

A qualitative Meta-Synthesis of Young peoples' experiences of sending and receiving sexual messages and images via hand held devices ('Sexting'): The implications for school nursing practice.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Objective**

To conduct a meta-synthesis of the qualitative research to explore young people's experiences and use of smart phones to send and receive sexually focused messages and images.

### **Design**

A qualitative meta-synthesis was conducted on the retrieved papers following a systematic search of PUBMED, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), COCHRANE , Embase, Medline and Psycinfo. The sample included five qualitative studies with a total sample size of 480 participants.

### **Results**

The meta-synthesis of the papers resulted in the development of four central themes: Gender Inequity, Popularity with peers, Relationship Context and Costs and Benefits.

### **Conclusion**

Drawing the qualitative work together highlights the manner in which 'sexting' is more nuanced than traditional 'cyber-bullying'. The consensual sending of intimate images is a highly gendered activity. The gender issues require work with female students to explore the issue of 'sexting' and how it can be harmful. Work with male students around the issues of respect and gender harassment in relation to 'sexting' is also required and should contribute to sex and relationships education. The results indicate that school nurses working

with young people need to build discussions about the use of technology within relationships into their work with young people.

**Keywords:** Sexting; Young people; School Nurses; Gender; Relationships; Popularity.

## **Research Question**

How do young people perceive, integrate and experience 'sexting' in their lives?

## **Background**

Today's young people are more consumed by the digital world than any other. The internet and mobile communication devices have revolutionised how young people engage with their peers (Agatston et al 2007; Walsh et al 2008, Kalogeraki & Marina 2010;). The popularity and portability of these devices means they are frequently used within the school environment. Often this technology is used in a positive manner; giving young people information at their fingertips and the ability to develop and conduct relationships and friendships through technology can be life enhancing (Livingstone 2008). These devices have also enabled young people to seek out factual information about sex and reproductive health (Whitfield et al 2013). However, in the arena of sexuality such technology can also have a negative aspect. The growth of the cyber-bullying phenomena – such as sexualised insults, name-calling and even the non-consensual distribution of sexual images via tablet or smart phone open up an area of concern for professionals working in the school setting (Agatston et al 2007; Smith et al 2008; Beckett & Schbotz 2014). A complicating factor is that often, the practice of sending and receiving sexually motivated messages or images is increasingly a consensual part of relationships between young people (Livingstone 2008; Kalogeraki & Marina 2010). Indeed, the practice has its own name; 'sexting'.

As key professionals working with young people and as important promoters of sexual health it is important that school nurses are aware of the extent and nuanced nature of sexting (Diliberto & Matthey 2009). This is a growing issue within school health and one that can place young people at risk – emotionally and physically (Leary 2008). The role technology plays in teen sexual relationships should be part of sex education and also

recognised within anti-bullying practice – both central areas of school nurse practice (Hayter et al 2012)

Most young people own a device capable of sending and receiving texts and the use of such devices is one of the main vehicles of peer to peer communication. This is especially true of intimate relationships where texting is used to initiate, arrange and conduct relationships – often regarded by the users as a safe, intimate and possibly secret method of communication (Coyne et al 2011). Hand held devices help to facilitate this by not requiring time at a computer or even in the home. Sexting is more nuanced than cyber-bullying. Often this behaviour is engaged in willingly by participants in a relationship, albeit often with differing levels of participation and also with different attached emotions (Weisskirch and Delevi, 2011). Sexting can enter the domain of cyber-bully in two key ways. One is when images are sent unsolicited to shock or embarrass and second when material shared consensually is used following a relationship breakdown in order to cause harm to the previous partner (Smith et al 2008; Kalogeraki & Marina 2010; Beckett & Schbotz 2014).

