

Teen girls 'bombarded and confused' by sexting requests: study

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

Adolescent women feel intense pressure to send sexual images to men, but they lack the tools to cope with their concerns and the potential consequences, according to new Northwestern University research published Wednesday, Dec. 6, 2017 in the journal of *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*.

Sexting, or sending nude or semi-nude sexually suggestive images or messages to others, is a reality for an estimated 15 to 25 percent of teens growing up in the digital age. Though some research points to sexting as a potentially low-risk way to explore sexuality, it also is associated with increased risk of ostracism, depression and suicide.

"Teenage girls know the potential risks and are disinclined to do it, yet they continue to share the images anyway," said study author Sara Thomas, who is pursuing a doctorate in human development and [social policy](#) in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern. "They struggle to say no."

Thomas explored the challenges teenagers have while debating whether to send photographs and the problems that can surface when they do. She also wanted to know how teen girls handled unwanted requests for photographs.

After analyzing 462 self-reported stories posted to the anonymous online platform AThinLine.org, Thomas found that teen girls who were asked to send nude photographs felt "overwhelmed, confused, tired, bombarded" and trapped between the conflicting pressure of saying both yes and no.

Young [women](#) were concerned about the repercussions of sending pictures, but those worries were overshadowed by more immediate day-to-day pressures, such as wanting the relationship, promises of love and trustworthiness, persistent requests, anger, harassment and threats.

"Faced with these pressures, young women often acquiesced to young men's terms for romantic and sexual engagement," Thomas said. "While many young women took on the responsibility of negotiating these pressures, they were also confused and didn't have the tools to cope."

In fact, the most common reaction was to ask WSID? ("What should I do?") Despite the frustrations and concerns, the stories Thomas analyzed indicated that the [teen girls](#) were reluctant to seek help from adults because they were embarrassed and feared the adult's response or legal consequences.

The study indicated that policy efforts focusing on criminalizing digital sexting or warning young women about the dangers of sending photographs may be misplaced, Thomas said. Her research suggests that "young women are not ignorant of the potential consequences of sending sexual images, but rather that for some, the fear of consequence is superseded by more proximal pressures to send them."

"The study focused on young women and didn't consider how young men behave, nor did it consider same-sex romantic couples. But it did point to a need to support [young women](#) to negotiate these situations with greater agency and teach [young men](#) relationships skills, like respect, consent and boundary acceptance," Thomas wrote.

More information: "What Should I Do?": Young Women's Reported Dilemmas with Nude Photographs:

link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s13178-017-0310-0

Provided by Northwestern University

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