



Sharing Personal Images and Videos Among Young People

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*“Sexting” is the act of sending sexually explicit messages or photos electronically, primarily between cell phones.
(Wikipedia 2009)*

From September – November 2009, the South West Grid for Learning undertook research in partnership with the Centre for Security, Communications and Networks Research, University of Plymouth to better understand the ways young people from 11 to 18 use mobile and Internet technology to share files among friends. In particular the research focused upon the practice of “sexting” – the sharing of explicit images electronically.

The research was conducted using an online survey, disseminated to schools across the South West of the UK. The survey aimed to inform understanding about image and video sharing among young people and contribute to improving measures for protecting individuals from the harm that can occur as a result of such practices. Surveying students from year 9 to year 13, 18 schools have participated in the survey with 535 respondents to date.

Key findings of the survey are:

- Young people are very confident in the use of digital technology to take and distributed images. 79% of respondents saying they used such digital technologies to take images and videos, and 78% said they distributed them.
- Young people’s attitude toward what might be considered an inappropriate image may differ somewhat from the adult population, with 40% not seeing anything wrong with a topless image, and 15% not taking issue with naked images.
- Sexting is prevalent among young people, with around 40% saying they knew friends who carried out such practice.
- 27% of respondents said that sexting happens regularly or all of the time.



- 56% of respondents were aware of instances where images and videos were distributed further than the intended recipient but only 23% believe this distribution is intended to cause upset.
- 30% of young people knew people who had been adversely affected by sexting.
- Only a minority (27%) believe young people need more support and advice related to sexting and 70% will turn to their friends if they were affected by issues related to sexting.
- Only 24% of young people would turn to a teacher for help if they were affected by issues related to sexting.

The survey clearly shows a population fully aware of the concept of sexting and a significant subset who are actively engaged with the practice. What is particularly worrying is the somewhat blasé attitude to the subject – illustrated in the fact that only a minority of respondents believe that the extended distribution of explicit images of an individual is done so to cause upset, and few feel that young people need further support in this area.

It is immediately apparent that such practices are cause for concern. It shows a population who are unconcerned about intimacy or privacy yet are ill equipped to understand the implications of their actions. Given there is evidence that sexting forms part of a wider online relationship young people have with each other, we would suggest that sexting is covered within the wider eSafety education practice. However, the approach taken in raising awareness of issues needs careful consideration. Our data shows that young people are unlikely to turn to teachers for help directly, so we would suggest that sexting awareness be adopted into wider peer-education schemes if they are to achieve high levels of success.

Full details of this report can be found at:

<http://www.swgfl.org.uk/XXXX?>

We are still running the survey and collecting data about young people's practices related to sexting. If you would like your school to take part in the survey please contact Dr Andy Phippen (andy.phippen@plymouth.ac.uk) and access the survey from the SWGfL website:

<http://www.swgfl.org.uk/surveys/text>



The Full Report...

From September – November 2009, the South West Grid for Learning undertook research in partnership with the Centre for Security, Communications and Networks Research, University of Plymouth to better understand the ways young people from 11 to 18 use mobile and Internet technology to share files among friends. In particular the research focused upon the practice of “sexting” – the sharing of explicit images electronically.

Data was collected via an online survey, disseminated to schools across the South West. The survey aimed to inform understanding about image and video sharing among young people and contribute to improving measures for protecting individuals from the harm that can occur as a result of such practices. While the original intention was for anyone aged 11-18 to respond, in reality schools who responded constrained dissemination of the survey to years 9 and upwards. In all, 18 schools have participated in the survey with 535 respondents to date.

Responses collected for the survey were done entirely anonymously and as such there was a broad range of behaviours reported in the survey data. However, what clearly emerges is the extent of the practice of sexting among young people in the South West of the UK, and the somewhat unconcerned attitude of young people (whether or not they indulge in such practices themselves) toward such behavior.

The following presents top line descriptive statistics on the survey responses with some commentary exploring issues in more depth.

The use of mobile technology to take and distribute images and videos

Figures 1 and 2 show responses to questions exploring the prevalence of use of mobile technology to take and distribute images and videos by young people. These responses clearly show a generation very much at ease with such practices with the vast majority both using technology to take images/videos and a very slightly reduced number using such to distribute images.

