2014; Abeele et al., 2014) and others finding higher rates among boys (e.g., Gamez-Guadix et al., 2017) or girls (e.g., Reyns et al., 2013). Such differences may be due to the way in which sexting is defined, which behaviours are examined, and motivations for sexting (Del Rey et al., 2019; Ringrose et al., 2013). What is clearer is that boys are more likely to forward and request sexts and girls are more likely to be asked to send sexts (Norman, 2017; Symons et al., 2018). Boys are also more likely to engage in abusive sexting[7] (Barrosso et al., 2021).

The presumed dangers inherent in sexting appear to relate more to young girls than young boys, primarily thought to be the result of the "sexual double standard" that sexual permissiveness is more acceptable for boys (Abeele et al., 2014; Cooper et al., 2016; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013). Adolescents have reported that sexting can lead to gains in social capital and peer popularity for boys, as sexting may be considered a positive expression of masculinity (Reed et al., 2020; Ringrose et al., 2012). Boys may also take and share sexually explicit photos of girls as a means of bonding with male peers or to appear sexually experienced (Reed et al., 2020; Ringrose et al., 2013). In contrast, girls are more likely to feel pressured or coerced to sext (Baumgartner et al., 2015; Buren & Lunde, 2018; Englander, 2015; Lippman & Campbell, 2014) and to have negative feelings after sexting (Buren & Lunde, 2018; Temple et al., 2014). Girls are also likely to be perceived as responsible for protecting their reputation and refusing requests for sexts (Ringrose et al., 2013). While engaging in sexting can result in girls being labelled as "sluts", not engaging in sexting can result in them being called "prudes" (Reed et al., 2020; Ringrose et al., 2012).

Sexting motivations also seem to differ between boys and girls, with boys engaging in more instrumental/aggravated sexting than girls (Bianchi et al., 2017; Bianchi et al., 2018). Girls tend to send sexts after being pressured to do so (Lippman & Campbell, 2014), sometimes due to fear of losing a romantic partner (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker et al., 2013), or to gain attention and status among peers (Bianchi et al., 2017; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Burkett (2015) notes that social pressure for girls to be sexy can ultimately complicate notions of agency and choice with sexting. Expectations can also play a role in the gendered experience of sexting, where men tend to report more positive expectancies regarding receiving sexts compared to women who report having more negative expectancies (Dir et al., 2013). Overall, men tend to

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[7] Abusive sexting is defined as dissemination of photos, videos, or messages without the consent of the content creator, but may also include forceful exposure to sexual material (e.g., porn) (Alonso & Romero, 2019; Barroso et al., 2020; Barroso et al., 2021b).

have more positive attitudes regarding sexting compared to women, but relationship context can change these attitudes whereby individuals in more committed or dating relationships are more likely to have positive attitudes about sexting compared to single individuals, regardless of gender (Samimi & Alderson, 2014).

Although related to adults, Drouin et al. (2017) found that men were more likely to engage in sexting with casual partners compared to women, which was explained by the fact that men may sext to satisfy sexual needs while maintaining relational distance and women may sext to create relational closeness (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). These results may also be explained by the potential reputational costs of sexting being higher for women, which results in them needing a higher level of relational commitment to feel safe sending sexts (Drouin et al., 2017). In Drouin et al.'s (2017) study, about half of the sample reported positive relationship consequences and comfort with sexting, but many individuals also reported negative consequences such as regret, worry, discomfort, and trauma. More positive consequences of sexting occurred among individuals who were in committed partnerships compared to individuals in casual relationships (Drouin et al., 2017). Further, women in this sample were more likely to report negative consequences related to sexting in casual relationships compared to men in casual relationships (Drouin et al. 2017). While still largely unexplored, women are more likely than men to report receiving unwanted sexts (Klettke et al., 2019), often within the context of online dating (Burkett, 2015; Hayes, 2018). This can result in receivers feeling unsafe, threatened, harassed, and distressed (Bonilla et al., 2020; Burkett, 2015; Hayes & Dragiewicz, 2018; Valiukas et al., 2019).