Around four percent of young people aged between 12 and 17 years admit sending sexually explicit messages or pictures via text messaging and 15% of the same age group say they have received such messages (Lenhart 2009). A common definition or the precise characteristic of sexting is unclear, with behaviours ranging from the sending of explicit written material, semi-nude images through to images of nudity and sexual activity. The literature often describes how this is entered into by young people as a means of attracting the attention of a potential partner, a means of flirtation or a way of testing out sexual propositions and experimentation (Ringrose et al 2013). Some have argued that sexting is another manifestation of gender and heterosexual power - perpetuating myths and stereotypes around sexuality (Bond 2011). It is also suggested that sexting can damage self-esteem and body image – especially among young females (Walker et al 2013; Lippman & Campbell,

2014). There is now a growing qualitative literature on how young people use and integrate this practice into their lives and also the impact this has on them. School nurses need to understand this aspect of their lives in order to inform their practice and develop strategies to address the potential harm that 'sexting' can create within the school environment and young people's lives.

This paper makes a contribution to that by reporting the findings of a review and meta-synthesis of the qualitative research into how young people perceive, integrate and experience 'sexting'; setting out the overarching elements of this aspect of young peoples' lives and exploring the implications for school nursing practice.

## **Design and Sample**

### **Meta –ethnography**

Meta –ethnographic synthesis is a process which allows a rigorous procedure for translating and developing substantive interpretations about a set of ethnographic, qualitative or interpretive studies similar to the process of meta-analysis in quantitative research (Noblit & Hare 1988; Atkins et al. 2008). Meta –ethnography, being firmly based within the interpretivist paradigm focuses on constructing translations and interpretations grounded in the everyday lives of people. Noblit and Hare (1988) identify how meta –ethnography goes beyond the analysis of single accounts to reveal the similarities between the accounts. It aims to preserve the ‘sense’ of the account through the selection of key metaphors or themes.

### **Analytic Strategy**

The seven phases of meta-ethnography are identified as getting started, deciding what is relevant to the initial interest, reading the studies, determining how the studies are related, translating the studies into one another, synthesising translations and expressing the synthesis. These phases have been followed in constructing this review (Noblit & Hare 1988). All studies that met the inclusion criteria were screened, evaluated and synthesised through comparison, interpretation and categorisation of themes. Table 1 shows this process and how these papers contributed to the synthesis.

Table 1

<i>Author</i>	<i>State aim/area of enquiry</i>	<i>Data Collection</i>	<i>Number and Characteristic of subjects</i>	<i>Recruitment</i>	<i>Main concepts/themes</i>	<i>Contribution to synthesis</i>
Lenhart (2009)	How and why minor teens are sending sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images via text messaging.	Nationally representative survey of those ages 12-17 conducted on landline and cell phones, 6 focus groups	52-12-18 year olds	3 cities in the US landline and cell phone	<b>Gender/peer influence</b> Exchange of images solely between two romantic partners. Exchanges between partners that are shared with others outside the relationship. <b>Cost</b> Threat for girls to reputation if images are shared. <b>Benefits</b> Sexting seen as a safer alternative to real life sexual activity.	Gender Popularity with peers Costs and benefits
Ringrose et al (2103)	Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange.	Qualitative approach Feminist Theory	35 Year 8 /10 focus group male & female	Secondary School	<b>Gender/ Peer influence</b> Girls felt pressured by boys to send sexual images of themselves. <b>Peer Influence</b> Boys have a different role in the process, boys need to have the guts to request an image seen as a positive by peers if they are able to get one. <b>Cost</b> Moral blame goes on the girl for taking/sending images. <b>Benefits</b> No blame is apportioned to the boy for asking.	Gender Popularity with peers Costs and benefits
Walker et al (2013)	Sexting: Young Women's and Men's Views on Its Nature and Origins	A qualitative methodology was used, involving face to face individual semi structured interviews	33 young people aged 15-20 years 15 males 18 females	Participants were sourced via youth health, recreational, and educational settings using purposive sampling	<b>Gender /Peer influence</b> Girls felt coerced, threatened, or bribed by boys to produce and send images. <b>Cost</b> Girls who allowed themselves to be pressured into sending images were responsible for their own loss of reputation according to other girls. Boys who refused to look at sexual images of girls were called "gay" and were ostracized by other boys.	Gender Popularity with peers



