



Döring, N. (2014). Consensual sexting among adolescents: Risk prevention through abstinence education or safer sexting?. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 8(1), article 9. doi: [10.5817/CP2014-1-9](https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2014-1-9)

## Consensual sexting among adolescents: Risk prevention through abstinence education or safer sexting?

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### Abstract

*Sexting – that is, the private exchange of self-produced sexual images via cell phone or the internet – has been widely discussed in public and academic discourses as a new high-risk behavior among youths (especially girls) that should be prevented through better education about the various and severe risks it poses. This paper summarizes existing data on sexting prevalence (17 studies), which reveal that sexting is much more common among adults than among youths, with increasing prevalence among adolescents as they grow older. The paper then looks at the current state of sexting research by reviewing all 50 sexting papers in the PsycINFO and PubMed databases published between 2009 and 2013 regarding their coverage of the risks and/or opportunities associated with sexting. Most of the papers (79%) address adolescent sexting as risky behavior and link it to sexual objectification and violence, to risky sexual behavior, and to negative consequences like bullying by peers and criminal prosecution under child pornography laws. In opposition to this deviance discourse, a normalcy discourse is appearing in the literature that interprets sexting as normal intimate communication within romantic and sexual relationships, both among adults and adolescents who are exploring and growing into adult relationships. Next, the paper analyzes the sexting risk prevention messages of 10 online educational campaigns. Such campaigns typically rely on scare scenarios, emphasize the risk of bullying and criminal prosecution, engage in female victim blaming, and recommend complete abstinence from sexting. The paper closes by questioning the abstinence approach in sexting education, and makes suggestions on how to move towards an evidence-based approach to sexting risk prevention that acknowledges both adolescents' vulnerability and sexual agency.*

Keywords: sexting; sexually explicit user generated content; cell phone; gender; bullying; media education

doi: [10.5817/CP2014-1-9](https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2014-1-9)

### Introduction

*Sexting* is a 21<sup>st</sup>-century neologism and portmanteau of "sex" and "texting" that refers to the *interpersonal exchange of self-produced sexualized texts and above all images (photos, videos) via cell phone or the internet* (Albury, Crawford, Byron, & Mathews, 2013; Calvert, 2009; Chalfen, 2009; Ferguson, 2011; Katzman, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2009). As cell phones and other mobile devices today are ubiquitous and usually come with a camera as well as a picture messaging service (MMS) or even a full internet connection it is easier than ever before to produce and distribute self-made pictures including sexualized self-portraits. Among the various types of self-produced revealing cell phone photos, some are taken in swimwear or in underwear, some are topless/semi-nude, some are naked images of body parts or the whole body, and some depict sexual activities (e.g. masturbation). The spectrum of expression is thus relatively large, and the degree of sexualization quite variable and often low (Calvert, 2009; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012). The exchange of sexualized pictures that are not self-produced (e.g. pornographic images from the internet) does not belong to the category of sexting.

*Consensual sexting* needs to be differentiated from pressuring or blackmailing someone into providing sexual pictures as well as from the act of taking or forwarding revealing pictures without the consent of the person(s) in the image, which is a violation of personal rights in many countries.

While "sexting" is the established term in public and academic discourses, youths usually do not talk about sending "sexts" or "engaging in sexting." They simply refer to "exchanging pictures," "taking sexy selfies," or for more explicit content "sending/getting a tit pic/dick pic," etc. (Albury, Crawford, Byron, & Mathews, 2013, p. 8; Lee, Crofts, Salter, Milivojevic, & McGovern, 2013, p. 45; Lumby & Funnell, 2012; see Urban Dictionary: [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)).

The emergence of sexting has been regarded primarily as a sexuality-related youth phenomenon. The predominant interpretation is that sexting represents a high-risk sexualized media behavior, and that the young internet generation is paying too little attention to its harmful consequences (Draper, 2012; Hua, 2012; Ostranger, 2010; Sadhu, 2012; Srinivas, White, & Omar, 2011). In recent years significant media attention has been devoted to a number of cases of

teenage girls who killed themselves after sexts they had sent to their current crushes or boyfriends became public and they were shamed, ridiculed, and harassed by their peers (for press reports on the cases of Jessica Logan and Hope Witsell, see Agomuoh, 2012; Celizic, 2009; Inbar, 2009; Kotz, 2009).

Against the backdrop of these discourses and concerns about risky adolescent sexting behavior, the current study addresses the following three research questions:

**RQ1:** How prevalent is sexting among adolescents as opposed to adults?

Prevalence data comparing minors and adults can help us to understand the role of this new type of sexual communication across the lifespan.

**RQ2:** What are the risks and opportunities of consensual sexting?

Previous research on youth's risky online and/or mobile communication stresses that risks often go hand in hand with opportunities ("risky opportunities," Livingstone, 2008). Therefore, to better understand sexting as one specific type of risky mobile content creation it seems advisable to analyze the current state of sexting research in terms of both risks and opportunities related to the phenomenon (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011: 14).

**RQ3:** Which educational sexting-risk prevention messages are currently disseminated?

Both public and academic discourses have been stressing the need to educate youth, parents, and teachers about sexting risks. However, *sexting risk reduction messages* haven't been analyzed or critically discussed in terms of their content.