5.2 Sexting Among 2SLGBTQI+ Individuals

Most sexting research to date has focused primarily on heterosexual samples and/or framed it within a heteronormative lens (Albury & Byron, 2014). Among the few studies that have incorporated 2SLGBTQI+ populations, some researchers have yielded similar findings on engagement in sexting and correlations with engaging in risky sexual behaviours compared to heterosexual samples (Eugene, 2015; Gamez-Guadix & de Santisteban, 2018). However, other research has shown that sexual minority youth are more likely to have sent, received, and asked for sexting images as well as received pressure to send sexually explicit images (Dir et al., 2013; Foody et al., 2021; Gamez-Guadix et al., 2015; Garcia et al., 2016; Morelli et al., 2016a; Needham, 2021; Rice et al., 2012; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, et al., 2019b; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020b; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016). Sexting practices also appear to be higher and more normalized for young gay men (Albury & Byron, 2014; Lee & Crofts, 2015).

Previous findings suggest that 2SLGBTQI+ youth are more likely to experience various forms of online victimization compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, et al., 2019b), including online bullying related to sexting (Luk et al., 2018), being the victim of non-consensual sharing of sexual images (Barrense-Dias et al., 2021; Pampati et al., 2018), and online grooming (Wolak et al., 2008). One explanation for the increased risk of online bullying related to sexting and sexual grooming among sexual minority youth is that they are more likely to use

the internet to find information on their sexuality and sexual health, and to connect with peers and romantic partners via dating apps and social media (Albury, 2017; Chong et al., 2015; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, et al., 2019b). Sexting may also be a protective factor against perceived discrimination, facilitate communication, and contribute to well-being of sexual minority youth (Chong et al., 2015). Online communication offers anonymity for individuals who may wish to protect their identity, especially if they have not yet disclosed their sexual identity to their peers or family (Rousaki, 2020). Albury (2017) and Ybarra and Mitchell (2014) argue that lack of social space for sexual minority youth to develop relationships, create intimacy, and express public displays of affection may also contribute to increased use of sexting among this population.

Overall, more research is needed on the experiences of sexting among 2SLGBTQI+ youth (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, et al., 2018c). Calls have also been made for novel studies on sexting among transgender and gender non-conforming youth (Eugene, 2015). Such research may provide additional insight into sexting behaviours and inform educational programs designed to encourage healthy sexuality and discourage risky sexual behaviours among gender and sexual minority youth (Foody et al., 2021).

5.3 Sexting and Sexual/Romantic Relationships

Increasingly, individuals are using internet-based communications to facilitate their sexual and romantic relationships (Currin et al., 2016), and sexting has become a normalized sexual behaviour (Beckmeyer et al., 2019; Beckmeyer et al., 2021; Holmes et al., 2021; Levine, 2013; Parker et al., 2013). Online communication technology, such as sexting, can enhance and strengthen romantic relationship satisfaction (Parker et al., 2013) and facilitate relationship building (Cupples & Thompson, 2010). Sexting can occur within various forms of relationships, including between strangers and friends, but most sexts seem to occur between romantic partners (Buren & Lunde, 2018; Cooper et al., 2016). However, relatively few studies distinguish between types of sexting recipients, leaving a gap in the literature and our understanding (Buren & Lunde, 2018).

Sexting may be viewed as a means for initiating sexual contact, where verbal (sending sexually suggestive or explicit messages) or nonverbal (sending sexually suggestive or explicit photos or videos) messages can be sent (Currin et al., 2016). According to Weisskirch and Develi (2011), sexting is "one step in the process of seduction for the establishment of a relationship or an enjoyable way to starting conversations in a relationship" (Silva et al., 2016, p. 747). Sexting can also be a strategy for preserving romantic connection or capturing the interest of a romantic partner (Weisskirch & Develi, 2011). Among the literature that has been published to date, sexting between romantic partners seems to be a fun aspect of the relationship (Lenhart, 2009), while sexting with strangers appears to be a way to seek affirmation (Jonsson et al., 2015). Sexting may also be used to establish new relationships (Bianchi et al., 2019; Yeung et al., 2014), enhance sexual intimacy, maintain excitement, and maintain long-distance in established relationships (Currin & Hubach, 2019; Yeung et al., 2014). Sexting also appears to be more

common among individuals in committed relationships compared to those in more casual, sexual ones (Galovan et al., 2018).