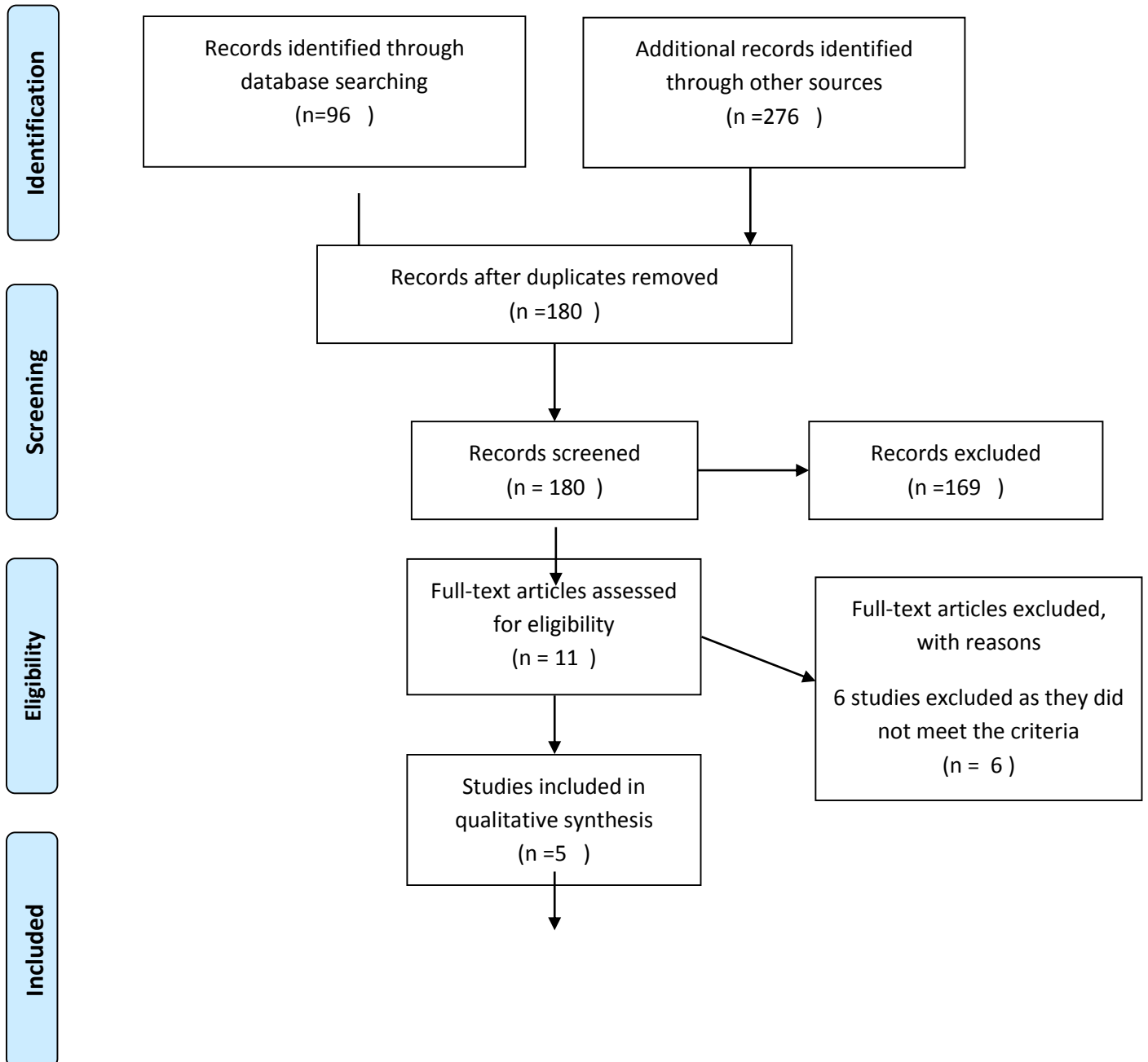
Albury & Crawford (2012)	Sexting, consent and young people's ethics : Beyond Megan's Story	Lit review commentary citing Megan's story (Crawford and Coggin)	330 18-30 years used sexting scenarios series. one to one interviews "Study Young mobile network" Parallels with Megan's story	Across 4 Australian states	<p><b>Gender/Peer influence</b> Some girls described the importance of their mobile phones in their relationships with boys. Boys and girls discuss the differing "context" of images depending on the nature of the relationship.</p> <p><b>Cost</b> If the relationships change the images may become public.</p> <p><b>Benefits</b> Sexting is not only used in the context of flirting but also used between friends as a joke or during a moment of bonding. It can be a constructive element in a relationship</p>	Relationship Context of sexting Costs and benefits
Bond (2011)	The Mobile phone = bike shed? Children , sex and mobile phones	Grounded theory approach based on social constructive perspective	Sample 30 YP 11-17 years 14 boys 16 girls Self-selecting focus groups 3-4 YP comfortable with each other	3 secondary schools	<p><b>Gender</b> Sexual images are sometimes used in developing sexual identity rather than shared in sexual relationships.</p> <p><b>Peer influence</b> Non – ownership of a mobile phone may lead to social exclusion.</p> <p><b>Benefits</b> A new space to develop and discover exploration and sharing of sexual material.</p> <p><b>Cost</b> Traditional boundaries of public and private become blurred making it difficult for young people to make considered choices about sexting.</p>	Relationship Context of sexting

