Sexting and Young People:  
A qualitative study

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Abstract

This study is one of the first Australian studies to describe the phenomenon of sexting from the perspective of young people. ‘Sexting’, which involves the production and distribution of sexually explicit images via information and communication technologies (ICTs) has led to young people being excluded from friendship groups, moving schools, suffering anxiety and depression, and in extreme cases being charged with the production and distribution of child pornography. There is an absence of published studies undertaken in this area, particularly from an Australian perspective and from the point of view of young people themselves. My study addresses this gap by exploring the meaning of sexting in young people’s lives. It focuses in particular on the nature of sexting, the reasons why young people are involved in the behaviour and potential solutions for addressing harmful consequences.

A qualitative methodology involving two phases was used. The first phase involved a focus group and individual interviews with twelve key informant professionals to develop a context that would inform the second phase, which involved individual semi-structured interviews with 33 young people aged 15-20 years (female [n=18]; male [n=15]). Young people were sourced via youth health, recreational and educational settings using purposive snowball sampling. Results were thematically analysed using a grounded theory approach.

Key informant findings helped frame interviews with young people, and affirmed that young people’s voices needed to be heard. Many of the views of key informants were also reflected in the views of young people.

Findings exposed a number of themes, including in particular, the gendered nature of the behavior. Of particular concern is that young women feel pressured by young men, who feel pressured by each other to be involved in the behaviour; young people observed that our sexualised media culture places pressure on young women and men to conform to gendered stereotypes that influence the behavior of sexting. Conversations with young people highlighted complexities of the phenomenon not revealed previously, including that definitions used in prevalence studies need to represent changes in young peoples use of ICTs. Young people’s views on solutions highlight that education about the implications of sexting is not the only answer, especially given young people’s views on the origins of sexting and what is
known about young people and risk taking from a developmental perspective. Both young women and men were concerned about the potential harmful outcomes for those involved in the behavior, with recognition that young people should be involved in the design of solutions. Findings present important implications for future prevention approaches.
Declaration of originality

This is to certify that:

• This thesis comprises only my original work towards the Master of Primary Health Care (research);
• Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other materials used;
• The thesis is approximately 36,647 words in length, exclusive of tables, references and appendices

Signed

__________________________________ (Shelley Walker)

__________________________________ (Date)
Acknowledgements

Undertaking this research project and writing the thesis has been one of the most rewarding experiences in my working career.

I would like to acknowledge the financial support of two Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development (PHCRED) Fellowships funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

First and foremost I would like to thank the young people who so generously gave their time and commitment to participate in individual interviews. Without their involvement, the research could not have been completed. I am extremely grateful for their openness, enthusiasm and willingness to share – especially given the sensitivity and confronting nature of some of the issues discussed. My strongest hope is that the stories, views and insights they have shared (which are at the heart of this research), will contribute to making a difference in the lives of other young people.

I would like to thank the key informants who participated in focus groups and interviews for their valuable insights and contributions. In particular I would like to thank Anastasia Powell, Gina Carroll, Jenny Walsh, Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, Maree Crabbe, Michael Carr-Gregg, Michelle Blanchard, Nicole Lee, Robyn Treyvaud, Scott Henderson and Sophie Reid.

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Discovering the joy of research happened for me in my Health Promotion role at Knox Community Health Service (KCHS), under the guidance and support of Annette Rudd. I would like to thank Annette for encouraging me to apply for a research fellowship in 2008, which gave me the knowledge and skills to embark on this journey. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Health Promotion team at KCHS for their ongoing interest and curiosity about
my research. In particular I’d like to thank Belinda Crockett and again Annette Rudd, who have both provided ongoing inspiration, support, guidance and encouragement when I’ve needed it.

I would like to thank the many staff and students in the Primary Care Research Unit of the Department of General Practice at the University of Melbourne, who were supportive and showed an interest in my research. There are too many to mention everyone individually, however I would like to acknowledge in particular Anita, Hagan, Susan and Cathy (all PhD students, who took me under their wings, and boosted my confidence as a researcher), and Helen, Val, Virginia and Vanessa (who supported my administrative needs). I would also like to thank Roger Hurcombe, who led our Thesis Writing Circle in the Department of General Practice, for sharing his wisdom and infectious passion for writing; I learnt so many valuable lessons about thesis writing.

Finally I’d like to express my greatest gratitude to my family, including my partner Lance, who has always supported and encouraged my professional endeavors. He gave me the time and space to think and work, and supported me through the many challenges, including trips away to present at conferences, coping with my new role in radio interviewing, dealing with the move to Apple Mac technology, allowing me to opt out of family life for weekends away to get the last of the thesis complete when the end was in sight, and just basically being my soundboard and support when I needed it. And last, but certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge and thank my two gorgeous boys Darcy and Finn, who wished I wasn’t ‘on the computer all the time’, but managed to accept this as a given. It is they who motivate me to continue working at making the world a better place for young people.
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Acronyms and glossary

PSEUDONYMS FOR QUOTES

- Key informant participants are referred to by number (for example Participant 7 = P7)
- Young people are referred to using a pseudonym or number (for example Solarflare or G5, where G stands for girl).

TERMS TO REPRESENT PARTICIPANTS

I have deliberately chosen to define those involved in my study as ‘young people’, in part because the age range of participants crosses a wide spectrum from teen or adolescent (15-19 years) through to early adult (18-20 years). Furthermore, I use the term ‘young people’ to remind us that teenagers and young adults are people and that traditional boundaries are blurry between childhood and adulthood (Weber and Dixon 2010). Most young people who participated in this study used the terms ‘girl/s’ or ‘boy/s’ to describe young people, thus, these terms are used in this thesis when referring to participants’ views of other young people.

- Participants of this study = young people, young women or young men
- Young people referred to by participants = girl/s or boy/s

DEFINITIONS

For the purpose of this thesis the term ‘sexting’ is defined as the production and distribution of sexually explicit images (SEIs) via information and communication technologies (ICTs). See table 2 for a summary of definitions relating to sexting. Table 1 provides a more detailed description of terms and acronyms used in this thesis in relation to sexting. Table 2 provides the meaning of other acronyms used throughout the thesis.
Table 1: My definitions relating to sexting used throughout thesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexting</th>
<th>Production and distribution of SEIs via ICTs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEIs</td>
<td>Sexually explicit images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributed</td>
<td>Sent, showed or posted online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images</td>
<td>Photos and/or videos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Terms and acronyms relating to sexting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and communication technology</td>
<td>Technological tools and resources used to communicate, produce, store, manage and disseminate (includes mobile phones, computers, iPads, iPods, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNS</td>
<td>Social networking sites</td>
<td>A website that enables users to create public profiles on that site, and then communicate and develop relationships with other users from the same website (includes chat rooms, online discussion forums, websites or any other online social space)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSN</td>
<td>The Microsoft Network</td>
<td>A collection of Internet sites and services provided by Microsoft (e.g. Hotmail and Messenger)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMS</td>
<td>Short message service</td>
<td>A text messaging service</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

Recognition of the research reported in this thesis has been received via journal publication, oral and poster presentations, media interviews, a Fellowship award and an invitation from the Victorian Law Reform Committee to write a submission for the 2012 Parliamentary Inquiry into Sexting. Details of each of these are provided below.

PUBLICATIONS


PRESENTATIONS


AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Invitation from Victorian Law Reform Committee to write submission for 2012 Parliamentary Inquiry into Sexting.

Primary Health Care, Research, Evaluation & Development (PHCRED) Fellowship, 2011

MEDIA INTERVIEWS


ABC Drive Newcastle, 5 October 2011. Interview with Garth Russell.

ABC Drive Melbourne, 3 October 2011. Interview with Sally Warhaft.

ABC Drive Hobart, 3 October 2011. Interview with Louise Saunders.

Triple JJJ Australia, 30 September 2011. Interview with Elize Strydom.

Agency France Media. Interview 30 September 2011.

Herald Sun Sydney. Interview with Nicole Hasler, 30 September 2011.
Scope of research

As highlighted in chapter 2, when I first embarked on the journey of researching the phenomenon of sexting amongst young people in 2008, very few academic studies had been conducted and very little academic literature was available on the topic. During the course of this research, however, a growing body of literature has been emerging, thus it was important to create a cut-off point for sourcing new literature for this thesis. Thus, no literature was sourced beyond December 2011, excluding one journal article by Mitchell, Finkhelhour, Jones and Wolak (2012).
1. Introduction

In 2008, the Australian Online Macquarie Dictionary added the word ‘sexting’ to its repertoire of 85 new words, indicating the word had been used for at least 5 years and was likely to be a permanent word in the English language (Macquarie Dictionary 2008). This event indicated that the phenomenon was well established and ‘increasingly a part of popular culture’ (Gaylord Forbes 2011). The term was described as the ‘sending and receiving of sexually explicit images via mobile phone’ (Australian Macquarie Dictionary 2008). It was at this time in 2008, whilst based at Knox Community Health Service (KCHS) in the City of Knox in outer eastern metropolitan Melbourne, that I first became alerted to the issue of sexting. The City of Knox is located approximately 25 kilometers east of the Melbourne Central Business District. It covers an area of 114 square kilometers, and has an estimated population of 145,299, with approximately 10% of its population aged 15-20. In 2006 Knox had an index of disadvantage score of 1050, ranking 69th (on a scale of best to worst) of all 79 local government areas in Victoria. Most Knox residents originate from English speaking countries, with 75% born in Australia, and 17% born of parents of a non-English speaking background (ABS 2006, Census of Population and Housing).

At a youth service provider forum to present findings and launch recommendations of a local needs study, concerns were raised for the safety and wellbeing of Knox young people in relation to sexting. At this time levels of mobile phone ownership amongst young people were growing, as was the ability to send images via mobile phone. Many working in the Knox youth health sector, including secondary school principals, youth workers and police, were alarmed by increasing reports of sexually explicit photos and video clips being circulated amongst and by young people. Three issues were of particular concern. Firstly, images of young women were reportedly being distributed without their consent; secondly, where an image was of a minor under 18 years engaged in sexual activity or depicted in an indecent way, young people were allegedly being charged under the Crimes Act [67A] (1958) with the production and distribution of child pornography. Finally young people were reported to be willingly distributing images of themselves, unaware of the consequences.
In response to this widespread community concern, and reports of young people suffering serious social, emotional and legal consequences as a result of sexting, I successfully applied for funding* to further develop my research skills, so that I could explore the phenomenon locally. Subsequently I enrolled in a Research Higher Degree (Master in Primary Health Care) to investigate the phenomenon more comprehensively.