Findings regarding relationship and sexual satisfaction and sexting have been mixed (Drouin et al., 2017). Some researchers have found these variables to be positively associated with sexting (Morey et al., 2013; Parker et al., 2013; Stasko & Geller, 2015), while others have noted a negative association (Currin et al., 2016) or no relationship at all (Matotek et al., 2021). Variables such as attachment style and level of relationship commitment have also been found to influence the relationship between sexting and relationship satisfaction, with those high in attachment avoidance (i.e., relationship distance tendencies) or women with anxious attachment styles experiencing more relationship satisfaction with sexting (McDaniel & Drouin, 2015). Individuals in relationships that are not "very committed" have also been found to experience more relationship satisfaction resulting from sexting (Stasko & Geller, 2015).

6. Sexting and the Law

6.1 Canadian Legislation

In Canada, the age of consent for sexual activity is 16 years, with close-in-age exceptions for youth aged 12 to 14 and 14 to 16, as well as an exception for anal intercourse for which the age of consent is 18 years (MacKay, 2017). Sexting is lawfully addressed or regulated in Canada with Section 163.1 of the Criminal Code of Canada child pornography laws (Lee & Darcy, 2021; Powell & Henry, 2014; Simpson, 2015; Strohmaier et al., 2014; Thomas & Cauffman, 2014) defined as "any visual representation (photographic or drawn) that shows a person who is under 18 (or depicted as under 18) engaged in explicit sexual activity, or which depicts the sexual organs or anal region of a person under 18 for a sexual purpose" (Criminal Code, 1985a, b, 163.1). The use of child pornography statutes for regulating youth sexting, whether consensual or malicious, has been successfully argued against, though, as those laws were initially designed to punish adult offenders who exploit children (Lee & Darcy, 2021).

Introduced by the Supreme Court of Canada as an exception to the severe legal consequences often accompanying child pornography rulings (Lee & Darcy, 2021), R v Sharpe 1999 is a "private use exception" which reflects situations where youth may create and share expressive materials and private recordings of a lawful sexual activity (Karaian & Brady, 2019). The Court reasoned that this behaviour would "pose little or no risk to children and may in fact be of significance to adolescent self-fulfillment, self-actualization, sexual exploration, and identity" (Karaian & Brady, 2019, p. 302). However, the scope of this exception has become exceedingly unclear as technological, social, sexual, and legal changes occur (Karaian & Brady, 2019; Lee & Darcy, 2021). Currently, young people are regularly informed by police and some child protection agencies that they cannot consensually and legally create and share digital sexual images (Karaian & Brady, 2019).

Sexting has also been addressed under Section 162.1 of the Criminal Code of Canada within online criminal legislation as "knowingly publishing, selling, making available, or advertising an intimate image of a person" (Lee & Darcy, 2021, p. 565) "knowing that the person depicted in the image did not give consent to that conduct, or being reckless as to whether or not that person gave their consent to that conduct" (Aikenhead, 2018; Criminal Code, 1985a, b, 162.1).

These laws have been critiqued for conflicting with one another given that child pornography laws are intended to protect children from adult perpetrators and online crime laws are designed to protect individuals from sexual privacy violations (Lee & Darcy, 2021). As a result, sexting can be defined and interpreted in various ways and result in "uncertain judicial outcomes and inconsistent research findings" (Lee & Darcy, 2021, p. 565). Some scholars also note that the risks associated with youth sexting are inconclusive and, as such, regulating youth sexting behaviour with child pornography laws is severe and misguided, and results in youth experiencing disproportionately harsh penalties (Lee & Darcy, 2021).

Overall, Canada's approach to addressing youth sexting remains outdated and ill-equipped for properly addressing various aspects of this phenomenon (e.g., consensual sexting, coerced sexting, non-consensual youth sexting, sextortion, and sexts accessed or requested by adults) (Lee & Darcy, 2021; Strasburger et al., 2019). This issue is also challenging because youth sexting results in the intersection of multiple legal rights (e.g., privacy, free speech, and sexual expression) as well as risk of various forms of harm (e.g., harassment, revenge pornography, child pornography, voyeurism, and copyright infringement) (Lee & Darcy, 2021).