Electronic databases searched for peer reviewed qualitative studies published in the English language were: PUBMED, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), EMBASE, COCHRANE database of Systematic Reviews, Medline and Psycinfo. The search included articles published up until the end of November 2015. The following search terms were used in a number of combinations using the Boolean operators “AND” and “OR”: sexting, qualitative, experiences young people\*, teen, youth, young person. Citations from the reference lists of previously gathered articles were also searched to ensure data would not be missed. Inclusion criteria for the review were qualitative research, published in English, peer reviewed, focusing on young people and excluding adults and described young people’s experience of sexting. No date restrictions were applied, however all studies are within the last 6 years. The initial search was undertaken independently by two authors; following removal of duplication 186 papers were identified, after screening titles and abstracts 11 articles were retrieved in full text; four authors independently assessed these. Six of these papers did not meet the inclusion criteria as the primary focus was not on sexting or were of low methodological quality. Five research papers met the inclusion criteria and were included in the analysis. The search process can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2



## PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram



## Results

The meta-synthesis of the five papers indicated a total sample size of 480 participants. Analysis resulted in the development of four central themes: *Gender Inequity, Popularity with peers, Relationship Context and Costs and Benefits.*

### Gender inequity

Gendered differences were most marked when it came to the exertions of pressure to engage in 'sexting'. Peer influence is highlighted specifically within Walker et al (2013), this appears to be in a negative context and is identified as of being of particular concern. This concept of peer pressure was strongly influenced by gender dynamics with girls feeling coerced, threatened or bribed by boys to produce and send images. "Most guys will get a girl to send them something with the promise that they'll send something back or they'll send something to them first to try and get the girl to warm up to it a little more." (Walker et al. 2013 p.700). Within the study both young women and young men highlight a double standard in sexting. "(Girls don't sext) unless they're very under the influence or too young or slutty to care."(Walker et al. 2013 p. 699) "If (sexting) happens with a guy, it's nothing. If it happens to a girl, there's a lot more stigma attached." (Walker et al. 2013 p. 699)

Similar to the findings of Walker et al. (2013) there was a fear that sexting could harm a person's reputation. Again this was strongly linked to gender with girls identifying this as an issue more than boys. This double standard is also evident in the study by Ringrose et al (2013) "For boys if they have sex with a girl, they are like, ooh they are sick, yeah" (Ringrose et al. 2013p315). "But if it is a girl then they are a sket, yeah." (Ringrose et al. 2013p315).