1.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Although literature about sexting and young people has been growing rapidly since undertaking this research, there has been little academic study of the phenomenon, particularly from an Australian perspective, and from the point of young people themselves. Many debates about sexting appear to focus on young people as the problem (Powell 2010), and name the behaviour as risky or dangerous, without acknowledging the broader context within which young people’s lives are lived. The phenomenon of sexting has received much scrutiny from adults, including those working in schools, parents, the media and researchers. Many assumptions have been made about the behaviour among young people, with some of these notions having fuelled a ‘moral panic’ (Cohen 2005) that is neither helpful nor representative of young people’s experiences or understanding of the phenomenon.

Adult opinions do not necessarily mirror the views of young people, as young people are often excluded from the social processes through which knowledge about them is collected (Best 2007). Not unlike many others who choose to do youth research; I wanted to reveal the truth about the ways in which their lives are often popularly misrepresented (Heath, Brooks, Cleaver & Ireland 2009). My study is an attempt to right this balance by capturing their views as their voices had been missing from the discussion and debate about sexting; thus, I was particularly interested in uncovering the meaning of the phenomenon from their point of view.

1.2 AIM OF STUDY

The aim of this study is to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of sexting from the perspective of Australian young people; to inform future prevention strategies regarding sexting and young people. The study focuses on the following areas in particular:

- The nature of sexting (definitions, descriptions of the behaviour, who is involved and their roles)
• The reasons why young people are involved in sexting
• The implications of sexting and what we should do about this if anything

1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the recognition that each young person is unique, but that all young people are shaped by developmental factors (including the biological and psychosocial changes of puberty), culture and gender. Young people need to be understood within a framework that acknowledges the key developmental tasks of adolescence – identity, autonomy, intimacy and sexuality – and the biological, cognitive and social changes that influence them (Hill 1983; Subrahmanyan & Greenfield 2008; Steinberg 2008).

This study also recognises the co-construction model, which was first proposed in 1984, (Subrahmanyan, Greenfield & Tynes 2004) in recognition that the adolescent physical, social and digital worlds are intertwined and interconnected. Within this framework, the digital world is considered another social context for adolescent development, along with family, peers and school. Therefore, the digital world is considered a playing ground for important issues in young people’s offline lives, including the developmental tasks of sexuality, identity, intimacy and interpersonal connection (Subrahmanyan & Smahel 2011). This perspective is in contrast to views that the Internet allows young people to present their online selves in a way that is separate from their offline worlds (Byam 1995).

This study also sits within a post-modern feminist framework, based on an understanding that gender is socially constructed, and influences how we feel, act and relate to one another (Kenny 1994; Summers 1994). Unlike other feminisms, the more recent post-modern perspective is focused on celebrating difference and diversity, believing all women should be free to choose their own female selves; and that there is no correct feminism (Butler 1990; Young 1990; Lorde 1984). From this viewpoint, I am not as interested in comparing young women and young men, as asking questions about the impact of gender on their feelings, behaviour and relationships (Raech Anleu 1995), in relationship to sexting.

Finally, this study is based on a view that young people have critical and unique perspectives on their lives, which are invaluable to our understanding of them (ARACY & NSW CCYP 2008). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC 1989) provides an important document for promoting the rights of young people to be involved in research.
about issues that affect them (Thomas and O’Kane 1998; Corsaro 2005). As sociologists and children’s rights advocates have agreed, young people need to be considered autonomous social actors and agents in their own lives (Christensen & Prout 2001), and thus should have the opportunity to have their voices heard.

1.4 Outline of Study

A qualitative design was used for this study, which was conducted in two phases. Given so little literature was available about sexting and young people, it was an important early step to develop a local context for the study, which would identify topics for exploration with young people.

Phase one (experts’ views) involved data collection via focus group and individual interviews with twelve key informant professionals from the youth health, education, cyber-safety and academic sectors.

Phase two (young people’s voice) aimed to address a gap in available literature about the phenomenon of sexting from the perspective of Australian young people. This phase involved individual interviews with 33 young people (male [n=15]; female [n=18]) aged 15–20 years, who were sourced via youth health, recreational and educational settings, and via snowball sampling. See table 3 for an overview of each phase of the research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Aim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1: Experts views’</td>
<td>To develop a contextual framework for interviews with young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2: Young people’s voice</td>
<td>To develop an understanding of the phenomenon of sexting from the perspective of young people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.5 Overview of Thesis

Chapter 2 provides background information about sexting and young people found in the literature, including an historical perspective, the nature of the behaviour, potential origins and prevalence. The literature highlights a gap in empirical peer reviewed studies regarding the phenomenon, and a lack of Australian literature. Chapter 3 describes the methods used
and their rationale for gathering data from key informants and young people. Ethical
considerations relating to the involvement of minors is also discussed. Chapter 4 reports on
findings of key informant individual and focus group interviews; highlighted is the complexity
of the phenomenon, the polarised views on aspects of sexting, and the importance of research
to capture the voice of young people. Chapter 5 provides results of individual interviews with
young people. Attention is drawn to a range of themes, including a view that young people
experience pressure to be involved in sexting, that a highly sexualised culture influences their
behaviour and that educative responses are not necessarily the only answer. Chapter 6
provides an analysis of the data, including new findings about the phenomenon of sexting
amongst young people, and the potential implications of these findings. Finally, conclusions
are drawn in chapter 7.
2. Background

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of literature sourced for this study, including many unpublished prevalence studies, discussion papers and other important grey literature. A description of the strategy used to search for literature, followed by an outline of the historical background of sexting and how sexting is described in the literature is provided. Views and findings in the literature in relation to the origins of sexting amongst young people are discussed, with a focus on pressure and sexual violence, young people in the new millennium, adolescence as a developmental stage, and the influence of a hyper-sexualised culture. An examination of prevalence data sourced is given, followed by a discussion of the legal issues in relation to sexting, and current policy and practice responses to the issue. Finally this chapter concludes by pointing to gaps in knowledge about sexting and young people, including recommendations for responding to a lack of reliable evidence about the true nature of the phenomenon.

2.2 Search Strategy

An on-line search of ten academic databases (Psychology and Behaviour Sciences, Medline, PsycINFO, Web of Science, PubMed, CINAHL PLUS, Academic Search Premier, Expanded Academic ASAP, JSTOR and Google Scholar) was undertaken via the University of Melbourne search engine (SuperSearch), at the beginning of the project, and then regularly at between three and six monthly intervals. Hand searching through the reference lists of valuable articles was also undertaken. As previously mentioned, excluding one study (Mitchell, Finkhelhour, Jones & Wolak 2012), no literature was sourced for this thesis beyond December 2011.

In response to a lack of available published literature, the only papers excluded were those not focused on young people, and non-English language papers. Furthermore, given the relative newness of the phenomenon, there was no need to exclude papers beyond a certain date – the earliest literature sourced for this study was authored in 2005. (See appendix 1 for search dates and search terms used.)
2.3 Overview of Literature Sourced

Very little scientifically sound literature about sexting and young people was found. Given this lack of published empirical data, grey literature was an important source of information for this study. Only two papers of published primary studies were sourced, excluding my own paper Sexting and young people: Experts’ views, describing the results of the first phase of this project (see appendix 17). Eleven additional unpublished surveys and studies were sourced; five were Australian, one was from the UK, and those remaining, were from the US. In total, 33 discussion papers were sourced about sexting and young people, the first of these was published in 2007. Only a handful was cited in peer review journals; four were from an Australian perspective, and the remaining papers were from a North American point of view. At least half of the discussion papers were sourced from US Law Review Journals, with others appearing in health, sexual violence prevention and education reviews, journals or newsletters.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author / Organisation</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Sample no.</th>
<th>Sample age</th>
<th>Study type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risks and safety for Australian children on the internet</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>ACE Centre for Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation</td>
<td>Aust.</td>
<td>400 y. people</td>
<td>14-16 years</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crimes Against Children Research</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Christopher Ferguson</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>1560 y. people</td>
<td>10-17 years</td>
<td>Quantitative (Published)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>clearsight</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>207 y. women</td>
<td>16-25 years</td>
<td>Quantitative (Published)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Communications, National Centre for Missing &amp; Exploited Children</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Co-Communications, National Centre for Missing &amp; Exploited Children</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>1,355 y. people</td>
<td>14-24 years</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Thin Line: Digital Abuse Study</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>PEW Internet &amp; American Life Project</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>655 y. people</td>
<td>13-18 years</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Thin Line: Digital Abuse Study</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>American Music TV</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>1,247 y. people</td>
<td>12-18 years</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Thin Line: Digital Abuse Study</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>BoysTown</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>548 y. people</td>
<td>Under 25</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on the First International Teen &amp; Sexting Study</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>South West Grid for Learning Trust</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>535 students</td>
<td>13-18 years</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CyberCulture Survey</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Independent Schools Victoria</td>
<td>Aust.</td>
<td>4,770 y. people</td>
<td>14-18 years</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriend Magazine</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Girlfriend Magazine</td>
<td>Aust.</td>
<td>588 y. people</td>
<td>Unreported</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.4 THE HISTORY OF SEXTING

The word sexting was reportedly first used to describe the transmission of sexually related images via mobile phone in Australia in 2005 in an Australian newspaper, The Daily Telegraph, published in Sydney (Carty 2011). Two years later in 2007, the first market research on sexting was conducted, in an attempt to determine prevalence amongst young people. The Australian GirlFriend magazine poll, which involved 588 teenage girls aged 13-16, revealed 40% of young women who participated in the survey had been asked to send a naked or semi-naked image of themselves over the Internet (Battersby 2008; Adams 2009). This figure was cited in media outlets worldwide, however the original report of this study was unable to be sourced, despite contacting the editor of the magazine.

In May 2008 the following year, an 18-year-old girl from Cincinnati, in the US, Jesse Logan, reportedly sent nude pictures of herself to her boyfriend. When they broke up he forwarded the photos, which were circulated amongst school classmates and friends. She was harassed and called names, and then appeared on US television to tell her story and warn other young people of the potential consequences of the behaviour. Two months later she hanged herself. (Barkacs & Barkacs 2010; Ryan 2010; Muscari 2009; Chalfen 2009; Bowker 2010). This story caught the attention of the media in the US, and around the world, including Australia.