6.2 United States Legislation

In many states, sexting has been deemed illegal and a form of sexual offending for minors (Yoder et al., 2018). A potential legal consequence for youth who engage in sexting includes being branded as a registered sex offender, which can result in an inability to attain future employment, housing, licensing, and educational financial benefits (Holoyda et al., 2017; Martinez-Prather & Vandiver, 2014). Some have deemed this approach an overreaction and a paradox where laws originally intended to challenge child pornography are now used to punish youth engaged in sexting (Villacampa, 2017). Attempts to decrease prosecution under child pornography statutes have been made by way of passing sexting and revenge pornography laws in some states (Holoyda et al., 2017). Convictions under these laws can still result in a misdemeanour, felony, or delinquent offense on a person's record (Holoyda et al., 2017), but these are arguably less severe than being labelled a sex offender.

Prosecution rates of youth sexting are challenging to estimate due to the various definitions of sexting (Lee & Darcy, 2021). However, one study where 378 state prosecutors who had worked on technology-facilitated crimes against children revealed that 62% of them had handled a sexting case involving juveniles, with 36% of the sample reporting that they had filed charges in those cases and 21% had filed felony charges (Walsh et al., 2013). Most of the charges were for child pornography production and 16% resulted in mandatory sex offender registration (Walsh

et al., 2013). Common factors that led to charges being filed included malicious intent, bullying, coercion, harassment, or revenge (Walsh et al., 2013). Among a sample of 378 U.S. prosecutors (Walsh et al., 2013), some noted that a multitude of contextual factors (e.g., malicious intention, age difference between individuals, nature of the sext) informed not only their decision to charge and type of statute used to charge, but also relevant punishments in cases where no charge is laid (e.g., sex education classes, community service, cell phone restriction) (Lee & Darcy, 2021).

6.3 Additional Legal Considerations Regarding Youth Sexting

In their 2017 article, Holoyda and colleagues offer alternative legal approaches for managing cases of youth sexting. In particular, they suggest that youths' "inherent immaturity and reduced criminal culpability due to ongoing cognitive, social, and psychological development" should be considered (p. 177). Motivation, intent, and content of sexts should also be considered, particularly since youth are more prone to thrill-seeking, impulsivity, inability to extricate themselves from their environments, susceptibility to peer influence, and poor judgement. Further, youth should be taught at home and school "what constitutes a harmful sext, encouraged to communicate their sexuality in healthy ways, and educated about the negative effects of sharing and distributing sexts" (p. 178). At a global level, the deterrence of bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment should be prioritized. Finally, teens can be supported by "educational programs in schools, open communication with parents and online monitoring of activity, and peer mentoring" (Holoyda et al., 2017, p. 178).

7. Sexting Education

In this section, the role of schools and caregivers in educating youth about sexting will be examined. It should be noted that schools and caregivers are not the only sources of information about sexting for youth. A 2015 report by Lee et al. found that most youth aged 13-18 years first learned about sexting from friends and/or the media. As such, it is important to consider various educational sources as a potential means for sharing information about sexting with youth.

7.1 Formal Education in Schools – Fear-Based vs. Harm Reduction Approaches

Sexting has been labelled a major problem by principals and schools due to the potential for student harassment and bullying when sexts are shared (Hachiya, 2017). Mishandling of student sexting cases can also jeopardize the careers of principals and teachers (Hachiya, 2017). Overall, there appears to be a lack of clear school-level policies on sexting (Lemke & Rogers, 2020). The approach taken when considering sexting can greatly influence student well-being. Labelling sexting as "child pornography" and applying an abstinence-only approach to educating youth can stigmatize and hamper adolescent development (O'Connor et al., 2017). Additionally, it can decrease adolescent help-seeking, which can isolate them in abusive relationships (Drouin et al., 2015; Hebert et al., 2014).

Like sex education, sexting education needs to move beyond ineffectual fear-based, abstinence-only messaging and instead provide youth with knowledge that allows them to make fully informed choices (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Education can still focus on teaching youth about the potential consequences of sexting while also equipping them with knowledge on how to minimize potential harms (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Patchin and Hinduja (2020) offered ten actionable messages (see Table 3 below) that can be shared with youth in certain formal (educational and therapeutic) or informal (familial) settings, while also considering the developmental and sexual maturity of the targeted youth.

Table 3. List of Actionable Messages to Share with Youth about Sexting (recreated from Patchin & Hinduja, 2020)

1. If someone sends you a sext, do not send it to or show anyone else. This could be considered non-consensual sharing of pornography, and there are laws prohibiting it that outline serious penalties (especially if the image portrays a minor).