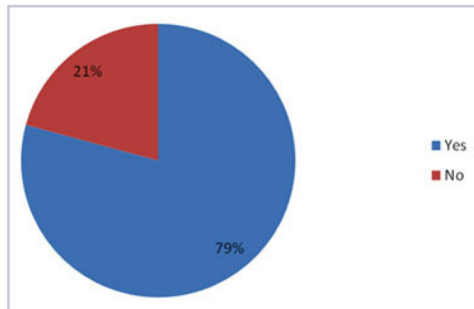


Figure 1 - Do you and your friends use mobile devices to take photographs and videos? (n=534)

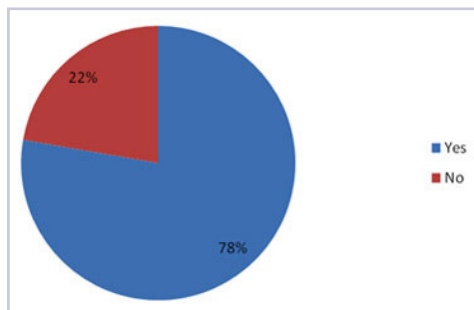


Figure 2 - Do you and your friends ever share images and videos using mobile devices? (n=534)

What Does a Young Person Consider to be Inappropriate?

Another approach used to better understand young people's attitudes toward the distribution of what one might consider to be improper was to ask them what they would consider an inappropriate image to be. As can be seen from the responses in figure 3, it is clear that the boundaries of acceptability are blurred in some cases, with almost 40% of respondents not thinking that a picture of someone topless being inappropriate, and 15% thinking similar of naked pictures!

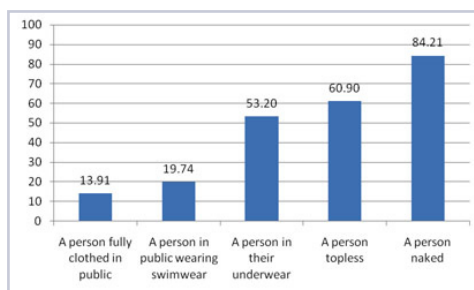


Figure 3 - What do you consider to be an inappropriate image (%age response)? (n=532)

Respondents were also given the opportunity to provide other examples of what they considered to be inappropriate. Of the 72 responses provided, the majority centred on sexual acts, and violence. However, a couple of responders took the opportunity to state

that they didn't believe that anything was inappropriate, one going so far as to say the age of consent should be lowered so adults wouldn't have to worry about such things as this research and one stating we should get over that fact that young people have sex!

Sexting Practices

The next section of the survey considered sexting practices among our respondents, firstly exploring whether they were aware of any friends that had ever exchanged explicit pictures using mobile devices. This question was deliberately targeted at friends of the respondent, rather than the individual, as it was felt they would be more open about friend's practices than their own. Following this question we explored what happened to the images once shared.

As can be seen in figure 4, it is clear from our respondents that this is a fairly common practice among young people, with nearly 40% of our respondents saying they had friends that shared explicit images.

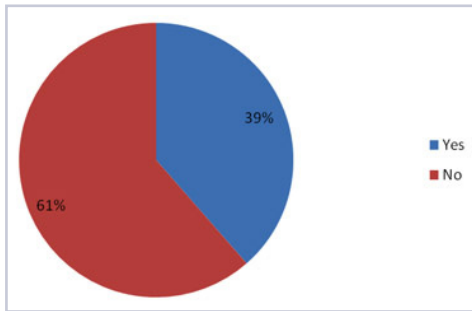


Figure 4 - Have any of your friends shared intimate pictures/videos with a boyfriend or girlfriend (sometimes referred to as "sexting")? (n=524)

The prevalence of this distribution is illustrated in figure 5, which shows the frequency of sexting practices the respondent was aware of. Note that this is any instance of sexting, not just those involving the respondent or their friends. While the majority (50%) of respondents said they were aware of "one or two" instances in the last year, almost the same amount have come across at least "a few" incidents, with a worrying 16% saying that it happens all the time. It is interesting to note that the smallest response to this question were those who were not aware of any cases.