The US National Campaign to Prevent Teenage Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com (a popular young women’s magazine in the US) released results of their consumer survey, Sex and Tech (2008), a few months later, reporting 19% of 13-19 year olds (22% girls; 18% boys) had sent a nude or semi-nude picture or video to someone else via cell phone or the Internet. A plethora of media reports and many discussion papers in peer-reviewed journals cited the results of this survey, with many quoting ‘one in five’ young people had been involved in sexting. The statistic created alarm for schools, parents and children’s rights groups (Funnell 2009) in the US, the UK and here in Australia, and sexting became a buzzword worldwide.

Later in 2008, another sexting case in the US received a great deal of media coverage, sparking the beginning of a debate over whether it is appropriate to punish teenagers who engage in sexting through the criminal justice system (Wastler 2010). The case involved three young women at a school in Pennsylvania, who had taken nude and semi-nude pictures of themselves and texted them to their three male classmates. School district officials turned the phones over to the local District Attorney (Ostrager 2010; Wastler 2010; Eraker 2010), who
subsequently notified the parents of twenty students who appeared in or had stored the photos on their phones. Students were given the choice of participating in a diversionary program or facing prosecution for distributing child pornography and criminal use of a communication device. The Attorney’s decision brought to public attention the issues of punishing and prosecuting in relation to the transmission of sexually explicit images among minors (Carty 2011). A serious debate has continued about the appropriateness of criminally charging teenagers engaged in sexting, with several discussion papers from the US and Australia exploring this issue (Barry 2010; Taylor 2009; Santelli 2007; Rommelmann 2009; Richards & Calvert 2009; Ostrager 2010; Justice Policy Institute 2009; Chalfen 2009).

2.5 HOW SEXTING IS DESCRIBED IN THE LITERATURE

2.5.1 Definitions and descriptions of sexting

No single definition is used to describe sexting in the literature. Consequently, across the studies and discussion papers cited in my literature review, sexting is defined and described in a range of different ways. A number of definitions suggest sexting involves images as well as messages; some definitions involve the transfer of these images or messages via mobile phone only, whereas others include all modes of ICTs. See table 4 for examples of definitions sourced in the literature. See table 5 for a summary of sexting definitions sourced in the literature.

Some authors have developed descriptions of the different aspects of sexting they believe are at play. Ryan (2010) discusses the four different roles of young people involved in sexting: 1) the subject of the photo, 2) the person who took the photo, 3) the distributors of the photo, and 4) the recipients of the photo. She refers to primary sexting when the subject of the photo also distributes it, and secondary sexting when another person distributes the image to others (Ryan 2010). Conversely, Shah (2010) simply describes the roles involved in sexting as ‘victim, receiver, forwarder and saver’.
Table 5: Examples of sexting definitions in the literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author &amp; Title of Paper/Study</th>
<th>Definition of sexting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muscari (2009), Sexting: New Technology, Old Problem</td>
<td>The sending of sexually charged messages or images via cell phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenhart (2009), Teens and Sexting</td>
<td>[Sent or received] sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo or video... using your cell phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety (2011), Are you safe? Survey</td>
<td>Posted nude or semi-nude photos to others via text message or email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmo.Girl (2008), Sex &amp; Tech Survey</td>
<td>Sent, or posted online, nude or semi-nude pictures or video of themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crimes Against Children Research Center, Prevalence &amp; Characteristics of Youth Sexting: A National Study</td>
<td>Receiving, forwarding posting or appearing in ‘nude or nearly nude’ photos or videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eraker (2010), Stemming Sexting</td>
<td>The self-production and distribution by cell phone of SEIs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phippen (2009), Sexting Survey</td>
<td>Sharing of explicit images/electronically intimate pictures/videos with a boyfriend/girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP-MTV (2009 &amp; 2011), A Thin Line Digital Abuse Study</td>
<td>Sending or forwarding nude, sexually suggestive, or explicit pics on your cell or online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox Communications (2009), Teen Online &amp; Wireless Safety Survey</td>
<td>Sending sexually suggestive text messages or emails with nude or nearly-nude photos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhang (2010), Charging children with child porn - Using legal system to handle problem of “sexting”</td>
<td>Use of mobile phones with built-in cameras to produce and distribute images of oneself in a sexually provocative or revealing position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Svantesson (2011), ‘Sexting’ and the Law</td>
<td>Electronic communication of non-professional images or videos portraying one or more persons in a state of nudity or otherwise in a sexual manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chalfen (2009), ‘It’s only a picture’: sexting, ‘smutty’ snapshots and felony charges</td>
<td>Homemade pornographic images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferguson (2010), Sexting Behaviors Among Young Hispanic Women</td>
<td>Sent erotic or nude photo (of themselves) to another person and received nude/erotic photographs from another person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGrath (2009), Young People &amp; Technology: A review of the current literature</td>
<td>Child pornography – uploading a photo of someone under-age who is naked or (if under-age) taking a photo of oneself naked and uploading it to a website</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In describing a proposed legal response to sexting for young people, Ostrager (2010) developed a 3-tiered model; tier 1 involves young people who sext a picture to one person or possess one picture but do not disseminate; tier 2 involves ‘mass sexters’ who send or forward the picture to up to ten people, or ‘repeat sexters’ who send or forward the image to up a total
of five people in one month; finally, Ostrager (2010) describes Tier 3 involving young people who send a mass sext to eleven or more people at different times within one month. In contrast, SzyMialis (2010) suggests sexting generally occurs in three situations, firstly between partners in relationships, secondly where images from this relationship are distributed to a third party, and finally the exchange of images in the hope of commencing a relationship.

Muscari (2009) argues there are differences often not recognised between sexting, cyberbullying, harassment and sexual offending:

A 16-year old sending a nude photo of herself to her boyfriend is sexting; mean girls secretly taking and sending photos of a peer undressing in a locker room is cyberbullying; a vindictive 15-year-old sending nude photos of his 15-year-old ex-boyfriend to the class ... without the boyfriends knowledge is harassment; and a 17-year-old downloading and collecting photos of nude 13-year-olds is a sex offender (Muscari 2009, p. 4).

2.5.2 Media reporting of sexting

A considerable amount of attention has been given to the topic of sexting and young people in the media. A pattern of increased reporting about the phenomenon appears to occur after results of a new survey or study have been released. Much reporting has focused on creating alarm and panic (Boucek 2009; Rommelmann 2009; Santelli 2009), while other media reporting has downplayed the negative consequences (AFP 2009; Funnell 2009; Bowker 2010).

2.5.3 Studies exploring young people’s views on sexting

Only three studies gathered information about young people’s views on sexting. The Teen Online and Wireless Safety Survey (Cox Communications 2009), a US study of the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, involving 655 young people aged 13-18 years, showed most teens thought sexting was wrong, including those who had engaged in the behaviour; nearly all thought it was dangerous, and about half believed adults over-react. On the other hand a study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, Teens and Sexting (Lenhart 2009), which involved 800 young people aged 12-18 years, and has been cited in much literature, reported a mixture of views expressed by young people; some thought it was a major issue, others thought it was inappropriate, damaging or illegal, and others viewed it as an alternative to real life sexual activity. In both 2009 and 2011, MTV partnered with Associated Press in the US, and conducted a survey that sought information about sexting

SEXTING AND YOUNG PEOPLE
amongst other technology use issues amongst young people. The 2009 study (AP-MTV 2009) was the only study sourced that reported differences in attitudes to sexting across gender; young men were less concerned about the phenomenon than young women.

2.6 LITERATURE ON THE ORIGINS OF SEXTING

Very little reliable data was sourced about the potential origins of sexting amongst young people, however a number of expert opinion papers have focused on the issue. Participants of only four prevalence studies were asked questions about why they sext; only one of these studies gathered qualitative information. The Teens and Sexting study (Lenhart 2009) revealed three reasons for involvement in sexting; first, to gain the romantic attention of someone else, second, as an experimental phase for young people who were not yet sexually active, and finally as a component of a sexual relationship. The study also gathered information about young people’s attitudes to sexting. Focus group discussions revealed widely varied views about the acceptability of sexting amongst young people, with some participants feeling very concerned about the potential damage and legal implications for those involved, and others feeling it was a safer alternative to real life sexual activity. A criticism of the reporting of these findings is that information was not available about numbers of young people participating in focus groups (where much of the qualitative data was gathered), and limited identifying information accompanied young people’s quotes.

The latest paper sourced, Prevalence and Characteristics of Youth Sexting: A National Study (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones & Wolak 2012), was one of only two studies published in a peer-reviewed journal. This paper reported on findings from the Third Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS-3), which involved 1,560 young people aged 10-17, which aimed to quantify and detail unwanted and problematic technology-facilitated experiences among young people, including sexting. The most common reported reason for sexting by young people in this study was ‘romance as part of an existing relationship’, pranks or jokes, or trying to start a new relationship.
A number of expert opinion and discussion papers have also explored the origins of sexting. Four themes emerged from the literature in relation to this; the first theme related to pressure, which is also discussed in the context of sexual violence; second was the influence of a hyper-sexualised culture; third involved the nature of the technological space in which young people now reside; and finally the reasons young people might be involved in the behaviour of sexting in relation to adolescence as a developmental stage, was explored.

Table 6: Reported rates of sexting across gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author of Study</th>
<th>Young women</th>
<th>Young men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crimes Against Children Research Centre (2011)</td>
<td>61% of youths who appeared in images</td>
<td>39% of youths who appeared in images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety (2011)</td>
<td>22% send nude or semi-nude images to others</td>
<td>17% send nude or semi-nude images to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated Press &amp; MTV (2009)</td>
<td>13% produce images</td>
<td>9% produce images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9% receive images</td>
<td>14% receive images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox Communications &amp; National Centre for Missing &amp; Exploited Children (2009)</td>
<td>65% had sent a nude or semi-nude image</td>
<td>35% had sent a nude or semi-nude image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pew Internet &amp; American Life Project (2009)</td>
<td>No figures available, however the following was reported: ‘There are no statistically significant differences in reports of sexting by gender’.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmo.Girl (2008)</td>
<td>22% have sent/posted nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves</td>
<td>18% have sent/posted nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.6.1 Gender, pressure and sexual violence

In terms of surveys and studies that gathered gendered information about prevalence of sexting, most reported greater numbers of sexually explicit images of young women than of ausyoung men. Only one study reported that both genders were equally likely to have sent a suggestive picture to another person (Lenhart 2009). Table 6 shows reported rates of sexting amongst young women and men.