Answering these three research questions can help to better assess current realities with regard to sexting and move towards an evidence-based approach to sexting risk prevention.

## Methods

To answer the research questions three different *methodological approaches* were used: a) a summary of primary studies on sexting prevalence, b) a systematic literature review on sexting risks and opportunities, and c) a content analysis of sexting risk prevention messages distributed by educational campaigns.

### Data Collection on Sexting Prevalence

Relatively few empirical studies have been conducted to date concerning how many adolescents and how many adults are participating in sexting. It was possible to identify *ten empirical studies reporting sexting prevalence rates among minors* of different age groups (five of them based on national representative samples) and *seven empirical studies reporting sexting prevalence rates among adults* (none of them based on national representative samples). Their main results are presented in tables 1 and 2. It should be noted that within the scope of this paper no systematic meta-analysis was conducted. The available prevalence rates were descriptively summarized. In spite of heterogeneity in a) samples, b) data collection methods, and c) definitions of sexting (for details see tables 1 and 2), consistent overall trends appeared.

### Data Collection on Risks and Opportunities of Consensual Sexting

The APA literature database PsycINFO was searched for all peer-reviewed journal articles addressing "sexting" (with the search term "sexting" in the title or abstract of the paper) that were published until the end of 2013. A pool of 48 peer-reviewed journal articles on sexting was built. An equivalent database search was performed for PubMed that returned 29 studies – 27 of them were already in the study pool; the two missed papers were added. Altogether, the study pool contained *50 peer-reviewed empirical and theoretical sexting papers* (including editorials and comments) from various disciplines such as psychology, medicine, sociology, law, and related fields, demonstrating growing research attention to this issue (2009: 1; 2010: 3; 2011: 8; 2012: 15; 2013: 23 papers; see [Appendix](#)). For each of the 50 papers, the citations (author names and years) and main topics (very brief summaries) as well as the target groups (minors or adults) are provided in [Appendix](#). The papers were grouped according to their theoretical framing of sexting as deviant behavior associated with different risks (*deviance discourse*) and/or as normal intimate communication in the digital age associated with different opportunities (*normalcy discourse*). Details on sexting risks and/or opportunities addressed by the papers are provided below. It should be noted that within the scope of this paper no formal discourse analysis was conducted. The dichotomy between deviance and normalcy in discussion around sexting is acknowledged by other sources, however (e.g. Chalfen, 2010; Levine, 2013; Lim, 2013; Wiederhold, 2011).

### Data Collection on Sexting Risk Prevention Messages

An internet search engine was used to find educational online materials on sexting published by official sources (search terms like "sexting campaign," "sexting prevention," and "sexting education"). A corpus of *ten English-language sexting education websites* addressed to youths, parents, and/or teachers were identified (see table 3). Each campaign website usually consisted of several web pages and downloadable materials (e.g. PDF files). All materials at each website were inspected and coded in October 2013 regarding five main content categories. These categories were derived both deductively from the sexting literature and inductively from the material (see table 3):

- *Type of sexting risks:* Which types of sexting risks are covered by the campaign materials? Five types of risks were differentiated and coded separately (yes/no): legal risks (e.g. prosecution under child

pornography laws), social risks (e.g. bullying, humiliation), educational risks (e.g. exclusion from school sports teams, loss of educational scholarship), career risks (e.g. loss of job offers), and abuse risks (e.g. sexual harassment, grooming by adults).

- *Gender of sexters*: The gender of sexters was coded as female (mainly female sexters were depicted in the materials, especially in the examples and videos), male (mainly male sexters), or both (female and male sexters); other gender identities – e.g. transgender – were not visible.
- *Sexting abstinence message*: Does the campaign website recommend complete sexting abstinence to avoid sexting risks (yes/no)?
- *Safer sexting message*: Does the campaign website recommend safer-sexting strategies to avoid sexting risks (yes/no)?
- *Anti-forwarding/Anti-bullying-message*: Does the campaign website provide messages that address unauthorized forwarding of private sexts (e.g. legal and ethical aspects of forwarding) and bullying related to the dissemination of intimate pictures to prevent one of the main sexting risks (yes/no)?

Two independent trained coders used the pretested coding system to code the ten campaigns' messages with the campaigns as the units of analysis. Inter-coder agreement was computed using Cohen's kappa coefficient. The final kappa coefficient was between 0.61 and 1.00 (mean kappa .89). Table 3 offers the very first overview of educational sexting campaigns and their main messages.

On the internet, youths are exposed not only to official sexting education campaigns, but also to peer advice. To complement educational messages with *peer advice*, available data from the research literature and examples from media culture were researched and presented. Within the scope of this paper no systematic content analysis of peer advice messages was possible. The exploration of sexting tips shared among adolescent and adult sexters nevertheless is helpful to contextualize and scrutinize educational messages.

### Prevalence of Sexting in Minors and Adults

The existing prevalence data for youth are quite divergent (2.5%–21%), as the surveys are based on different age groups, different types of samples, different data collection methods, and different single-item sexting measures (see table 1; half of the reported studies are peer-reviewed: 2, 4, 8, 9, 10; another half of the studies are based on representative national samples of the respective age groups: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6). The ten studies reported in table 1 indicate a mean prevalence rate of 13.9% for minors 9–18 years old. Apparently, the majority of minors in the U.S. (79%–97.5%) do not sext. Sexting usually is an interactive behavior, about 9% of minors are only passively involved in sexting.