2. If you send someone a sext, make sure you know and fully trust them. "Catfishing", where someone sets up a fictitious profile or pretends to be someone else to lure you into a fraudulent romantic relationship (and, often, to send sexts), happens more often than you think. You can never really know if they will share it with others or post it online, but do not send photos or video to people you do not know well.

3. Do not send images to someone who you are not certain would like to see it (make sure you receive textual consent that they are interested before sending). Sending unsolicited explicit images to others could also lead to criminal charges.

4. Consider boudoir pictures. Boudoir is a genre of photography that involves suggestion rather than explicitness. Instead of nudes, send photos that strategically cover the most private of private parts. They can still be intimate and flirty but lack the obvious nudity that could get you in trouble.

5. Never include your face. This is so that images are not immediately identifiable as yours and also because certain social media sites have sophisticated facial recognition algorithms that automatically tag you in any pictures, including ones that you want to stay private.

6. Make sure the images do not include tattoos, birthmarks, scars, or other features that could connect the photos to you. In addition, remove all jewelry before sharing. Also consider your surroundings. Bedroom pictures could, for example, include wall art or furniture that others may recognize.

7. Turn your device's location services off for all of your social media apps, make sure your photos are not automatically tagged with your location or username, and, if possible, delete any metadata digitally attached to the image.

8. If you are being pressured or threatened to send nude photos, collect evidence when possible. Having digital evidence (such as screenshots of text messages) of any maliciousness or threats of sextortion will help law enforcement investigate and prosecute (if necessary), as well as help social media sites flag and delete accounts.

9. Use apps that provide the capability for sent images to be automatically and securely deleted after a certain amount of time (e.g., Snapchat). You can never guarantee that a screenshot was not taken, nor that another device was used to capture the image without you being notified, but using specialized apps can decrease the chance of distribution.

10. Be sure to promptly delete any explicit photos or videos from your device. This applies to images you take of yourself and images received from someone else. Having images stored on your device increases the likelihood that someone (e.g., a parent, the police, a hacker) will find them. Possessing nude images of minors may have criminal implications. In 2015, for example, a North Carolina teen was charged with possessing child pornography, although the image on his phone was of himself.

7.2 The Role of Caregivers (i.e., parents, guardians)

Research on caregiver perspectives on youth sexting is limited, despite the establishment of clear links between parental monitoring and communication with development of healthy sexuality and reduced sexual risk behaviours in youth (Fix et al., 2021). However, a recent study indicated that caregivers lack a clear understanding of sexting as well as the perceived and real harms associated with this behaviour (Fix et al., 2021). As such, there is a need for more comprehensive sexual education addressing this topic for both youth and parents (Fix et al., 2021). Another study noted that parents are least concerned with the actual practice of sexting and more concerned about the potential exposure of an adolescent if sexting content is publicly shared (Cardoso et al., 2019). Guilt, anger, sadness, and shame of judgement by friends and relatives have also been cited as potential negative consequences for families of youth engaging in sexting (Cardoso et al., 2019).

With respect to familial influence on youth sexting, the limited research that has been conducted in this area suggests that poor family relations and lower family cohesion are related to an increased likelihood of sexting (Baumgartner et al., 2012; Jonsson et al., 2015). Parental intervention or mediation practices related to adolescent sexting behaviour have also been described in the research literature (Confalonieri et al., 2020). For instance, Vanwesenbeeck et al. (2018) distinguish between restrictive and active mediation, with the former referring to parental control and regulation of children's online media access and the latter referring to

parental efforts in comprehensively explaining the beneficial and desirable aspects of media content.

As with formal education settings, Patchin and Hinduja (2020) note that fear-based information provision about sexting does not decrease sexting and can increase the likelihood of harm. For example, if youth have engaged in sexting and become vulnerable to extortion, they may feel trapped and unable to ask for help from adults in their lives who previously told them to abstain from sexting (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020).

7.3 Youth Preferences for Sexting Education
In Jorgensen et al.'s (2018) research, youth indicated that they would like to learn about sexting in school and believe that education on sexting should be a regular aspect of social and health curriculum. They felt that education about sexting during whole school assemblies was ineffective because youth are rarely paying attention during such large, one-time meetings and may not feel comfortable asking questions in front of the whole school population (Jorgensen et al., 2018). Instead, youth suggested that ongoing casual/conversational lessons on sexting every few months be provided (Jorgensen et al., 2018). They also recommended separating the students by gender to increase students' comfort (Jorgensen et al., 2018). Youth in this study reported a preference for receiving information from peers or an adult from a non-school affiliated organization rather than from parents or teachers (Jorgensen et al., 2018).