Three prevalence surveys included a question regarding pressure experienced in relation to sexting. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart 2009) reported little evidence of
difference in the behaviour of sexting related to gender, however results did highlight that girls often feel pressure to share images of themselves. The Sex and Tech Survey (Cosmogirl.com 2008) also showed a significant difference in pressure experienced by each gender; 51% of girls said they sexted because of pressure from a boy, with only 18% of teen boys saying pressure from a girl was the reason they sent a sexually explicit image. Furthermore, around a quarter of boys and girls reported having been pressured by friends to send or post sexual content. About half of the respondents of the 2011 US AP-MTV Digital Abuse Study (2011), who had sent a naked photo or video of themselves, also reported they had been pressured by someone else to do so at least once. The study reported that those who had been involved in sexting themselves were more likely to have a positive attitude to sexting calling it ‘hot’, ‘fun’ and ‘exciting’, while those who had not been involved in the behaviour were more likely to find it ‘stupid’, ‘slutty’ or ‘dangerous’. Furthermore, boys were more likely to have positive attitudes to sexting than girls.

Some authors (Hand, Chung & Peters 2009; Kee 2005; Powell 2009; Flood 2008) argue it is young women’s sexual images in particular that are being distributed without their consent, and that sexting is just another means for controlling and exerting power over women. In a paper by the Australian Domestic Violence Clearinghouse (2009) this argument is supported, with a view that the misuse of ICTs provides new and more extensive techniques for the control and abuse of women. Discussion papers (Wastler 2010; Gaylord Forbes 2011) have also highlighted a concern that those who are the subjects of the photos (usually females), are often prosecuted, while those having received or forwarded the images are not, pointing to a gender gap in the legal treatment of sexting cases.

A small number of discussion papers were also sourced that focused on concerns about SNS and ICTs and their use as vehicles for the perpetration of sexual assault, particularly in relation to sexting (Powell 2011; Powell 2010). Powell argues that new technologies provide multiple avenues for sexual victimisation, and that sexting potentially sits within the continuum of gendered sexual violence and harassment that targets women. Furthermore, Quadara (2010) suggests ICTs have the capacity to normalise sexual violence and provide new ways of sexual offending.

In contrast, Funnell (2009) disagrees with the view that girls are involved in sexting in response to sexual pressure or a hyper-sexualised culture; she suggests the origins of sexting can be
found in the erosion of the public-private divide, which has created a concept of privacy for young people that is different to that of adults. She also proposes that sexting provides an opportunity for young people to test out the sexual territory without having to have sex, and without the risk of contracting Sexually Transmissible Infections.

A gap in studies about sexting and the role gender plays in this behaviour has prompted the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA 2011) to undertake a research project in this area. The study, which is funded by the Legal Services Board of Victoria is focusing on the experiences of Victorian young people aged 16-20 years, and aims to explore the use of new communication technologies, specifically social networking sites and mobile phone technology in the facilitation of sexual violence.

2.6.2 Young people in the new millennium

While there is some debate about whether or not sexting is a new iteration of previous practices (Muscari 2009; Albury, Funnell & Noonan 2010; Chalfen 2009), many authors agree that advances in information technology have made the transmission of images faster and more anonymous, and access easier, and that it is this aspect of sexting that is new (Hand, Chung & Peters 2009; Chalfen 2009; Muscari 2009; Flood 2009).

The ways in which young people now gain access to information, communicate with each other, and define and understand privacy is changing, with digital culture now embedded in their everyday experience (Weber & Dixon 2010). Young people born somewhere between the mid-1970s and 1990s are often referred to as Generation Y. Howe & Strauss (2000), well known authors in this area, use 1982 and 2001 as the start and end years of this generation, respectively. While many different terms, including ‘Digital Natives’, ‘Millennial Generation’ and ‘Net Generation’, have been used to describe this cohort of young people, each definition tends to refer to young people growing up in a world that is marked by increased use and familiarity with digital, media and communication technologies (Weber & Dixon 2010; Prensky 2001). Unfortunately however, research on young people’s patterns of digital technology use, and the effects on their health and wellbeing, have struggled to keep up with the rapidly shifting technological environment (Brown & Bobkowski 2011). The fourth national statistical report on the health and wellbeing of Australian young people aged 12-24 years (AIHW 2011) highlights a data gap relating to media and communications (including ICTs), and along with environmental issues and sleep disorders, this area is regarded as one of the three most
significant emerging issues of concern for young people. Research into young people’s understanding and experience of this emergent and changing digital culture is thus increasingly relevant and important.

In terms of digital media, mobile phone technologies are considered amongst the fastest growing, with young people often referred to as early adopters in the mobile phone market (Gutnick, Robb, Takeuchi & Kotler 2011; Collin, Rahilly, Richardson & Third 2011; NSW Commission for Children and Young People [CCYP] 2009). In fact, since the very beginning of this project, much has changed already in relation to young people’s use of digital media. In 2007, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) found 75% of Australian 12-14 year olds and 90% of 15-17 year olds owned a mobile phone. By 2010, a study by Nielson revealed 97% of 16-29 year olds owned a mobile phone. Moreover, in 2008 when the term sexting entered the Australian Macquarie Dictionary, ownership of mobile phones with camera capabilities was increasing (NSW CCYP 2009), however at this time smart phones with Internet capabilities were only being talked about. A US discussion paper about sexting authored in 2009, stated, ‘Today most traditional media content is accessible on the Internet, and soon will be widely available 24/7 on handheld devices’ (Brown, Keller & Stern 2009). In Australia in 2009, 34% of 18 to 24 year olds accessed the Internet on their mobile phones, making it the fifth most common use for mobile phones in this age group (AIMIA 2009). By 2010 the Australian Internet and Technology Report reported that 64% of mobile phones owned by 16-29 year olds were Internet capable; this figure is expected to rise. Furthermore SNS such as Facebook have gained escalating popularity (Waite 2011; Pew Research Center 2009; Rideout, Foehr & Roberts 2010), with the ACMA in 2009 reporting SNS use as the number one online activity for 16-29 year olds with 90% of 12-17 year olds and 97% of 16-17 year olds reporting they use SNS on a regular basis (Nielson 2010). An Australian study about young people and SNS (de Zwart, Lindsay, Henderson & Phillips 2011) also showed that the most common content young people post to SNS is photos of themselves (60.9%), followed closely by photos of friends (52.6%).

Funnell (2009) believes compared to older generations, teens place a fundamentally different value on privacy and what it means to be seen naked, partly due to the Internet’s erosion of the public-private divide. Digital privacy has been a consistent concern since the 1990s, as ICTs have created an environment where details of personal information are easily accessed (Butterfield 2009; Marwick, Murgia & Palfrey 2010). While there is an assumption that young
people do not care about their privacy because they post so much information online, studies have shown that young people do in fact care deeply about their privacy, particularly in regard to their parents and teachers (Marwick et al 2010).

2.6.3 Adolescence as a developmental stage

From an adolescent development point of view, the technological world is the new space where the identities of young people are being constructed (Quadara 2010). Weiss (2010) believes sexting challenges society’s understanding of normal adolescent behaviour, however, another view is that sexting is a doorway to sexual activity (Mattey Diliberto 2009). Chalfen (2009) suggests that most public concern about sexting is based on what adults believe is inappropriate behaviour for young people. He discusses the notion that sexting needs to be understood within the context of four different subcultures which affect young people: the ‘media culture’ of increased private and public use of cameras, where public imagery is more sexual, and young people are media-makers as well as consumers; the ‘techno culture’ of a world driven by technology, where young people are labeled ‘digital natives’; the ‘visual culture’ in which young people place value on personal appearance and ‘how people look’; and finally the ‘adolescent culture’ influenced by, among other things, hormone changes, sexual awakening, identify seeking and construction.

Much grey literature highlights that young people do not understand or recognize the serious consequences of their actions (Barry 2010), as the prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain responsible for reasoning and decision making, and is not fully developed until the mid twenties (Ostrager 2010; Johnson, Blum & Giedd 2009). This explains why the impulsive and emotional response of adolescence to risk-taking is not always about a deficit in knowledge, as many young people participate in high-risk behaviours even though they know they should not (Muscari 2009; Adams 2009). For example the AP-MTV study (2011) showed 71% of 14-24 year olds consider sexting a serious problem for people their age, even though one in three reported having engaged in the practice.

2.6.4 A hyper-sexualised culture

Some authors share a view that it is the influence of a highly sexualised culture that is at least partly responsible for sexting. The sexualisation of girls is now considered a public health issue (Levy 2006; Dines 2010; Walter 2010) and has created much debate in the public arena, with a
focus on the social and psychological costs of girls growing up in a ‘sex saturated culture’ (Tankard Reist 2009, p5). While the opportunities available to women have expanded, young women are ‘under pressure to conform to particular versions of so-called empowered female sexuality’ (Powell 2010, p. 13). Some authors argue marketing and advertising reinforce this by deliberately representing girls and young women as sexual objects for male consumption (Rush & La Nauze 2006; Powell 2010). Muscari (2009) argues that as soft porn is now the norm, it is no wonder young people are sexting, given teens have a history of finding whatever technology is available to express and share their sexual behavior with others. An Australian on-line survey involving 400 children and young people aged 9-16 years, by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (Green, Brady, Ólafsson, Hartley & Lumby 2011), reported 28% of participants had seen sexually explicit material on the Internet, with 17% having seen genitals, and 16% having seen images of sexual acts both by choice and inadvertently.

2.7 SURVEYS AND STUDIES ON PREVALENCE OF SextING

More than ¾ of the studies and consumer surveys sourced about sexting and young people were quantitative, however their reliability in determining true prevalence of the phenomenon is uncertain. Still, many of the results of these studies and surveys have continued to be publicised in media reports, expert opinion and government reports worldwide; the majority were undertaken in North America, only five were Australian, and one was conducted in the United Kingdom.

As previously mentioned, two surveys were led by young women's magazines, one of which was the first to gather prevalence data about sexting worldwide (Australian Girlfriend Magazine 2007); this poll reported 40% of girls had been involved in sexting (Battersby 2008). As previously mentioned, unfortunately the original report of this survey was unable to be sourced, despite contacting the editors of the magazine. Because no demographic characteristics other than age were reported, it is difficult to determine if respondents were representative of the population or not, however it is unlikely. In contrast, the Sex and Tech study, led by the US young women’s magazine Cosmo.girl (2008), reported 19% of those surveyed had been involved in sexting, and was also unlikely to have been representative of the youth population in general. Furthermore the definition of sexting used in this study was
‘nude or semi-nude’, which may have included images that are not necessarily sexually explicit. Both studies have been cited widely in grey literature and journal articles.