## **Popularity with peers**

This aspect was also gendered. Boys saw sexting as a way of impressing their peers. For instance, Ringrose et al. (2013) describe where sexting and negotiating images can be seen as an indicator of popularity, this seems to be more acceptable by young men though therefore perpetuating the double standards. “Say if I got a popular girl to do it that looks like one of those girls who wouldn’t do it then it would make me look even better”. (Ringrose et al. 2013 p313). “So you have got, like, thirty of them. So then do you go to your mates, ‘Look at this, I’ve got thirty pictures?’” (Ringrose et al. 2013 p313). Albury and Crawford (2012) also report this phenomenon amongst young men and their peers; it is viewed in a positive context.

In two studies young men identified that persuading a girl to send intimate images was a mark of respect amongst peers and earned recognition and reputation; “For example, say if I don’t think it’s okay but my mates say, “oh check [this out],” they’ve got all these images, I go in and say, “oh yeah that’s so cool.” (Walker et al. 2013 p699) “Say if I got a popular girl to do it that looks like one of those girls who wouldn’t do it then it would make me look even better.” (Ringrose et al. 2013p313). “They’ll be like oh look, look . . . what you are capable of doing, making a girl take a picture of her breasts and give it to you and stuff.” (Ringrose et al. 2013p316).

## **Relationship Context of sexting**

Sexting takes place in a range of fluid relationship contexts. Younger students, who are not yet sexually active, report the use of sexting as experimental and providing safer alternatives to face to face contact “Most people are too shy to have sex. Sexting is not as bad.” (Lenhart 2009 p8). For some students sexting, between two individuals, where there is a mutual exchange of intimate images for example, was seen as an acceptable part of a long

term or long distance relationship; students talk about sexting with a partner “Just between my girlfriend and I. Just my girlfriend sending pictures of herself to me and me sending pictures of myself to her” (Lenhart 2009 p6)

“I haven’t sent them to people recently but when I had a boyfriend I did. Especially like when he was in France we would, yeah, send sexy videos to each other all the time”. (Albury & Crawford 2012 p468). There is a feeling that trust is important as a context for sexting “: . . . if you are going to take naked pictures at least send it to someone whom you trust, not some random boyfriend that you have been going out for a week”. (Ringrose et al. 2013p315).

Sexting occurs outside long term relationships and is used by young people to identify and make contact with potential partners. This can range from flirting “I think it’s fairly common in my school for people to do this. They see it as a way of flirting that may possibly lead to more for them” (Lenhart 2009 p9). “Almost all the time it’s a single girl sending to a single guy, wrote a younger high school boy. Sometimes people trade pictures like ‘hey you send me a pic I’ll send you one” (Lenhart 2009 p7). “Interviewer: How does like all this sending of pictures and stuff relate to like having sex and doing stuff? Participant: Because if a girl sends a picture to you it means that probably she wants to meet up with you and stuff” (Ringrose et al. 2013 p317).

The fluidity of relationships during the dating process and ambiguity of flirting leaves young people, especially girls, vulnerable to exploitation. Boys may overtly threaten girls to produce images:

It is not a joke because boys get really serious because they just get really angry at the time and say, ‘Do it, there’s nothing to it. Oh you are pissing me off, I know where you live you know’ and they will try for it in any type of way even if they don’t even know you. (Ringrose et al. 2013 p318).