*Table 1. Proportion (%) of surveyed children and adolescents who sent [received] self-produced semi-/nude cell phone pictures.*

Study	Age Group	Girls	Boys	Total	Sample	Sexting Measure/Definition
1. Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson (2011: 74)	9-16	- [13]	- [16]	3 [15]	N = 23,000 Europe (25 countries) Personal survey	Did you post/send sexual messages of any kind on the internet? This could be words, pictures or videos.
2. Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones & Wolak (2012)	10-17	3	2	2.5 [7.1]	N = 1,560 U.S. Telephone survey	Have you ever taken (or has someone else ever taken) nude or nearly nude pictures or videos of yourself.
3. Pew Research Center (2009)	12-18	-	-	4 [15]	N = 800 U.S. Telephone survey	Have you ever sent a sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo or video to someone else using your cell phone?
4. Dake, Price, Maziarz & Ward (2012)	12-18	16	19	17	N=1,289 U.S. Paper Survey	Engaging in sexting
5. Cox Communications (2009)	13-18	12	6	9 [17]	N = 655 U.S. Online survey	Have you ever sent a sexually suggestive text message or email with nude or nearly nude photos?
6. Knowledge Networks (2009)	13-19	22	18	20	N = 652 U.S. Online survey	Have you ever sent a nude or semi-nude picture/video (of yourself) to someone (via email, cell phone, etc.)?
7. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and Cosmogirl.com (2009)	14-24	13	9	10 [18]	N = 1,247 U.S. Online survey	I used my cell phone or the Internet to send naked pictures of myself to someone else.
8. Peskin, Markhan, Addy, Shegog, Thiel & Tortolero (2013)	15-16	22	21	21 [31]	N = 1,034 U.S. (ethnic minority students) Electronic audio Survey	Sending a nude or semi-nude picture or video or sexually explicit text message
9. Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaita & Rullo (2013: 18)	15-17	17.3 [30.9]	18.3 [49.7]	17.8 [40.3]	N=606 U.S. Paper survey	Sending a sexually explicit cell phone picture of oneself, meaning a picture depicting the genitals or buttocks for both sexes and/or the breasts for females.
10. Ferguson (2011)	16-25	20 [34]	-	-	N=207 U.S. (Hispanic students) Paper survey	I sent erotic or nude photographs of myself (sexting) to another person
<b>Total (2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9)</b>		<b>15.0</b>	<b>13.3</b>	<b>13.9</b> <b>[22.7]</b>	<b>N = 7,043</b>	

The ten sexting studies reported in table 1 are ordered by lowest to highest age and show increasing sexting prevalence with increasing age. Regarding adult sexters, empirical data are scarce as well. The seven sexting studies reported in table 2 are (with three exceptions: 2, 3, 7) based on young adult samples from the U.S. and, again, use different age groups, different sample types, different data collection methods, and different single-item sexting measures (see table 2; total values were not computed because of the divergence of the study pool).

Table 2. Proportion (%) of adults who sent [received] self-produced semi-/nude cell phone pictures.



Study	Age Group	Women	Men	Total	Sample	Sexting Measure / Definition
1. Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, Zimmerman (2013)	18-24	30.2 [38.9]	27.6 [44.6]	30.1 [40.8]	N = 3447 U.S. Online Survey	Have you ever sent a sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo or video of yourself to someone else?
2. Döring (2012)	18-27	18 [18]	12 [21]	16 [19]	N = 217 DE Online survey, college students	Have you ever sent an erotic picture of yourself via cell phone?
3. Agustina & Gómez-Durán (2012)	18-29	14 [40]	4 [40]	10 [40]	N=149 ES Paper survey, college students	Sending a sexually suggestive message including a nude or semi-nude picture/video
4. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and Cosmogirl.com (2009)	20-26	36	31	33	N = 627 U.S. Online survey	Have you ever sent a nude or semi-nude picture/video (of yourself) to someone (via email, cell phone, etc.)?
5. Weisskirch & Delevi (2011)	18-30	40	18	36	N=128 U.S. Online survey, college students	Have you sent a sexually suggestive photo or video of yourself using your cell phone?
6. Wysocki & Childers (2011)	18-38	-	-	54	N=744 U.S. Online survey, college students	Have you ever sent a sexually explicit photo or video message to your relationship partner?
7. Drouin & Landgraaf (2012)	18-80	60	45	51	N = 5187 U.S. Online survey, users of a dating website	Have you ever sent a nude or nearly nude photo of yourself via email or from your cell phone?