The Association of Independent Schools of Victoria (AISV) CyberCytulture Survey (2008), involving 4,770 students aged 14-18 years, and the Kids Help Line Poll (2009) both included questions about sexting. 39% of those who participated in the KHL online survey reported having engaged in ‘sexting’; maybe not a surprising figure given that all 548 participants were self-identifying cyberbully victims, and more than three quarters were female. The AISV Survey on the other hand, reported only 7.3% of young people had sent a nude picture, with figures highest amongst young women. Limited evidence is available beyond these results, with little information indicating whether images were self-produced or not, and who they were sent to and why. Neither survey was representative of the Australian youth population.

The previously mentioned Australian study by the ARC Centre for Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (Green, Brady, Ólafsson, Hartley & Lumby 2011) conducted a survey with a random sample of 400, 9 to 16 year olds and their parents about opportunities and risks associated with Internet use. 9% of participants had been sent ‘sexts’ via the Internet, 4% reported having sent ‘sexts’ online themselves, and 3% had been asked for a photo or video of their ‘private parts’. This study was not population representative.

Only five prevalence studies were reportedly representative of the youth population in the area they were conducted; all were from the US. The first of these, the previously mentioned Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey (Cox Communications & The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children 2009), was undertaken less than one year after the Sex and Tech survey, and also received a great deal of publicity. This study was weighted to be representative of the US population of teens aged 13-18 years. ‘One in five teens has engaged in sexting’, is the most commonly cited report of this study (Lounsbury, Mitchell & Finkelhor 2011). This statistic however, reflected only those who received the images (19%); 9% actually produced and sent the messages themselves and only 3% forwarded the messages. Furthermore the sample for this study was drawn from an online panel, which experts in the US have advised against using for national prevalence estimates (American Association of Public Opinion Research 2010).

The previously mentioned 2009 Digital Abuse Study (AP-MTV 2009) reported three in ten young people aged 14-24 had been involved in some form of ‘naked sexting’, and around one
in ten shared a naked photo or video of themselves with someone; females were more likely to do this (13% vs. males 9%). On the other hand, the AP-MTV 2011 study reported one in three young people had engaged in some from of sexting, with young men more likely to receive than send nude photos. Fifteen percent reported having sent naked photos or videos of themselves, with 21% having received images of others. Finally among those who had sexted, 10% reported having done so with people they only knew online, marking a sizeable decrease from 29% in 2009 (AP-MTV 2011). Additionally about half of those who sent a nude photo reported feeling pressured to do so. Although the method of recruitment for these studies was considered to be US population representative, the sample was drawn from an online panel and findings were not broken down by age, so it is impossible to determine if figures were applicable to young adults in the study aged 18-24 years, or those in their teens.

The previously mentioned Teens and Sexting study (Lenhart 2009) reported only 4% of 12-17 year olds owning mobile phones had sent ‘sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images’ of themselves to someone else via text message, and 15% of young people had received these images from someone they knew. Whilst this study also involved a nationally representative sample, only those who owned a mobile phone were eligible to participate, which may have excluded some groups of young people.

The first peer-reviewed paper (Ferguson 2010) of an empirical study was cited in a US psychiatry medical journal. The study involved a convenience sample of 207 predominantly Hispanic young people aged 16-25 and gathered data about incidence of sexting and associated high-risk sexual behaviours. 20.5% of participants reported sending or engaging in sexting, which was defined as having sent or received ‘erotic or nude photographs (of themselves) to or from another person’. The study reported that sexting was not related to other high-risk sexual behaviours with the exception of having sex without the use of contraception.

The previously highlighted Third Youth Internet Safety Study (Mitchell et al 2012) recruited participants from a national sample of households with telephones, by random digit dialing. 9.6% [149] of young people in the study reported involvement in sexting (2.5% appeared in or created nude or nearly-nude images, and 7.1% received images). Of those who appeared in or created images, 61% were female, and for those who received images, 56% were female. Unlike other studies about sexting, participants were asked whether nude or nearly nude
images they had appeared in, created or received had ‘showed breasts, genitals, or someone’s bottom’. Just over half (54%) reported that pictures had met these criteria. Images of young people wearing underwear or bathers, in sexy poses with clothes on, and pictures focused on clothed genitals made up the other 46%. The authors of this study were particularly concerned about the percentage of young people who appeared in or created sexually explicit images that potentially violate child pornography laws, reporting the figure may have been as low as 1%. Reports of forwarding or posting images by participants were low, and photos were reportedly distributed in only 10% of incidents when young people appeared in or created images and in only 3% when young people received images. The authors stated,

In the face of some widely cited, but flawed studies claiming to show as many as 1 in 5 youth ‘involved in sexting’ these results are to some extent reassuring. Only a low percentage of young people are appearing in or creating sexting images that could be considered child pornography. (Mitchell 2012, p. 6)

Mitchell et al (2012) highlight how rates of sexting may vary considerably depending on how young people define the behaviour. For example, the phrase ‘nude or nearly nude’ might for some young people include the kinds of images that are seen on the beach (Mitchell et al 2012). Furthermore, given all sourced prevalence studies and surveys used different terms to describe the behaviour of sexting, determining true prevalence of the phenomenon is difficult. This may explain the contradictions in prevalence rates discussed, with reported rates of sexting ranging from anything between 4 and 40%.

The previously mentioned, Third Youth Internet Safety Study and the Teens and Sexting study reported some of the lowest rates of sexting amongst young people. Both studies also sought consent of a parent or guardian via a telephone interview prior to the young person being interviewed. While both these studies were large and youth population representative, it is my view that the requirements for parent/guardian consent may have been a barrier to young people’s participation. Although it is not apparent whether a parent or guardian was in close range while telephone interviews took place, given many young people do not feel comfortable talking with parents about sexual issues (Walsh 2009; Smith, Agius, Mitchell, Barrett & Pitts 2009), this fact may have affected young people’s capacity to talk openly with the interviewer. Furthermore, it is possible that sexting was under-reported in these studies because participants were unwilling to disclose involvement in the behaviour due to fear of social disapproval or legal prosecution (Adams 2009; Gaylord Forbes 2011).
Conducted in 2011, the Are you Safe? Survey was developed and administered to gather the opinions and experiences of young people in Australia on the topics of cyber-safety and cyber-bullying for the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety. Although the survey involved the biggest sample of young people (n=33,751) for a prevalence study about sexting, it was a self-selecting sample, only included two questions about sexting, and participants ranged from 5-18 years. 22.8% of females aged 18 years reported they ‘would send nude or semi-nude photos’, and 17.3% of 18-year-old males reported they ‘do send nude or semi-nude photos to others’. On careful examination of the results however, it was revealed that 18.7% of female 5-year-olds and 23.2% of males in this same age group reported sending nude or semi-nude pictures, with similar figures for 6-year-olds, casting doubt on the reliability of the findings.

Sharing Personal Images and Videos Among Young People (Phippen 2009), was the only study sourced from the UK. Preliminary results were announced in 2009, and showed 40% of students knew friends who had been involved in sexting. 27% of respondents reported they felt sexting happened regularly or all the time. Reliability of the data is questionable, given that students were only asked about their perception of others’ behaviour. Whilst this may have been a safer approach than asking about young people’s own personal experience, it meant that amongst students at the same school, participants might have used the same small group of students as a reference point. Additionally, the term ‘sexting’ was only loosely defined as ‘the sharing of explicit images electronically’, with no consensus amongst students about what ‘explicit’ or ‘sharing’ meant.

2.8 LITERATURE ON LEGAL ISSUES AND SEXTING

One of the major concerns regarding sexting and young people has been that young people face the risk of being criminally charged for the production and distribution of child pornography when a sexted image is of a minor (Prince & Jordan 2004; Krause & Russell 2008; Weiss & Samenow 2010; Carty 2011; Eraker 2010).

It is difficult to find accurate numbers of young people who have been criminally charged in Australia in relation to sexting episodes. Damien Eades from Sydney (who was 18 at the time) received much media attention for being involved in the first sexting case in Australia in 2008, after a 13-year-old school-girl sent a nude photo of herself to his mobile phone. Eades was charged with inciting a person under 16 years old to commit an act of indecency towards him,
and one count of possessing child pornography (Pace Legal 2010). In October 2011, online media (Tin 2011) reported that in the past three years, more than 450 child pornography charges had been laid against young people between the ages of 10 and 17 in Queensland, including 113 charges of making child exploitation material. Reports stated that more than 160 charges were laid in 2010 alone, yet, there is no public evidence that any of these cases involved the production or distribution of sexually explicit images by young people themselves, even though this report refers to these cases as sexting.

There have been fewer reported criminal cases against a young person in Australia than in the US in relation to sexting (Pace Legal 2010); a report by Wolak and Finkelhor (2011) presents a typology of sexting episodes involving young people based on a review of more than 550 cases from law enforcement agencies in the US. The cases all involved ‘youth produced sexual images’, defined as images of minors created by minors, that could qualify as child pornography under applicable criminal statures.

So far, much of the debate about sexting and the law are focused on criminal law, and more specifically, child pornography offences. However in Australia areas of law affecting sexting are regulated by a complex system of overlapping state, federal, civil and criminal law, and may also be regulated by civil law such as defamation law, privacy law, surveillance law, nuisance, confidentiality and copyright law (Svantesson 2011 p. 42).

Only one law and policy review article was sourced from Australia (Svantesson 2011), however, more than a dozen were sourced from the US (Ryan 2010; Wood 2009). Most focused on the need for review of child pornography laws in response to the evolving technology (Ostager 2010; Wastler 2010; Barry 2010; Powell 2009; Ostrager 2010; Gaylord Forbes 2011). Krupa (2010) argued that governments are continually trying to make current laws fit the new technology; Humbach (2009) agreed:

These laws and prosecutions represent a stark example of the contradictions that can occur when governmental policies and initiatives built on past truths and values collide with new and unanticipated phenomena (p. 37).

Furthermore:

Several problems emerge from lumping sexting teens into the same category as depraved criminals who inflict harm on minors. First, and perhaps most obvious, teenagers engaged in sexting are not knowingly harming minors in the same way that
traditional child pornographers do. [...] Second, the draconian penalties that stem from child pornography convictions can decimate a teenager’s life making it all but impossible for the teen to become a productive member of society. [...] Finally, the stigma attached to being labeled [sic] a child pornographer is lasting. Few crimes carry such a pejorative marker, and members of the public often link child pornography with pedophilia [sic] and other heinous crimes - sometimes for good reason. (Richards & Calvert 2009, p. 35)

More recently a number of states in North America have introduced new laws that reduce the penalty for young people involved in sexting. For example in June 2011 in Nevada a new law was passed that applies only to minors caught sexting, and Illinois in 2010 made sexting between minors illegal so they would not be prosecuted under the child pornography laws and or required to register as a sex offender. In 2009 the State of Nebraska also passed a law making it a crime to send sexually explicit images of a minor by way of text messaging, so that individuals under the age of 18 would not be prosecuted for receiving a sexually explicit image of a minor 15 years of age or older, provided that, the image was taken voluntarily by the subject of the image and the recipient of the image did not distribute the image to anyone else. Finally, in Florida, as of October 2011 any minor who is caught sending, possessing, or creating nude images of a minor can be charged with a non-criminal violation for their first offense and subject to a US$60 fine or eight hours of community service as well as being required to attend training or instructional classes on the dangers of sexting (Mobile Media Guard 2011).

