

# Teen sexting, the gender gap

March 14 2013

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A survey of US adolescents reveals a gender gap in attitudes towards sexting and perceived harm.

[Sexting](#) involves sending sexually explicit messages and/or photographs, primarily between mobile phones using the SMS system was first reported in 2005. It is an obvious portmanteau of "sex" and "texting"; the word was added to the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary in August 2012. 4% of mobile phone-owning teens claim to have sent sexually suggestive, nude or nearly nude images or videos of themselves to someone else via a mobile device while 15% claim to have received such material from someone they know.

With contract cell phones and cheaper multimedia messaging services it is easier and cheaper than ever to share information, images and other data. Ran Wei of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of South Carolina and Ven-Hwei Lo of the School of Journalism and Communication of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, examined the effects of teen sexting that involves serious privacy and personal safety issues. One observer has suggested that the desire for risk-taking and sexual exploration among teens, coupled with a perpetual connection with peers via [mobile telephony](#), creates a "perfect storm for sexting."

The USC-Hong Kong team has now carried out a survey of 236 adolescents in the USA, the results of which reveal that teenagers believe sexting to cause more harm to other people than to themselves. Moreover, they also consider that sext messages subsequently posted to

the Internet on [social networking sites](#) and elsewhere are more harmful than those messages that are shared en masse among a group of [phone users](#). However, they also felt that consensual sexting between two people was less harmful.

The survey also revealed a strong gender gap with regards to third-person perception of sexting: both [males and females](#) believed other females were more harmed by sexting. This perception of girls, not boys, as the victims of sexting is perhaps a common theme in sexual culture and predates telecommunications by several centuries if not longer I'd say. The survey did reveal that this [gender gap](#) meant many respondents were willing to support restrictions on sexting, but those who participated in this activity were less keen on the application of restrictions.

"Sexting raises a new issue with far-reaching social consequences for teenagers because it spans the boundaries of interpersonal communication and mass mediated communication," the team explains. "In addition, sexting poses a challenge in defining the boundary between what is socially appropriate and what is inappropriate in various communication contexts." They point out that fun or flirtatious messages between two teenagers in a romantic relationship might be shared outside that relationship to a large audience on wireless networks or the internet, causing psychological, social, cultural, and legal problems. Indeed, there have been numerous legal cases involving high-school students who have sexted in recent years.

"Sexting among teens is characteristic of an expected negative message from the perspective of parents, educators, and law enforcers," the team concludes. "When sexting is no longer confined to two people in a romantic relationship, to be vulnerable to sexting implies that sext messages may end up in the hands of predators and have a long-term harm on a teen sexter's future."

**More information:** "Examining sexting's effect among adolescent mobile phone users" in Int. J. Mobile Communications, 2013, 11, 176-193

Provided by Inderscience Publishers

Citation: Teen sexting, the gender gap (2013, March 14) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-03-teen-sexting-gender-gap.html>

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