Existing empirical studies have produced the following three main findings regarding sexting prevalence:

1. Sexting among minors occurs relatively seldom; depending on the study, between 2.5% and 21% of minors in the U.S. report having sent a least one sext (see table 1). With increasing age and sexual experience young people's involvement in sexting steadily increases (see table 1; Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2012; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011; Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaíta, & Rullo, 2013). While children very rarely receive sexts (4% of 12-year-olds in the U.S.), teenagers get more involved the older they grow: 20% of 16-year-olds and 30% of 17-year-olds in the U.S. report having received a sext (Pew Research Center, 2009: 5–6). The same trend applies to the sending of sexts: 3% of 12-year-olds as opposed to 32% of 18-year-olds in the U.S. report having sent a sext (Dake et al., 2012).
2. With current prevalence rates between 30% and 54% in different, non-representative samples, sexting is much more common among adults in the U.S. than among minors (see table 2; prevalence rates in European samples from Germany and Spain were lower).
3. Both male and female cell phone/internet users engage in sexting. Females of all age groups usually report being slightly more active sexters than males (see table 1 and 2).

### Risks and Opportunities of Consensual Sexting

The internet and the cell phone are integral parts of contemporary adolescent life, and thus invariably play a crucial role in sexual communication, exploration, and personal sexual development (Pascoe, 2011). Consensual sexting between adolescents, which is one specific type of sexualized mobile communication, has often been framed as *risky and deviant behavior* that is associated with other problematic behaviors like alcohol use or promiscuity. Different types of sexting risks are addressed in the literature, and different explanations for supposedly deviant involvement of youth in sexting have been offered.

Yet sexting has also been framed as a *normal contemporary form of intimate communication in romantic and sexual relationships* between adults as well as between adolescents who are exploring and growing into adult relationships. Different opportunities of consensual sexting in different relational contexts are addressed in the literature and different

explanations for supposedly normal involvement of youth in sexting are offered.

An article titled "*Sexting: A terrifying health risk ... or the new normal for young adults?*" in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* perfectly mirrors the deviance versus normalcy dichotomy in discourses around sexting (Levine, 2013; see also Draper, 2012). While more nuanced frameworks that look at both risks and opportunities in terms of "*risky opportunities*" do exist (Livingstone, 2008; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011: 14), a more comprehensive theoretical elaboration of the risks and opportunities associated with sexting behaviors in different populations is just beginning to emerge.

### Consensual Sexting and its Risks: The Deviance Discourse

According to the predominant theoretical framework, sexting is a new type of *deviant sexualized behavior* in youth that is associated with many risks (Ahern & Mechling, 2013; Benotsch, Martin, Snipes, & Bull, 2013a; Draper, 2012; Hua, 2012; Judge, 2012; Korenis & Billick, 2013; O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Council on Communications and Media, 2011; see Appendix). Of the 50 academic sexting papers (2009–2013) from the PsycINFO and PubMed databases, the majority (33/50: 66%) address sexting as a problematic and unhealthy behavior in minors and adults. Of the papers that specifically address minor/adolescent sexting, 79% (27/34) frame the behavior as problematic, while 37% (6/16) of the papers discussing adult sexting adopt a deviance frame. Papers in pediatrics, psychiatry, nursing, clinical psychology, and criminology often use the deviance frame.

The main sexting risks for adolescents that are covered by the literature are *unwanted dissemination of private sexts* and subsequent *bullying by peers* (in extreme cases up to the point of suicide) as well as *exclusion from educational and career opportunities* if a private sext becomes public (Ahern & Mechling, 2013; Hua, 2012; Korenis & Billick, 2013). That privately exchanged sexts at some point "go viral" and are forwarded to third parties or published on the internet against the will of their original authors is typically regarded as very likely if not inevitable. Additionally, the legal risk of *criminal prosecution under child pornography laws* (e.g. in the U.S. and Australia) is emphasized (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchel, 2012). The aforementioned types of risks are mainly formal and informal *sanctions against adolescent sexting* when it becomes public or at least known to authorities (e.g. some peers discriminate against females sexters as "sluts"; some schools exclude adolescent sexters from sports teams; some states prosecute adolescent sexters as child pornographers).

Another line of research is concerned with sexting risks that occur even if the sexting is kept perfectly private: Sexual texting is likened to a "gateway drug" (Diliberto & Matthey, 2009) that leads to other forms of *risky or inappropriate sexual behavior* such as promiscuity, unsafe sex, or sexual infidelity. Sexting behavior is placed in a context of adolescent impulsivity, bad judgment, sensation seeking, and problematic alcohol and drug use. Sexting is seen as a manifestation or moderator of problematic and age-inappropriate sexual behavior (Dir, Cyders, & Coskunpinar, 2013).

Still another line of research is concerned with the link between sexting and *sexual objectification* as well as between sexting and *sexual violence*. The production and exchange of sexualized pictures is regarded as the unhealthy objectification especially of teenage girls that can be harmful in itself (Jewell & Brown, 2013; Maurović & Knežević, 2012) and can put minors at risk of sexual molestation and abuse by peers or adults (Fontenot & Fantasia, 2011; Hua, 2012).

Adolescent involvement in risky and deviant sexting behavior is mainly explained by a) thoughtlessness, b) peer pressure, and c) high-risk personality traits. Risk prevention is urgently requested. Usually it is implied that youth need to be better educated about the possible negative consequences of sexting (especially the different types of social and legal sanctions against adolescent sexters) so that they can overcome thoughtlessness and peer pressure.