In 2010 the Australian Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs held an inquiry into the Crimes Legislation Amendment (Sexual Offences Against Children) Bill 2010. A submission by the Australian Privacy Foundation (APF) to the Senate Inquiry (2010), argued that the Bill ‘represents a good opportunity to ensure that Australian law does not follow the same path as the law in the US’ (p. 5), 2 young people have been exposed to criminal prosecution, as a result of involvement in sexting. The APF expressed concern about the potential impacts of the Bill, and the child sexual offences regime more broadly in relation to sexting, arguing the child sexual offences regime should take account of sexting as a common practice among young people, in order to avoid criminalising or stigmatising young people as child sex offenders. Furthermore, the Victorian Attorney-General in September 2011 announced the terms of reference for a parliamentary Inquiry into Sexting, to examine the
appropriateness and adequacy of existing laws in relation to the behavior (Victorian Law Reform Committee 2011). The Office of the Victorian Privacy Commissioner’s Youth Advisory Group is developing a submission for this inquiry, and have invited young Victorians to take part in a survey, Have Your Say on Sexting, so young people can share their views on whether or not sexting by people under 18 should be illegal and, if so, what the legal consequences for young people should be (Office of the Victorian Privacy Commissioner 2011).

2.9 LITERATURE ON RESPONSES TO SEXTING

Most literature about sexting and young people sourced for this study, included recommendations about how we should respond to the issue, including prevention strategies and approaches for dealing with harmful consequences of the behaviour.

2.9.1 Warning young people, parents and teachers

Much of the popular literature and policy responses discuss the need for education targeting young people about the potential consequences of sexting (Muscari 2009; Brown, Keller & Stern 2009). It has been posed by a number of authors, (Marwick, Murgia Diaz & Palfrey 2010) that if young people understood the potential consequences of their behaviour they would not be sexting; a view contrary to evidence on risk taking among young people (Zirkel 2009). Despite this, in Australia a number of government campaigns (NSW Government 2007; Mattey Diliberto & Mattey 2009; Australian Government 2010) have attempted to warn young people and parents about the potential harmful effects of sexting. A range of audio, print and online resources have been produced by community and health organisations internationally (see Table 7 for some examples). In Australia in 2009 the NSW Government launched the Safe Sexting – No Such Thing campaign, followed in 2010 by the launch and rollout of the Australian Federal Government ThinkUKnow program and The Line campaign (based on a recommendation from a Time for Action: the National Council’s Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Children 2009). There is no evidence that these campaigns have been informed by young people’s understanding or experience of the practice; their effectiveness in dealing with the phenomenon remains to be seen. Additionally, a range of online and video resources have been developed for use in schools, however there is no evidence these resources have been evaluated for their effectiveness in preventing the negative implications of sexting.
A number of discussion papers have been targeted at those working in schools (Manzo 2009; Brown, Keller & Stern 2009; Brosch 2008; Mason 2008; Shiel 2009), providing suggestions and advice to teachers and administrators about prevention strategies. Boucek (2009) argues that policies and procedures have not kept pace with rapid changes in technology, and advises schools of the need to review and revise current policies to prevent issues arising. There is some evidence in grey literature, including media reports and law and policy reviews, that school principals in the US have been criminally charged for possessing child pornography, which has usually been confiscated from students involved in sexting (Manzo 2009; Boucek 2009; Wood 2009; Taylor 2009), highlighting the impact not only on students, but on teachers and administrators too.

A few discussion papers (American Academy of Pediatrics 2009; Schurin O’Keefe 2011; Mattey Diliberto 2009) have focused on the role of parents in the prevention of sexting, arguing they need to be better educated and aware of the nature of technologies young people are using in order to advise their children of potential risks, including the potential implications of involvement in the behaviour.

2.9.2 Other solutions

Quadara (2010) suggests there are many challenges in developing prevention strategies and policing the space within which sexting and young people sit. She highlights firstly the speed and potential reach of sexually explicit information being circulated, the limitations of current legislation (as previously mentioned), and she reminds us of the challenges posed by the fact that social networking and other online communications are central forms of communication for young people (Quadara 2010) nowadays. Furthermore, Powell (2010) discusses the need for health and legal professionals to work together, that existing legislation needs reviewing and that responses are needed at the primary, secondary and tertiary prevention ends of the spectrum.

In June 2011, the Australian Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety conducted an Inquiry into cyber-safety, called High-Wire Act: Cyber-Safety and the Young. The report provided details of submissions to this inquiry in relation to sexting, which were received from a number of Australian organisations, including the Alana and Madeline Foundation, BoysTown, the Australian University Cyberbullying Research Alliance, iKeepSafe, Device Connections Pty Ltd, Childnet International Berry Street, and the Northern Territory Government. The report
highlighted a number of recommendations, including many that focus on education strategies targeting schools, teachers and whole-of-school communities. Other strategies proposed relate to policing and law enforcement, with a significant amount of attention given to a proposed national mandatory filtering scheme so that Internet service providers (ISPs) can remove access to refused classification material online. Debate continues in Australia about the effectiveness of a mandatory ISP filtering system (ACMA 2007) to filter harmful content on the Internet, including sexually explicit images of young people. Potential infringement on freedom of speech, lack of evidence to support the efficacy of such a system, and the potential that a system may prevent access to other important health information, are among concerns raised about the introduction of such a filtering system in Australia (Dvorak 2010).

2.9.3 Young people need to be involved

Many submissions to the above mentioned cyber-safety Inquiry highlighted the importance of young people’s input into the development of new methods to promote cyber-safety and reduce cyber-bullying. There was much acknowledgement that young people have a wealth of experience in the area of new technologies and are in fact more equipped to respond to online risks, than adults often assume (Alannah and Madeline Foundation 2011; Youth Affairs Council of South Australia 2011). Helen McGrath from the Australian Psychological Society commented that,

Young people need to be part of [the] process, because if we do not listen to what they have to say about what works and does not work, we are going to go down some dead ends. (Transcript of Evidence, 9 December 2010, p. CS58)

The literature makes it clear that young people need to be involved in solutions, given many are already good at understanding and managing online risks.

2.10 More questions

A good deal of literature highlighted a lack of quality research about sexting and young people, with some arguing that sexual assault counsellors, police and other legal personal and educators need to take a role in guiding the research agenda in this area (Quadara 2010).

In Prevalence and Characteristics of Youth Sexting: A national study, the authors argue that,
Good research and sympathetic clinical assessment is necessary to understand the nature and extent of activities such as sexting before strong recommendations about how to counsel and educate youth and their families are developed and disseminated (Mitchell 2012, p. 7).

Ferguson (2010) recommends future research needs to explore more closely the problematic consequences that may be associated with sexting, such as depression, bullying and other negative experiences.

Lounsbury, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2011) argue for a standardised definition of sexting, suggesting the popular term ‘sexting’ is not appropriate for formal research, as it covers too broad a spectrum of activities. They suggest the phrase ‘youth produced sexual images’ as a more appropriate definition, arguing research should be about ‘images created by minors that depict minors and that are or could be considered child pornography’ (p. 4). Their argument is based on a view that the main concern regarding sexting is about youth-produced child pornography; suggesting researchers should limit samples to only include minors (aged 17 or younger). They also suggest research is needed regarding who is sharing images and what their reasons are for doing this, to determine how best to respond.

Weiss (2010) called for research and empirical studies regarding prevalence, highlighting that most data has been gathered from unreliable sources such as small polls, uncontrolled studies and the media. He argues we also need to have a better understanding about who is most at risk in this area, and what prevention and treatments work best.

A number of authors highlighted gaps in knowledge requiring further exploration. Chalfen (2009) suggests we need to consider,

... what kinds of communication are found in sexting, who is showing what to whom, for what reasons, under what circumstances, with what effect, and for what anticipated and unanticipated results (p. 261).

He also argues little is known about what happens before and after the sexting episode (in terms of motivations and consequences of the behaviour). Powell (2009) recommends a number of areas of investigation are needed, for example who is sexting, whether there are differences between the behaviour of sexting for heterosexual and same sex attracted young people, and whether there are age, racial, ethnic or religious disparities. She also poses that an
understanding of the characteristics of teens who participate in sexting, how it relates to sexual behaviour, and how it compares with other forms of sexual communication are all essential pieces of information needed to address this public health issue.

2.11 Conclusion

Amongst the literature sourced about sexting and young people, very few academic studies were found, and even fewer were published in peer reviewed or academic journals. My literature review was therefore reliant on a great deal of grey literature. Most of the studies conducted gathered information about prevalence, with rates of sexting amongst young people varying considerably depending on the study sample and definition of sexting used, raising concerns about the reliability of the data. A gap was identified in empirical information about the origins of sexting, however a number of discussion and expert opinion papers were sourced on this topic. Most were written from a North American perspective, and many focused on legal concerns relating to the behaviour of sexting amongst young people. A range of solutions are posed in both grey literature and published discussion papers. Most are focused on educative responses to prevent the harmful effects of sexting, but with no available information on their effectiveness. Whilst there is some literature pointing to the need for young people’s involvement in the design of solutions, and other literature highlighting gaps in knowledge about who is sexting, why and what we should do about it, there is little evidence of young people’s views on these topics.
3. Research Design

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design used for this study, including the rationale for choosing a qualitative methodology involving two phases. Methods used to gather and analyse data from key informants and young people in both phase one and two, will be discussed in parallel throughout this chapter. Descriptions of key informant and young people samples will be provided, along with methods used for their recruitment. Finally ethical considerations are explored regarding the involvement of young people, including potential risks and strategies to protect them from potential harm.

3.2 Methodology

This study used a qualitative methodology. The decision to choose this methodology over others was based on a range of factors, including the aim of the study, available resources, and the theoretical framework underpinning the research (Crabtree & Miller 1999; Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellett & Robinson 2004). A qualitative approach is commonly used when little or nothing is known about a phenomenon; this research project thus lent itself well to this methodology.