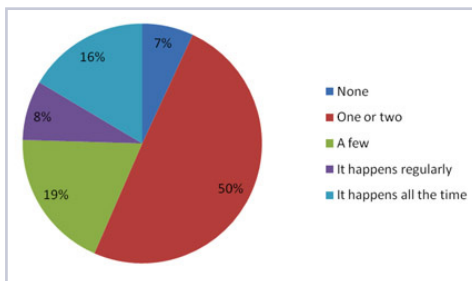


Figure 5 - How many separate incidents of "sexting" have happened this year that you are aware of? (n=534)

It is concerning that in over half of all cases of sharing explicit images our respondents were aware of, the file was passed on to other parties. Equally interesting is figure 6, which shows that while images are shared beyond the intended recipient, it is only in a minority of cases where the respondent felt that this was done to upset someone. Which does beg the question, what other reasons were there to forward an explicit, personal picture onto third parties?

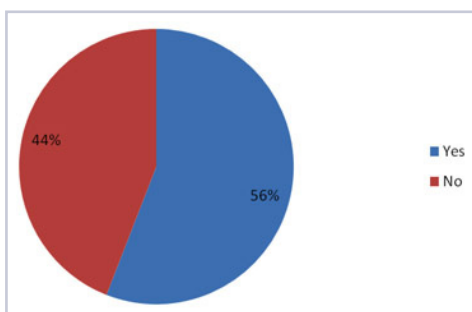


Figure 6 - Are you aware of any times where such a picture/video was shared further than just the person it was sent to (to a third/fourth or even more people)?

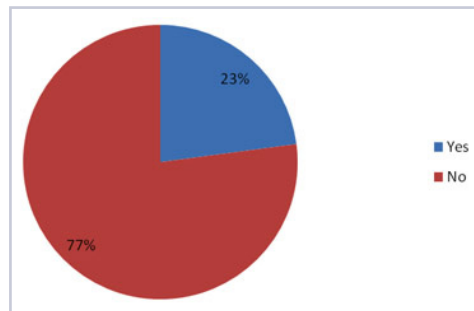


Figure 7 - Were the images/videos used in a way intended to upset someone? (n=511)

If we are to isolate responses solely to those who have said they are aware of friends who have shared explicit images (i.e. have shown themselves to have personal contact with sexting practices), we get an even more alarming set of results. As shown in figure 8, in this subset of respondents, 73% have are aware of at least “a few” instances of sexting in the past year. More alarmingly is that the largest response in this subset is that “it happens all of the time”.

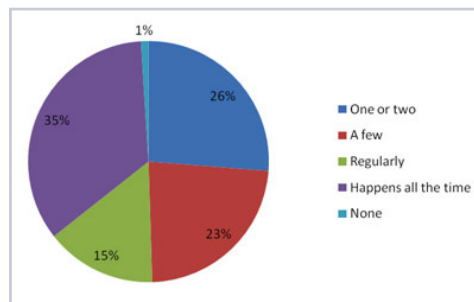


Figure 8 - How many separate incidents of “sexting” have happened this year that you are aware of? Response constrained to those who have had personal contact with sexting (n=202)

In addition, 73% of those in this sub grouping were aware of images being passed on to people other than the intended recipient. These figures indicate that those “engaged” with sexting are used to it, and somewhat blasé to its impacts.

The Affects of Sexting

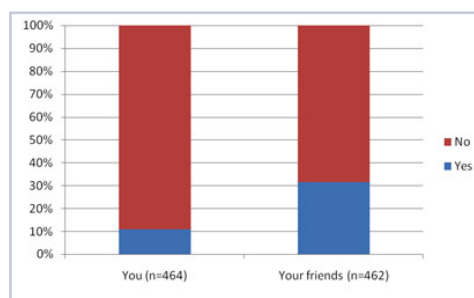


Figure 9 - Have you and/or your friends been affected by this sort of thing?

Figure 9 illustrates responses to a question asking if respondents had (a) been personally affected by the consequences of sexting behavior (i.e. further distribution of images), and (b) whether their friends had. It shows that while those personally impacts are very much in the minority, a larger number are aware of friends that have been affected. A worrying 30% of respondents know a friend who has been affected by the problems introduced by sexting practice.

If we only consider those who have said they are personally aware of sexting practices, those who have been affected increases with 20% saying they have been personally affected, and 52% saying their friends have.