Or the process may be more subtle, so that one person may feel they are in a relationship and the other uses that to acquire, through coercion, sexting images. For example, girls may feel they will lose their chance with a boy if they do not respond to requests for sexts/images from the boy, coercive overtones. In addition, fluidity and ambiguity between the categories of ‘boyfriend’ and a boy they ‘really like’ is apparent

When I was about 14-15 years old, I received/sent these types of pictures. Boys usually ask for them or start that type of conversation. My boyfriend, or someone I really liked asked for them. And I felt like if I didn’t do it, they wouldn’t continue to talk to me. At the time, it was no big deal. But now looking back it was definitely inappropriate and over the line (Lenhart 2009 p8).

Finally, sexts may be sent as a joke amongst friends and family: “The first thing I did was get it and take a picture down my pants and then set it as a background, but that type of a thing’s more of a joke than the serious sexual type of thing.” (Albury & Crawford 2012 p468)

Or in error: “... he called her by accident – yeah – having a wank”. (Bond 2011 p597)

### **Costs and Benefits of sexting**

The data from across the studies shows how participants identified the benefits and the costs to themselves, their relationships and their peer group as a result of sexting activity. It revealed an activity that could have some positive impact, but also one that had the potential for significant negative impact – especially for girls.

## Costs

The data from across the studies showed that that sexting could threaten a relationship; “Sure, there was a video though and I’m pretty sure it was just him coming on her face and she wasn’t really impressed with it and then they broke up.” (Walker et al. 2013 p699.)

However, the most commonly cited potential cost of sexting was the risk of images being used to humiliate or blackmail after a relationship had already ended; “Then they do have a fight and then they break up or something and then he thinks, “well, she’s no good anymore and let’s embarrass her in the best way I can,” and sends it out.” (Walker et al. 2013 p699.)

Then they broke up and he sent them to his friend, who sent them to like everyone in my school. Then she was supposed to come to my school because she got kicked out of her school because it was a Catholic school....it ruined high school for her (Lenhart 2009 p7).

“Sometimes people will get into fights with their exs, and so they will send the nudes as blackmail, but it’s usually when or after you’ve been dating someone”. (Lenhart 2009 p7).

A girl was taking pictures of herself, revealing pictures shall I say? And sent them to her boyfriend – they like split up and he sent them to like everyone and everyone found out who it was and that and everyone knew so. (Bond 2011 p596.)

What is apparent from these data extracts is that they universally relate to the negative impact on young women, there were no data that suggested that the use of images after a relationship ended affected boys as equally as girls. Indeed, one participant remarked; “If



[sexting] happens with a guy, it's nothing. If it happens to a girl, there's a lot more stigma attached." (Walker et al. 2013 p699.)

### **Benefits**

Where young female participant's remarked on the benefits it was in the form of helping sustain a long distance relationship;

I've got a friend that is a model in London. Her boyfriend lives [overseas]. They Skype all the time and she tells me about it. That's okay because they're in a committed relationship and it's the both of them wanting to do it. (Walker et al. 2013 p699.)

"I haven't sent them to people recently but when I had a boyfriend I did. Especially like when he was in France we would, yeah, send sexy videos to each other all the time" (Albury and Crawford 2012 p468.)

An isolated but interesting benefit to sexting identified by one participant was that it possibly helped when young people were too embarrassed for any physical contact with partners; "I think it was more common in middle school, because kids are afraid to do face-to-face contact sexually. In high school, kids don't need the pictures. They'll just hang out with that person romantically." (Lenhart 2009 p6.)

## Discussion

Arising from this analysis is the central issue that sexting is a gendered social process. It is a process that is experienced differently by girls and boys, who play different roles, face differing pressures and consequences and therefore have access to differing costs and benefits. Indeed, gender differences are highlighted in all five studies— Lenhart (2009) suggests that boys and girls who are familiar with sexting have differing views and are concerned with the consequences of sexting and the pressure that sexting puts them under. This is supported by Walker et al (2013) who found gender differences between girls' and boys' understanding of sexting; boys saw sexting as a positive, a means to improve their status. Girls on the other hand viewed sexting as the destruction of their sexual standing or reputation. This consideration of risk varies with the changing relationship contexts within which sexts are sent and viewed (Doring 2014). Central here is the concern that gendered differences in the sexting experience reflect unequal power dynamics, those in individual and personal relationships being both shaped by and reproducing gendered power dynamics of wider society (Gill 2012).