Whereas quantitative research is underpinned by a positivist paradigm, based on the assumption that the world can be investigated using scientific method, and that measurable influences affect measurable outcomes in a cause-effect manner (Grbich 1999), qualitative research sits within a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm based on an understanding that the world is constructed socially and to understand human actions and behaviours, we first need to understand the meaning people give to their own and other’s actions, and to situations and events (Hansen 2006). In other words, quantitative research measures social phenomenon and qualitative research aims to understand social processes (Baum 1992), based on a belief that real trustworthy knowledge is found by hearing what people say about their own experience (Hansen 2006; Holstein & Gubrium 1997).
The inductive nature of this research meant the study was able to evolve with time in response to changing circumstances (Hansen 2006). As so little was known about sexting among young people, it was critical the study could be approached without set assumptions or predetermined ideas; this created openness to the generation of new ideas and knowledge that may otherwise not have been uncovered.

I was more concerned about the quality of data being gathered per sampling unit as opposed to the number of samples, thus purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. Using this data collection method meant it was possible to locate important and information-rich cases by deliberately seeking to include them (Barbour 2001; Rice, Liamputtong & Ezzy 1999). This created a degree of control in selecting the sample to ensure data gathered provided a full understanding of the phenomenon. In other words this method of recruitment ensured quality data was gathered.

### 3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data was collected for this study via a focus group and individual semi-structured interviews; these methods are amongst the four most commonly used in qualitative research (Berg 2004).

#### 3.3.1 Focus group (key informants only)

Initial data was collected from key informants via a focus group, an organised group discussion useful for research projects that aim to develop a public understanding and social context of an issue (Kitzinger 1994; Hansen 2006). There are several reasons initial data was collected using this method. Many authors (Kitzinger 1994; Morgan 1996) agree that the main advantage of gathering information via a focus group is the purposeful use of group interaction to generate data, and it is this that distinguishes this method of interview from the broader category of group interviews; this was an important factor for its use in this study. As Rubin and Rubin (1995) highlight, participants can ‘spark off one another’ (p. 140) to generate new ideas; therefore the interaction between participants becomes a source of data, with the group process encouraging participants to raise new issues not anticipated by the facilitator. Furthermore, using a focus group is an economical way to gather a large amount of data in a short time span (Heath et al. 2009; Berg 2004), which was important in the first phase of the study, allowing more of my candidature time for interviews with young people.
Nine participants were involved in the focus group, including the facilitator and myself. The group was purposefully small enough to ensure all participants had an opportunity to share, but large enough to create a stimulating discussion. An external facilitator with experience in the primary care sector ran the focus group, encouraging interaction and debate between research participants, and working with group dynamics to allow everyone an opinion that encouraged research participants to set the priorities for discussion, as well as helping them clarify their views and expand their own thinking (Kitzinger 1994). The discussion was held around an oval table in the library of the Department of General Practice at the University of Melbourne, and lasted approximately two hours. Prior to the focus group, lunch provided an informal icebreaker to help participants feel more relaxed and comfortable with each other. At the beginning of the session participants were invited to share a challenge and highlight of the previous workweek to further ‘break the ice’, and gently bring participants’ focus back to the professional setting after lunch.

An interview guide was developed and used in the focus group, which served a number of purposes (see appendix 4 for the key informant interview guide). Firstly, the guide mapped out broad areas of inquiry for the focus group (Heath et al 2009); secondly it served as a guide for the facilitator; and finally it ensured all desired information sought from key informants was gathered (McLafferty 2004). The guide was developed by establishing a list of key issues for exploration, based on my literature review of grey literature and peer-reviewed articles about the phenomenon. The list was arranged into broad themes, which were drilled down to develop the interview plan. Lofland and Lofland (1984) describe this process as beginning with broad descriptive questions and following up with more probing questions for more detail.

3.3.2 Individual semi-structured interviews (key informants and young people)

Additional data for this study was collected via individual semi-structured interviews, which is a popular method of data collection in health related research (Rice, Liamputtong & Ezzy 1999), particularly for investigating a phenomenon when very little is known (Hansen 2006).

The qualitative interview, not unlike the focus group, allows the researcher to explore how people view their own and others behaviours and understandings, ‘and the meanings they attribute to them’ (Heath 2006, p. 96). It is based on an assumption that each person’s opinions and views are valid and that by interviewing carefully selected individuals, insights into the phenomenon will be unveiled, that may not have otherwise been uncovered (Marvasti
2004). Furthermore, the interview is an interactive process whereby the interviewer and those being interviewed come together to jointly construct social reality through this interaction.

In contrast to the focus group, the individual interview is a more private process of interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. Although lacking the dynamic group interaction of the focus group, the individual interview provides an opportunity to build greater rapport with participants, and accommodate individual needs. The interview also allows participants to discuss sensitive and personal issues that they may not have felt comfortable discussing in a group setting; an important factor for this research given the nature of the topic under investigation, including in particular the sexual nature of the behaviour of sexting and that sexting poses legal implications for those involved.

a) Interviews with key informants
Choosing individual interviews as an additional method of data collection from key informants meant I was able to build on information gathered in the focus group to build a more complete picture of the phenomenon being explored. I was able to include valuable sources that otherwise could not be included in the study, including key informants not wanting to share opinions in a group setting and those unable to attend the focus group.

I conducted individual interviews with five key informants; four interviews were conducted in the participants’ workplace (in an office or interview room), and one was conducted in the home of the participant (who was working from home on that particular day).

An interview guide was adapted from results of the focus group discussion (see appendix 15). It meant there was flexibility to explore unanticipated themes and connections in greater detail (Heath et al. 2009) as they arose in individual interviews. This process allowed researcher reflexivity, and created a dynamic cycle of ongoing data collection and analysis. It meant for this study, as new data emerged, new questions were generated (Patton 2002).

b) Interviews with young people
It was a priority of this study that data collection methods were respectful of the ability of young people to contribute in a meaningful way to knowledge generation about issues that affect them. Therefore, documenting ‘the world from the point of view of the people studied ... rather than presenting it from the point of view of the researcher’ (Hamersley 1992, p. 45) was a priority for this project.
I conducted all individual interviews with young people, aware of the power imbalance that inevitably exists between the professional interviewer (which can also be exacerbated by an age difference) and the young person (McLeod & Malone 2000; Bennet, Cieslik & Miles 2003; Griffin 1993; Cohen 2005; France 2004). I was therefore committed to reducing this imbalance wherever I could, by handing over as much control as possible to young people in the interview process. I used a range of strategies to build rapport and support young people to feel comfortable and at ease in the interview session. Young people were provided information about the interview process and what it would mean for them to be involved, including the purpose of the study, about their anonymity and option to ‘opt out’ at any time (Hansen 2006, p101), and finally about sources of information and support available in or after the interview if this was needed. Participants were also given a choice about the location of their interview; for example one young person chose to be interviewed in their car, as this felt most comfortable for them in terms of feeling safe to share private and personal views. An iPhone was used for audio recording and participants were shown how to stop the interview recording themselves if they wished. A method termed ‘process consent’ by Heath et al. (2009) was also used which is based on the notion that consent should be negotiated on an on-going basis, rather than being about initial consent only, which meant young people could express a desire to opt out of some or all elements of the research at any time, despite having already agreed to participate. Therefore it was explained to young people at many points along the way that opting out was a valid option, including before the interview began, once into the interview, and after transcripts were completed.

As previously mentioned an interview guide was also developed to lead the interview process. The guide was based on themes elicited from the literature review and thematic analysis of key informant data, and included both broad and more specific open-ended questions. Topics were not always explored by direct questioning; sometimes participants were simply asked to reflect on their view or understanding of a particular aspect of sexting (Heath et al. 2009).

The interview process was flexible enough to allow the discussion to wander to places that interested the young people so they could take the lead when they wanted to. It meant they were free to explore topics, which may have been equally relevant ‘even if the connections were not always straightforwardly transparent’ (Heath et al. 2009 p. 81) to me as the researcher. As the research developed and new participants were interviewed, the interview guide was adapted to capture new and important areas of inquiry; this inductive nature of the
study meant it was able to evolve with time (Hansen 2006), so the orientation of the study changed as new data was gathered from young people.

3.4 Sample

Careful consideration was taken to select an appropriate number of research participants for each stage of the study. Whereas generalisation of results to the wider population is within the ambit of quantitative studies, in contrast, qualitative methods allow the sample size to be determined by saturation, the point at which no new data emerges, thus a sample size calculation was not necessary. Saturation may occur as early as between eight and sixteen interviews (Hansen 2006).

3.4.1 Key informants

The key informant sample was smaller than that of young people, as the first stage of the research was merely about building a context for phase two and setting the scene for the central focus of the research involving young people.

Given very little was known about the phenomenon of sexting amongst young people, key informants were chosen for their level of expertise and knowledge in this area. Thus, twelve key stakeholders with diverse experience and views were represented, including professionals notable in their field. Researchers, cyber-safety experts and individuals working with young people in a teaching, support or counselling role were represented (see table 8 for more detail) from across a diverse range of organisations and settings. Although some participants knew each other, others had not met previously.

3.4.2 Young people

As previously discussed, sampling was not designed to be representative, which only applies to large-scale quantitative samples, however, it was important to have representation of young people from a broad spread of ages, genders and experience. Thus, young people were recruited from a variety of sources in an attempt to ensure this was the case, including from recreational and health settings and 15 different educational settings. Details of the sample of young people are outlined in chapter 5.
3.4.3 Participation of minors

As previously stated, media and anecdotal reports about the phenomenon of sexting have raised particular concerns for young people aged 18 years and under. Many of these concerns relate to the fact that, according to the law, an image or video that depicts a person who is, or appears to be, under the age of 18 engaging in sexual activity or depicted in an indecent sexual manner or context, is considered child pornography. Thus, a person who is found to have produced and/or distributed these images or videos could be criminally charged (Griffith & Simon 2008; Victorian Crimes Act [67A] 1958).

While there are very few known cases of Australian young people involved in sexting being charged with the production or distribution of child pornography, those who produce or disseminate images of young people under 18 years do face this risk; thus the need for young people in early adolescence to participate in this study was considered important.

