

Young people's sexual engagement using digital devices: findings from the 2021 Secondary Schools and Sexual Health Survey

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Background:

The ubiquity of smart phone technology means that use of phones to create, send and receive sexual images ('sexting') is common. In this paper, we explore patterns of engagement with digital sexual imagery among young people and how they feel about this.

Methods:

We analysed data from an Australian-wide online survey of 14-18-year-olds conducted in 2021 (n=6,841). This analysis focuses on survey items related to frequency of sending and receiving sexual images and attitudes about sexting. Chi-square analyses compared differences between genders, sexual orientation, and age.

Results:

Overall, 47% reported sending a sexually explicit image of themselves once a month or more, while 61% reporting receiving a sexually explicit image once a month or more. Images were most likely to be sent to a romantic partner (72% of those reporting to have sent an image once a month or more), although 28% reported sending images to someone they knew only online. Participants more likely to have sent or received sexual images were: female ($p<.001$), LGBTQ ($p<.001$), sexually active ($p<.001$) and aged 17-18 ($p<.05$, compared to younger participants). Participants agreed that sending sexual images was risky (87%) and could have negative consequences (92%). However, more than half also recognised benefits such as: being more open about sex and sexuality (55%) and learning about their own (52%) or their partner's (53%) sexual identity. Overall, 63% agreed that 'sexting' is a normal part of romantic relationships.

Conclusion:

Sending and receiving digital sexual images (sexting) is common practice among young people, and that is reflected in these findings. Young people are aware of risks associated with this but also appreciative of potential benefits. Addressing the balance of risks and benefits should be part of digital sexual literacy and safety education.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

This study was funded by the Australian Government Department of Health.