Sexting is a social process; texts (and sexts) contribute to the formation of self-identity. Bond (2011) suggests that sexts are embedded with signs by the writer and the reader in light of particular contexts, experiences or wishes (Brewis 2005; Bond 2011). As a social process, sexting is also concerned with projecting a social identity, and is read by others, as an indicator of social popularity (Bond 2011). Ringrose et al (2013) suggest that “negotiating images contributes to a peer hierarchy where boys and girls stake out positions in the popularity ratings” (Ringrose et al. 2013, p313). This is evident in our analysis in relation to how boys develop a social identity; however, the relationship between taking part

in sexting and popularity is more complicated for girls as they face pressure to protect their reputation (Lenahrt 2009; Ringrose et al. 2013; Walker et al. 2013). Images of girls' bodies may be used to blame and shame girls within the social network (Ringrose et al. 2013) with familiar sexual double standards, both boys and girls described girls who sent images as 'skets' who lacked self-respect. At the same time, and related to this, the process of sexting helps build specific forms of masculinity and promote particular types of masculine identities. Ringrose et al. (2013) relate the process of acquiring and showing images in a relationship not only to wider gendered (sexist) structures but also to the process of male identity formation. The sexting process is used to signal to other boys (and wider peer group) their masculinity through their levels of power to acquire images and having, and exercising, the power over decisions about distribution without sanction reflects wider sexist power structures.

'Sexting' as a social process is evident beyond individual relationships; and the data clearly shows that sexting is not a gender-neutral activity, but is influenced by gender dynamics, (Walker et al. 2013) and the micro-context within which sexts are sent and received are shaped by the wider social context (Ringrose et al. 2013). Bond (2011) warns of potential dangers related to sexting images; although shared in a relationship (private), when the context changes, images may be shared (by boy) with others. This exposes the unequal power relationship between genders where the boy is able to make the private public without permission, redress or blame. Such sexting processes contributes to young males' perception that they have the power to acquire and distribute sexual images of girls with impunity reinforcing messages that men have control over women in sexual relationships (Ringrose et al. 2013). This is supported by Walker et al. (2013) and relates to Lenhart's (2009) work, acknowledging that many young people involved in sexting do it under pressure particularly girls, and that behaviours were shaped by gender dynamic as girls felt pressured by boys to

produce and send images, in extreme cases sexual images of girls were used as a form of blackmail or revenge. Ringrose et al. (2013 p319) suggest that these differential experience is 'legitimised through moral sexual double standards and performances'; 'most problematic for young people are the pernicious and persistent discourses of gender inequity and sexual double standards around teen girls' and also adult women's sexuality and bodies (Tolman 2012). This sexual double standard is clearly evident in the data and is overtly expressed by some participants.

Not only social, but potentially physical dangers are faced by girls as a result of sexting. Lenhart (2009) also found that some young people see sexting as a safe medium for flirting and sexting can be used by young people as a safer alternative to real life sexual activity. This is supported by Ringrose et al. (2013) who refer to the new norms of digital flirtation which may or not to be coercive. Albury & Crawford (2012) identify a range of positives regarding sexting. They acknowledged the need for safeguarding, but their findings suggest that sexting contributed to positive romantic relationships. Lenhart's (2009) third concept is romantic sexting, which is for those who are in a romantic relationship. This type of sexting is seen as an acceptable transition in a relationship. Although Lenhart (2009) does not draw out differences between gender in her final analysis, she discusses the pressure on girls to share sexualised images and the potential for these images to be forwarded or used in an argument. Walker et al. (2013) suggest that media technologies, including social networking sites, are new modes used to impose gendered sexual violence on women, and that this violence represents an increasingly "subtle systematic form of sexual harassment, pressure and coercion" (Powell 2010 p700). There is some agreement here with Ringrose et al's (2013) power analysis- again an element evident in the data.