### Consensual Sexting and its Opportunities: The Normalcy Discourse

The dominant deviance discourse around sexting is challenged by a growing normalcy discourse that interprets consensual sexting as a *normal contemporary form of sexual expression and intimate communication in romantic and sexual relationships* (17/50 papers: 34%). Of the papers addressing specifically minor/adolescent sexting, 21% (7/34) frame the behavior as normal, while 63% (10/16) of the papers discussing adult sexting adopt a normalcy frame. In the age of the internet and mobile devices, intimate communication – as an integral part of building and maintaining romantic and sexual relationships – takes place via different channels, including face-to-face communication, telephone calls, e-mails, and text and photo messages. Sexting is understood within the normalcy frame as regular intimate communication mediated by current communications technology, and as such, as the creative production of erotic material within the framework of contemporary media culture (Hasinoff, 2013; Karaian, 2012). The normalcy frame is particularly adopted by papers in the disciplines of cultural, media, communication, sexuality, and gender studies as well as in law (these disciplines are only partially covered by the PsycINFO and PubMed databases; see Albury & Crawford, 2013; Curnutt, 2012; Lim, 2013; Lumby & Funnell, 2012).

One indicator of the normalcy of sexting is its popularity among adults, whose behavior cannot be explained by adolescent bad judgment or peer pressure. Another normalcy indicator is the occurrence of sexting in all types of romantic and sexual relationships, including committed relationships (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013). The strongest predictor for sexting in both adult and teenage populations is often simply being in a romantic relationship.

The main opportunities associated with consensual sexting are the mutual expression of sexual desire and affection, playfulness, pleasure, as well as bonding and trust (e.g. Hasinoff, 2013; Karaian, 2012). In contrast to the deviance discourse's claims that sexting is dangerous because all private sexts will eventually go viral, most adult and adolescent sexters handle erotic pictures mutually exchanged with their romantic partners with care and discretion; only 3% of

adolescent sexters reported unwanted dissemination of a private sext (Cox Communications, 2009, p. 38). Trust is regarded by youth as one of the most important features of their romantic relationships (Gala & Kapadia, 2013).

In the realm of digital communications (texting, online chatting, and sexting) adolescents explore their sexual desires, identities, and relationships, and learn to communicate and deal with sexual feelings. Using mediated channels (as opposed to face-to-face communication) to disclose sexual emotion can be helpful in dealing with insecurity and shyness. Involvement in romantic and sexual relationships is part of growing up. Exercising sexual agency and emancipating oneself from childhood roles and parental control are developmental tasks in adolescence, and can explain involvement in sexting (Angelides, 2013; Simpson, 2013).

The normalcy discourse points out that sexting is not consistently correlated with risky behavior or mental health problems (e.g. Ferguson, 2011; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013). Some studies even reveal positive correlations between sexting and sexual as well as relationship satisfaction (e.g. Ferguson, 2011; Parker, Blackburn, Perry, & Hawks, 2013).

From the perspective of the normalcy frame, the deviance discourse is conceived as another example of mass media-fuelled *moral panic* regarding adolescent sexuality (e.g. Angelides, 2013; Draper, 2012; Hasinoff, 2013; Karaian, 2012). Criticizing the moral panic around adolescent sexting doesn't mean to deny the existence of problems related to this type of behavior, but stresses the need to investigate carefully both the downsides and benefits of consensual sexting experienced by all parties involved.

Harsh legal consequences in some countries (e.g. the U.S. and Australia) are one main reason why sexting is so dangerous for adolescents. Yet such legal sanctions are being increasingly questioned by legal experts, who point to adolescents' right to exercise sexual agency (e.g. Angelides, 2013; Ostrager, 2010; Simpson, 2013).

Another main reason why sexting is so dangerous especially for female adolescents is the widespread sexual double standard and the "slut shaming" of sexually active girls. While the deviance frame warns girls not to engage in sexting, the normalcy discourse defends female sexual agency and attributes the problem of bullying and stigmatizing not to the allegedly deviant girl but to a misogynist culture that at the same time demands feminine sexiness but punishes and shames girls for their normal sexual expression (Hasinoff, 2013; Karaian, 2012; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013).

## Prevention of Sexting Risks

In general, digital media literacy is gained through media education offered by various sources, such as parents, teachers, and educational campaigns, as well as through personal exploration and peer learning. When it comes to sexting risk prevention, adolescents today are exposed to different prevention messages. Focusing on online prevention messages that are disseminated by websites and social media channels, we can differentiate between official educational campaigns and peer advice. Thus far, the content, dissemination, and effects of different types of sexting risk-prevention messages have not been systematically investigated. This study starts off by looking at the content of official sexting risk-prevention messages.

### Abstinence Messages in Educational Campaigns

Ten official sexting education campaigns on the internet (initiated by different organizations) could be identified (see table 3). The campaigns cover five different types of sexting risks: 1) legal (e.g. criminal prosecution under child pornography laws), 2) social (e.g. bullying by peers if the sext goes viral), 3) educational (e.g. exclusion from educational opportunities if the sext goes viral), 4) career (e.g. exclusion from career opportunities if the sext goes viral), and 5) abuse (e.g. sexual molestation by adults if the sext goes viral). Almost all of the campaigns address social (10/10) and legal (9/10) risks. Educational, career, and abuse risks are mentioned by only about half of the campaigns. Campaigns emphasize the emotional distress that the different negative consequences will create.