It is interesting, therefore to consider the belief of respondents regarding who is responsible for the image or video taken by the mobile device. This is illustrated in figure 10 and on face value is confusing given that the vast majority of respondents are saying that the person taking the picture is responsible for it.

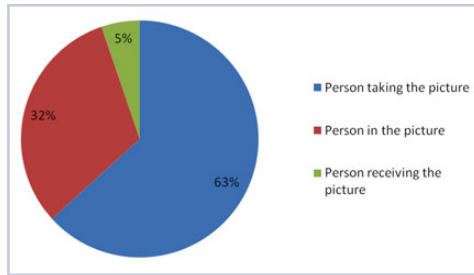


Figure 10 - Whose responsibility is the image/video? (n=517)

However, the nature of image capture in sexting practice is not the same as “regular” photography, with a lot of images being taken by the subject them self to then pass onto a partner via a mobile phone or the Internet. Therefore, it is less surprising to see this result. Given the results shown in figure 6 regarding how often an image or video is passed on to a third party, it is a concern that only a very small minority of respondents believe the image to be the responsibility of the recipient yet they seem undaunted about this distribution or the impact.

This is also illustrated in figure 11, where only 27% of respondents believe young people need more help and support with issues around sexting. This figure remains constant for most subgrouping of respondents. Even those personally affected by the issues around sexting are unconcerned, with only a 2% increase in those saying “yes” to the question.

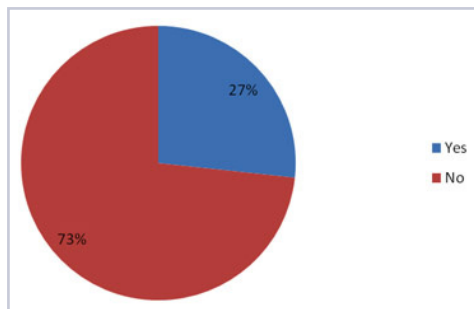


Figure 11 - Would you like to see more advice/support/protection for young people in this area? (n=517)

Those respondents who did say they felt more should be done were given the opportunity to elaborate on the sort of help they thought was needed. The vast majority of those responses were around awareness and education – many respondents said they were not aware of the issues and felt promotion of potential problems that occur when engaging in such practices was necessary. However, one response was particularly pertinent, because it highlighted a separate issue associated with sexting:

“i think you should because some of my mates send pic to boys they don’t no and they meet up wiv them and they dont even no the boys i think it would be a good thing so people dont get hurt. because one day my mate might a boy and the boy might be someone different and kidnap her or other bad stuff so yeah i think it would be a great idea to get more advice support and protection for all people.”

This quote illustrates that in some instances the recipient of the image might not be physically known by the sender – it might be someone they have met, for example, via social networking and have built a relationship around this online liaison. This does ring true with dialogue we have had with young people, where they might have a relationship with a member of the opposite sex that is entirely online in nature, and that they have never physically met.

The final question in the survey also elicited some interesting responses. Given that only 27% of respondents had said they felt people needed more support around the issues of sexting, we wished to discover who they currently turned to if there were problems. It is clear from the responses that the first port of call in there are any concerns is friends, with a fraction over 70% saying they would turn to their peers, with the second most popular being a family member other than parent. It is concerning, however, that teachers are the least likely group that young people would turn to for help. This, in turn, might be an indication on why they don't believe further help is needed.

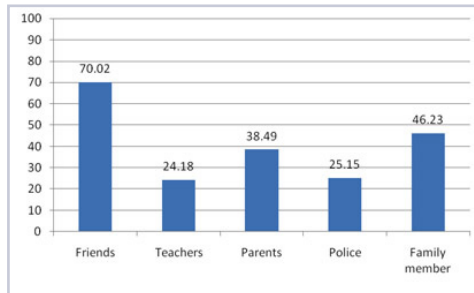


Figure 12 - If this sort of thing happened to you or your friends, who do you feel you could talk to about it (please tick all that apply)? (n=517)

Conclusions

The survey clearly shows a population fully aware of the concept of sexting and a significant subset who are actively engaged with the practice. What is particularly worrying is the somewhat blasé attitude to the subject – illustrated in the fact that only a minority of respondents believe that the extended distribution of explicit images of an individual is done so to cause upset, and few feel that young people need further support in this area.

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