The analysis of the data suggests that the same problems of unequal power relations are faced by women but that sexting represents a new method of achieving and maintaining

the status quo. Sexting represents ‘new norms of digital flirtation, which may or may not be coercive’ (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Gill 2012; Ringrose et al. 2013).

Such sexting behaviours, however, are complex and not universal or fixed by nature—many boys saw this behaviour as derogatory and felt loyalty to their girl (mates), and some boys who had sent sexual images to others reported that they regretted sending images without the girls consent. Bond (2011) describes the behaviour of boy’s sexting habits and introduces the notion of “boys talk”—this includes discussing sexual encounters with girls, but does not include images of a sexual encounter; Bond (2011) argues this demonstrates a degree of etiquette on behalf of the boys and is an attempt to address social norms in mobile phone use. Girls attitudes to girls who send sexual images of themselves to boys varies as Ringrose et al. (2013) revealed that girls felt sympathy for girls who had sent sexual images of themselves to boys and concluded that they must have felt pressured to do so. Walker et al. (2013) held a different view and found that girls were unfeeling to girls who had lost their reputation due to sexting and blamed the girl for not judging the situation correctly. They perceived the boys behaviours as to be expected and apportioned no blame to the boys.

It is important to acknowledge these factors; otherwise it becomes the victim’s fault. Overt discussion of these covert power dynamics and associated processes and practices would begin to address these issues. In addition, it is apparent that education about sexting and safe sexting need to be set in the context of respectful relationships.

## **Implications for School Nursing Practice**

This study has shown that the collective qualitative research into this area highlights 'sexting' as a significant and growing phenomenon in the lives of young peoples. It's often consensual nature – at least initially – separates it from traditional 'cyber-bullying'. However this does not mean it is innocent or without risk, it is clear that there is a potential for young people to experience serious consequences that can be devastating from this practice (Diliberto & Matthey 2009, Bond 2011, Gill 2012, Ringstone et al. 2013, Walker et al 2013). School nurses within their role are often in a position to support and educate young people who are at risk or partake in high risk activities through their 'drop in sessions' or clinics held within school. There are legal consequences associated with transmitting and receiving sexually explicit images of young people under the age of 18 and there is evidence to suggest the threat of legal or punitive measures alone is not sufficient to address this issue, as is seen in other risk taking behaviours (Leather, 2009).

Whilst it is important for school nurses to reinforce the legal aspect there is also a responsibility for them to not just focus on the potential punishment but to ensure that young people who continue to partake in this behaviour minimise the risk of harm associated with sexting. School nurses working with young people need to build discussions about the use of technology within their relationships into their work with young people. Sex and relationship education needs to be developed to include sexting and the use of social media, young people need to be aware of how images can spread and once in cyberspace their control over these images is lost (Diliberto & Matthey, 2009). Adopting strategies similar to Megan's story (Albury and Crawford, 2012) may be useful to highlight the lack of control individuals have on their images once in cyberspace and how quickly they can be disseminated. This strategy

has been used on Twitter and Facebook by parents and teachers to highlight to young people how quickly messages can spread.

Furthermore, the gender issues require work with young women to explore the issue of 'sexting' and how it can be harmful or coercive, scenarios and discussions can be used to explore and raise awareness amongst young people, work to develop self –efficacy with young people in order for them to feel empowered and in control of their own body. Similar work with young men around the issues of respect and gender harassment in relation to 'sexting' would also be a useful contribution to sex and relationships education.

In addition, school nurses involved in bullying cases should be aware of this technological dimension and actively ask questions to elicit any sexualised harassment. As school nurses are often seen as professional confidantes by students they are also ideally placed to provide an authoritative contribution to school policy on the use of mobile devices and the development of school policy on messaging between students.

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