7.4 Practicing Safer Sexting
There are various guides available online for sexting as safely and securely as possible (Geeng et al., 2020). Vice, for example, suggests the following: get consent, set expectations, check for identifying details in photos, turn off services that automatically backup photos, and choose an online communication app that addresses personal concerns (Matsakis, 2017). The Cut has also developed a sex-positive "ultimate guide" for sexting, which suggests the following: consider timing, take it slow, remember that you're playing a role, don't stray too far from your comfort zone, give your partner a heads up before sending a nude photo, put effort into the visuals, keep sexy pics ready at hand in your personal library, know the "emoji sex code", have fun with dirty talk, draw from your own personal experiences, don't be afraid to open up about your fantasies, consider the details, ask questions, go beyond just texts and visuals, don't get too technical, make use of memes and gifs, and have fun with it (Jalili, 2018). There are various apps that can be used for secure sexting, including Snapchat which offers features like disappearing messages, screenshot notifications, and password-protected photo albums (Geeng et al., 2020). Kaboom and Confide also offer disappearing messages and screenshot notification features[8] (Geeng et al., 2020). Other apps that provide encrypted messaging platforms include Signal, WhatsApp, and Facebook Secret Messenger (Geeng et al., 2020).

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[8] While this feature notifies the user that a screenshot has been taken, it does not prevent others from taking a screenshot before the message disappears.

In February 2021, the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute published a report entitled *An Environmental Scan of Online Resources Related to Sexting* which may be helpful for parents/guardians, youth, and educators who are seeking materials to educate themselves or the youth in their lives about sexting. The purpose of the environmental scan was to gather current, evidence-based resources on sexting and its impact on youth sexual and reproductive health decision-making and mental health. The report is available at https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/an-environmental-scan-of-online-resources-related-to-sexting/.

8. Conclusions

As online and media technology improves and the use of it increases, sexting has become more prevalent among youth. Overall, though, youth are largely ambivalent regarding sexting and seem to experience the effects of the sexual double standard present with sexting. The phenomenon of sexting is incredibly varied in terms of context, meaning, and intention, as well as the consensual/non-consensual aspects and positive/negative outcomes related to it (Cooper et al., 2016). Motivations to engage in sexting seem contingent on individual needs and desires as well as who receives the sext. Unfortunately, many youth may be coerced into sexting and even bullied if sexting content is shared with unintended audiences.

At present, there is no agreed upon definition of sexting and there appear to be two main perspectives adopted (i.e., the risk and the developmental perspectives). This has led to very mixed results within the relevant research literature. Sexting has received considerable media, public health, legal scholar, and researcher attention due to its association with sexually risky behaviours, other mental health risk behaviours (e.g., sadness, hopelessness, suicidality), the potential for other negative outcomes (e.g., cyberbullying, reputational damage) (Dake et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2015; Van Ouytsel, Walrave et al., 2019b), and legal risks (e.g., charges related to creating and distributing child pornography) (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). However, there are also a variety of positive outcomes associated with sexting, particularly in the context of romantic/sexual relationships. In order to reduce the risks associated with sexting and increase the positive outcomes for youth who decide to participate in sexting, both formal education institutions and caregivers have a role to play in educating youth.

Sexting research to date has primarily focused on the experiences of young adults (i.e., post-secondary students) or older adolescents in the last years of secondary school (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018b). As such, additional research is needed on younger adolescents, such as those in middle school (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018b). Future research and resource development should also focus on consent and negotiation skills specific to sexting given the gendered double standards and differing behaviours among boys and girls, including coercion, feeling pressured, and non-consensual forwarding of content. There is also a lack of research focusing on the motives and characteristics of individuals who request sexts from others, coerce individuals to engage in sexting, or share sexts with consent (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018b). While more samples include 2SLGBTQI+ youth, more

research is needed regarding the distinct experiences of these subgroups. Addressing the identified gaps in the current research literature will help increase understanding about sexting behaviours and the associated positive and negative outcomes experienced by youth.

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