*Table 3. Overview over ten English-language sexting education campaigns.*



Sexting Education Campaigns (alphabetic order)	Organizations	Target Group	Sexting Risks	Gender of Sexters	Sexting Abstinence Message	Safer Sexting Message	Anti-Forwarding/ Anti-Bullying-Message
<b>1. A Thin Line</b> <a href="http://www.athinline.org/facts/sexting">www.athinline.org/facts/sexting</a>	Television channel MTV, U.S.	Youth	L, S, E	F, M	+	+	+
<b>2. Before you sext</b> <a href="http://beforeyoutext.com/">http://beforeyoutext.com/</a> (7 e-learning modules including 2 videos) <b>Video: "Choose what happens next"</b> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGkaw44-QJ4&amp;feature=youtu.be">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGkaw44-QJ4&amp;feature=youtu.be</a> <b>Video "Megan's story"</b> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwKgg35YbC4&amp;feature=youtu.be">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwKgg35YbC4&amp;feature=youtu.be</a>	Texas School Safety Center, U.S.	Youth	L, S, E, C, A	F	+	-	+
<b>3. Click CEOP Internet Safety</b> <a href="http://www.ceop.police.uk">www.ceop.police.uk</a> <b>Video "Exposed":</b> <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ovR3FF_6us&amp;feature=relmfu">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ovR3FF_6us&amp;feature=relmfu</a>	National Crime Agency, UK	Youth	L, S, E, C, A	F	+	-	-
<b>4. Common Sense Media</b> <a href="http://www.common sense media.org/educators/lesson/overexposed-sexting-and-relationships">http://www.common sense media.org/educators/lesson/overexposed-sexting-and-relationships</a> <b>Video "Ally's Story"</b> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKew2-8U_w">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKew2-8U_w</a> <a href="http://www.common sense media.org/video/modal/2102081">http://www.common sense media.org/video/modal/2102081</a>	Common Sense Media, U.S.	Teachers	L, S, E, A	F, M	+	-	-
<b>5. Netsmartz</b> <a href="http://cdn.netsmartz.org/tipsheets/sexting.pdf">http://cdn.netsmartz.org/tipsheets/sexting.pdf</a>	National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, U.S.	Parents	L, S, E, C	F, M	+	-	+
<b>6. Respect me don't sext me</b> <a href="http://www.secasa.com.au/assets/Sexting/Sexting-teachers-resource_v15.pdf">http://www.secasa.com.au/assets/Sexting/Sexting-teachers-resource_v15.pdf</a> <b>Example: "Matt and Nikki's Story"</b>	South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault, Australia	Teachers	L, S, E, C, A	F	+	-	+
<b>7. SaferInternetProgram</b> <a href="http://www.saferinternet.org/online-issues/parents-and-carers/sexting">http://www.saferinternet.org/online-issues/parents-and-carers/sexting</a> <a href="http://www.saferinternet.org/online-issues/teachers-and-educators/sexting">http://www.saferinternet.org/online-issues/teachers-and-educators/sexting</a>	INSAFE, European Network of National Safer Internet Centres	Parents, Teachers	L, S, C, A	F, M	+	-	-
<b>8. Sheeplive</b> <a href="http://sheeplive.eu">http://sheeplive.eu</a> <b>Video "Coatless":</b> <a href="http://uk.sheeplive.eu/en/fairytales/coatless-subtitles">http://uk.sheeplive.eu/en/fairytales/coatless-subtitles</a>	Civic association eSlovensko, Slovak Ministry of the Interior & Slovak Committee for UNICEF	Youth	S	F	+	-	-
<b>9. That'sNotCool</b> <a href="http://www.that'snotcool.com/TalkitOutForum.aspx?forumID=HJhWnLqu0KY">http://www.that'snotcool.com/TalkitOutForum.aspx?forumID=HJhWnLqu0KY</a> <b>Video: "Pressure Pic Problem – Boyfriend's story"</b> <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-e5WQr8BU7Y">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-e5WQr8BU7Y</a> <b>Video "Pressure Pic Problem – Girlfriend's story"</b> <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0meBHbUqGjc">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0meBHbUqGjc</a>	Family Violence Prevention Fund & U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women & U.S. Advertising Council	Youth	L, S	F	+	-	-
<b>10. ThinkUKnow</b> <a href="http://www.thinkuknow.org.au/kids/sexting.asp">http://www.thinkuknow.org.au/kids/sexting.asp</a> <b>Video: "Megan's Story"</b> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwKgg35YbC4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwKgg35YbC4</a>	Australian Federal Police AFP and Microsoft Australia	Youth	L, S, C, A	F	+	-	+

**Note:** Sexting Risks: L: legal, S: social, E: educational, C: career; A: abuse; Gender: F: female, M: male.

While 4 of the 10 campaigns address female and male adolescents as sexters, 6 campaigns present exclusively or primarily females as risky sexters. The typical sexting scenario that is depicted by the campaigns involves a girl who



sends a sext to a current or former boyfriend because he asks for one, sometimes by pressuring her. All of the ten campaigns offer *abstinence messages* that underscore the risks of sexting can only be prevented by refraining from such behavior. Only one of the ten campaigns offers a *safer sexting message*: "If you must take them [i.e. sexy selfies], save—don't send—and share in-person, on your device only" (Campaign 1, see table 3).

At campaign websites (see table 3) and in books (e.g. Hinduja & Patchin, 2012), official positions in the field of media education are dominated by calls for abstinence from sexting based on drastic *scare scenarios* involving a sext that has gone viral through unauthorized dissemination:

Anyone could come across or find the images, such as your future employer or even your mum or dad! Even scarier, they could still be out there when you have kids of your own! You will also be making yourself more vulnerable to people who use technology as a way to access and abuse young people, or more commonly you could be bullied for sending indecent images. You could also be committing an offence under child pornography legislation ("ThinkUKnow," campaign 10, [Appendix](#); [www.thinkuknow.org.au/kids/sexting.asp](http://www.thinkuknow.org.au/kids/sexting.asp)).

Youths and especially girls are told by the sexting risk-prevention messages that even a single revealing photo, if it ends up in the wrong hands, can never be recalled, will destroy their reputation, and bring about severe negative legal, social, educational, and career consequences, and may even lead to sexual abuse by adults. Only five of the ten campaigns discuss third parties who illegally forward private sexts and participate in bullying, thus providing *anti-forwarding and anti-bullying messages*.

Several campaigns specifically frame sexting as a problematic behavior of girls, and some engage in *female victim blaming* (see videos of campaigns 3, 8, 10). Legal experts (Salter, Crofts, & Lee, 2013) as well as teenage girls in focus group discussions (Albury, Crawford, Byron, & Mathews, 2013) have recently drawn attention to the problematic tendency for public discourse and educational campaigns to blame female victims, rather than bullies.

It is noteworthy that 9 out of 10 educational campaigns emphasize and affirm the illegality of adolescent sexting while at the same time more and more legal experts question and condemn the criminalization of adolescent sexting, especially prosecution under child pornography laws in the U.S. and Australia (Chalfen, 2009; Crofts & Lee, 2013; Day, 200; Karaian, 2013; Lee, Crofts, Salter, Milivojevic, & McGovern, 2013; Stone, 2011).

Some authors point out that the overall sexting abstinence messages of official education campaigns are at odds with a) adolescents' romantic and sexual lives, which include many examples of responsible sexting behavior within their personal relationships, and with b) the ongoing debate among teenagers about the ethical aspects of sexting (Albury & Crawford, 2013). While adolescents frame the exchange of sexts within their romantic relationships as an expression of trust and intimacy, official campaign messages essentially claim that you can never trust your romantic partner, especially not your male partner if you are a teenage girl. It is important to give attention to gender power imbalances, however – the campaigns' depictions of heterosexual adolescent relationships ("he" is asking/pressuring "her" to sext) run the risk of affirming sexual gender stereotypes. It is also important to note that all of the 10 sexting risk prevention campaigns solely discuss heterosexual cisgender youth.

### Safer Sexting Messages in Peer Advice

Apart from the official educational sexting campaigns, the internet and many social media channels offer abundant peer advice on sexting risk prevention. This peer discourse usually does not focus on complete sexting abstinence, but rather asks about sexting "rules," "etiquette," "safety," and "ethics" (Albury & Crawford, 2013; Oravec, 2012). A content analysis of *online forum discussions* on sexting risk prevention revealed three main tips shared between young sexters (Döring, 2012):

1. *Reciprocity and trust*: Do not engage in one-sided sexting, where you are the only one to send pictures, but do it reciprocally with a trustworthy partner.
2. *Anonymous pictures*: Sexting images can be anonymized if you simply do not show your face or any other identifying features (e.g. tattoos) in the picture.
3. *Legal action against unwanted picture dissemination*: If anyone threatens to show your private pictures around or to put them on the internet, then this would be a criminal act. Do not let yourself be intimidated, but instead, let them know you are going to take legal action. If someone has distributed pictures without your consent, seek the support of parents and teachers and take aggressive measures against them, including legal action.

Peer advice on sexting can be found on online discussion forums as well as at video portals like *YouTube*. Among the most popular sexting videos are parodies and advice videos. For example, the young comedian Timothy DeLaGhetto in 2010 published a video clip called "Sexting Rules – The D\*ck Pic," which has more than 2.2 million views and more than 4,000 comments (as of October 2013). The video recommends anonymous pictures ("never put your face in a dick pic").

Since sexting has become quite popular among adults (see section on sexting prevalence) *self-help articles and books* on how to sext safely are available for them (e.g. advice books like O'Hanlon, without year; Ravenscraft, 2013). *Sexting within couple relationships between adults* is now often seen as one possibility for enhancing and adding erotic novelty to a relationship (e.g. advice books like Kitt, 2012). Yet this raises the question as to whether it is realistic and helpful to depict *sexting within the romantic and sexual relationships of adolescents and emerging adults* as

unequivocally bad and dangerous, instead of discussing the individual and organizational conditions and prerequisites for consensual and ethical sexting behavior.

## Discussion

This paper first summarized existing data on sexting prevalence (17 studies), which revealed that sexting is much more common among adults than among youth, with adolescents steadily getting more involved with growing age.

The paper then looked at the current state of sexting research by reviewing all 50 sexting papers in the PsycINFO and PubMed databases published between 2009 and 2013 regarding their coverage of the risks and/or opportunities of sexting. Most of the papers (79%) address adolescent sexting as risky behavior and link it to sexual objectification and violence, to risky sexual behavior, and to negative consequences like bullying by peers and criminal prosecution under child pornography laws. In opposition to this *deviance discourse* around adolescent sexting a *normalcy discourse* is appearing in the literature that interprets sexting as normal intimate communication within romantic and sexual relationships, both among adults and adolescents exploring and growing into adult relationships. The deviance discourse is deconstructed by the normalcy stance as an expression of a "moral panic" regarding adolescent sexuality.

Third, this paper analyzed the sexting risk-prevention messages of 10 online educational campaigns. This analysis revealed that the campaigns primarily rely on scare scenarios, stress the risks of bullying (10 out of 10 campaigns) and criminal prosecution (9 out of 10), engage in female victim blaming, and recommend complete abstinence from sexting.

Some limitations of the presented data need to be kept in mind: Available sexting prevalence rates are predominantly based on U.S. samples, representative data for adult populations are missing, and sexting definitions vary between studies. A recent systematic literature review (Klettke, Halford, & Mellor, 2014) that was published after the submission of this paper reports sexting prevalence rates for adolescents (10.20%; 95% CI [1.77%–18.63%] based on 12 studies) and for adults (53.31%; 95% CI [49.57%–57.07%] based on 12 studies) that are very similar to the results reported in this study.

The academic sexting papers extracted from the PsycINFO and PubMed databases are also most often from the U.S. or other Western countries. Sexting papers from European and non-Western countries need to be included in future literature reviews for a more complete picture of the current state of sexting research, particularly because the legal regulations and cultural norms regarding sexting differ between countries. Additionally, differences between academic disciplines and their theoretical framing of adolescent sexting should be further examined. The same applies to the analyzed sexting risk prevention campaigns: Not only should a broader spectrum of online and offline sexting risk prevention campaigns be analyzed, future studies should engage in input, process, and outcome evaluations.

Further research is necessary to better understand the risks and opportunities of sexting in adolescents' and adults' romantic and sexual lives, including non-heterosexual and non-cisgender populations. To move towards effective sexting risk prevention programs it is necessary to create evidence-based risk prevention messages for different target groups.

Based on the analysis of contemporary sexting practices and problems discussed in this paper, a turn from the dominant educational recommendation of sexting abstinence to safer sexting education should be considered. First, the *safer sexting approach* would be in line with the general *safer sex approach* endorsed by many sex education programs (for a critical analysis of different sex education approaches see Kendall, 2013). Such an approach should a) foster adolescents' individual skills of resisting peer pressure and making conscious decisions about if, when, how, and with whom to have sex and/or to sext consensually and responsibly, and b) build a safer environment by taking more effective anti-bullying measures at the school and community levels, and by avoiding punishment and stigmatization for consensual age-appropriate sexual exploration.

Second, many adolescents who already know about possible negative outcomes still engage in sexting. Teenagers exchange safer sexting tips (e.g. use of anonymized pictures; using apps like Snapchat that automatically deletes pictures after a couple of seconds). These technical measures can be helpful but have limits (e.g. Snapchat's "deleted" photos can be retrieved and screenshots can be made). More importantly, research finds that youth do engage in moral discourses about consensual and ethical sexting practices (e.g. protection of the sexting partner's privacy). Official educational campaigns could cover selected content from peer advice instead of ignoring this discourse (for suggestions of possible new educational messages see Hasinoff, without year).

Third, sexting risk prevention messages need to be checked for gender issues. Gender stereotyping and female victim blaming should be avoided. Instead, adolescents should be educated about the mechanisms of gender power inequalities, sexual double standards (Kraeger & Staff, 2009), victim blaming (Fein, 2011), slut shaming (Attwood, 2007), sexual violence, homophobia, etc. Girls' sexual empowerment (Petersen, 2009) should be facilitated, and more effective gender-sensible anti-bullying measures both at the individual and organizational levels need to be established (e.g. collecting and publishing good practice examples for stopping the unauthorized dissemination of a particular private sext and protecting a female victim against bullying at school).

Fourth and lastly, both academics, health care providers, educators, and public policy officials dealing with adolescent sexting need to engage in more meta-reflection of their different (sometimes very polarized) implicit and explicit norms regarding "healthy" and "normal" as opposed to "risky" and "deviant" adolescent sexualities. Controversies about the legitimacy of adolescent sexting mirrors general debates about appropriate sex education and sexual values, especially

when it comes to girls who are often seen as either asexual or hypersexual and sexually victimized (APA, 2007; Fields, 2008; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009; Vanwesenbeeck, 2009). Clearly, many questions still pervade the issue of how to move towards an evidence-based approach to sexting risk prevention that acknowledges both adolescents' vulnerability and sexual agency.

## Appendix

Appendix can be found [here](#).

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