Most research involving minors requires young people to obtain parent/legal guardian consent to participate. However, it was my belief that requiring this permission would create a barrier to the inclusion of many young people and would deny their autonomy. Evidence suggests young people do not talk to parents about cyber-bullying for fear of removal of technological privileges. For example a US study (National Crime Prevention Centre 2009) found only 10% of children who were cyber-bullied told their parents about the incident. Furthermore, research by the Australian Catholic University (2012) suggests numbers of young people being bullied may be much higher than is being reported, given many children do not report for fear of losing access to technological privileges. Therefore insisting on obtaining parent/guardian consent from participants (including minors) ran the risk of young people not choosing to participate and potentially compromising research validity (Sanci, Sawyer, Weller, Bond & Patton 2004).

Although concern exists about young people’s ability to consent to research without their parents approval (Ensign 2003; National Health & Medical Research Council 2007; Lothen-Kline, Howard, Hamburger, Worrell & Boekeloo 2003), in Australia the law says a minor is capable of giving informed consent if they are considered to have sufficient understanding and intelligence to be able to understand fully what is proposed (Bird 2011). Furthermore, a review of psychological research into adolescents’ decision-making capacities has found that those at least as young as 14 years are capable of making informed decisions (Sanci et al. 2004).
Unfortunately there are no guidelines that indicate which factors represent sufficient maturity to be considered a mature minor (Harrison 1992). To determine mature minor status of young people, characteristics that were taken into account were an ability to weigh up and express options and consequences (positive and negative) of involvement in the research and an ability to organise and arrange to participate in research interviews without their parents (Sanci, Sawyer, Kang, Haller & Patton 2005; Skene 2004). As a registered nurse with a wealth of experience working with many different groups of young people in their teens, I was well equipped to undertake this mature minor assessment. See appendix 14 for a diagram of the mature minor assessment process for this study.

All minors were asked if they would like to obtain parent/guardian consent; those not considered a mature minor, were ineligible to participate One quarter of minors chose to obtain parent/guardian consent (see appendices 8 and 9 for samples of parent/guardian plain language statements and consent forms).

The fact that most young people aged under 18 years who participated in this study did not want to obtain parent consent, was affirmation that expecting all minors to obtain this consent may have excluded potential participants. Furthermore, of those who did wish to participate without parent consent, all were assessed as mature minor.

3.5 RECRUITMENT

3.5.1 Recruitment of key informants

Key informants were sourced through my own professional networks and snowball sampling, a form of purposive sampling (Lofland & Lofland 1984) that allows participants to suggest additional sources for the study. Initial contact was made with potential participants and interested individuals were sent plain language statements (PLS) and consent forms (see appendices 2 and 3). Overall, contact was made with 24 individuals; however only seven participated in the focus group and five participated in individual interviews. Twelve individuals were deemed unsuitable, in terms of not having sufficient knowledge or expertise in the area of study, or were unable to attend an interview or the focus group during the study period.
3.5.2 Recruitment of young people

Young people were recruited mostly from organisational settings via my own professional networks, which provided access to young people from a range of youth and educational programs and organisations. Teachers, lecturers and youth workers acted as third parties. Additional young people were recruited via my own personal networks. See table 7 for a summary of sources of recruitment for young people.

Where third parties were involved, they initially discussed the project with young people and then I was invited to attend the class or session to discuss the project in more detail and answer potential questions (see appendix 12 for third party script and appendix 13 for researcher script). Interested young people were given PLS and consent forms, and contact details were obtained to arrange a suitable time and location for the interview.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit additional young people. Participants were given information to pass on to others, with details for contacting me if they were interested.

Some authors argue (Heath et al. 2009) that young people being offered payment for their involvement might be construed as a subtle form of coercion which may influence young people’s desire to participate and thus influence the cohort of young people recruited. I believe however, recompensing young people for the time taken to get to the interview, and being prepared to talk about what may be considered a challenging and sensitive topic is an important way to show gratitude (McDowell 2001; Johnson & White 2004). Thus to acknowledge and show gratitude for their contribution, young people were given a gift voucher at the completion of interviews.
Table 7: Sources of recruitment of young people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Age of participants</th>
<th>Third Party Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary And Further Education (TAFE)</td>
<td>CGEA (Certificate in General Education for Adults)</td>
<td>15-18</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>Health promotion/public health students</td>
<td>19-20</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local government youth service</td>
<td>Youth advisory council</td>
<td>15-20</td>
<td>Youth worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>Health &amp; community programs</td>
<td>15-18</td>
<td>School nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martial arts organisation</td>
<td>Karate school</td>
<td>15-18</td>
<td>Karate school principal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The participation of young people in this study led to a number of ethical challenges for the researcher, however the potential benefits of their involvement far outweighed any potential risks.

The first phase of this project involving key informants was considered minimal risk and was granted ethics approval (0932843.2) in December 2009. The second phase however, involving young people, sat within a particularly ethically challenging area, and did not receive ethics approval (0931852.1) until February 2010, following my attendance at a University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) meeting to present an overview of all potential risks to participants, and how these would be prevented and addressed. Issues about access and power (McDowell 2001), and the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic were the main areas of ethical concern.

A fine balance existed between minimising potential risk to young people, while ensuring the process of recruitment was inclusive for those whose voice needed to be heard. A wide range of strategies and processes were developed and implemented to prevent and minimise potential risks and deal with any potential adverse outcomes arising as a result of participation in the study. These are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.
### 3.6.1 Protecting young people from harm

As a registered nurse, I am professionally mandated to report to Victorian Child Protection Service, disclosures of physical or sexual abuse of minors, where the parents or guardians have not protected, or are unlikely to protect them from this harm; as soon as is possible after a disclosure (National Child Protection Clearinghouse 2010). This placed me, as the interviewer, in a position of ethical and legal responsibility to act if a young person was perceived to be at risk of harm, and although it was considered unlikely a young person would disclose information about physical or sexual abuse or harm, it was considered important to have processes in place to prevent and deal with this if it did occur. Therefore, at the beginning of each interview minors were advised that I was ethically and legally bound to inform someone if they disclosed information about their being at risk of harming themselves or others, or being harmed by someone else. That is, if a minor disclosed information that suggested they were at risk of physical or sexual abuse, or neglect, I was required to report this to the Victorian Child Protection Service. A distress/disclosure protocol was developed to provide a process for dealing with emotional distress or trauma; disclosure of sexual or physical abuse; or involvement in illegal activity experienced by young people in or after the interview. See appendix 16 for the distress/disclosure protocol.

Many of the distinctive ethical concerns regarding research with young people relate to the power imbalance of the adult-child relationship, which can lead to vulnerability and powerlessness for young people in the research process (Matthews 2001; Matthews & Tucker 2000; Heath et al. 2009). As knowledge creates power (Roach Anleu 1995), it was therefore important that young people were given information in a language that was ‘young people friendly’ at a number of stages throughout the interview process, including prior, during and at completion of the interview. Information was provided about ways in which the interview was to be conducted, including the location, duration and topics for discussion, which meant young people were able to make an informed choice about whether or not to be involved.

Occasionally participating in an interview or reflecting back on involvement may generate issues not anticipated, thus most interviews were conducted at places with on-call support of a youth worker or counselor, to support young people or provide secondary consultation debriefing for me if needed. Young people were also given the opportunity for a follow-up support phone-call if needed.
Young people were advised that pseudonyms would be used to disguise their identity, and that all information gathered would be kept confidential and secured, in locked storage at the University of Melbourne, subject to legal requirements in accordance with the University’s guidelines for the conduct of research. Furthermore, participants were advised not to share information about their own personal involvement in sexting, as the purpose of the study was to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of sexting amongst young people in general. They were advised to use the method ‘one person removed’ (Friedman & Miller 2003), which involves using a made up name to tell a story about themselves or someone they know.

A young people’s ‘Services and Supports Resource Pack’ was developed and offered to young people at the completion of interviews, which contained information about a range of services and supports, should they have required counselling or support after participating in the research (see appendix 10 for contents of resource pack). Only a few young people accepted this information; most young people expressed it was either information they already had or did not need.

3.6.2 Disclosure of illegal activity (criminal offences or alleged offences)

As previously mentioned, in Australia a young person involved in sexting can potentially be criminally charged with producing or distributing child pornography (Svantesson 2010). I was, however, not legally or ethically obliged to report disclosures of criminal activity, unless the offence was one that I was mandated to report (physical or sexual abuse of a minor). The Australian Psychological Society (APS) explains this in their ethical guidelines as follows:

In criminal law the matter of concealment of information about a crime, is covered by those parts of the criminal codes and statures concerning accessories to crimes. In sections of the criminal codes concerning accessories, it is generally the case that simply knowing about an offence is insufficient for such a conviction to occur. Furthermore, failure to simply act on information about an offence, i.e. failure simply to report an offence, is also insufficient for a person to be found guilty of being an accessory after the fact to that offence. (Australian Psychological Society 2004, p. 5)

Furthermore, the Victorian Department of Health, Human Research Ethics Council ‘Guidelines on Research into Illegal Behaviours’ (2008), states that:

...it is not necessary to spell out in precise detail the nature of the circumstances in which a legal obligation may arise to reveal information to police, prosecuting
authorities or to a court ... researchers may consider removing questions that may discover reportable information or collect only anonymous data. Where this is not possible or desirable, researchers should explain in the PLS the risks and any obligation they may have to report the disclosure of illegal activities. (Victorian Department of Health 2008, p. 1)

Thus, it was decided that to spell out remote possibilities of research being subpoenaed, was considered inappropriate, as young people would be less likely to answer honestly, which may have invalidated the entire project. As a precaution however, prior to each interview young people were given information about laws in Victoria in regards to the production and distribution of child pornography. They were advised that the interviewer could not guarantee absolute confidentiality with respect to illegal behaviour disclosed.

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS

The focus group and interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim by a transcription company and returned in Microsoft Word format for analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to young people to protect their identities, and increase their control in the research process. They were offered to choose their own pseudonym; some chose names, others chose acronyms. Any other identifying information was also removed. For example, where participants referred to names of suburbs or local secondary colleges, these were removed to further protect the identity of participants.

It was also considered especially important to be accountable to participants for overall results of the research. Thus, at the completion of interviews, respondent validation was offered to both key informants and young people who wished to read their own transcripts. Just over half of key informants and young people chose to have transcripts returned. Two key informants and four young people identified minor amendments that were incorporated into the study findings. Key informants and young people were advised they could receive a copy of the final report if they chose.

A qualitative software package (NVivo 9) was employed to initially manage and organise the data into emerging categories and themes. I then developed a system of color-coding categories to further explore emerging themes. This systematic analysis was conducted using a grounded theory approach (Hansen 2006) and elicited a range of themes, which were then compared and contrasted against current literature.
As previously noted, key informant data was analysed to inform topics for exploration with young people in the second phase of the research; it was not however within the scope of this study to compare data from key informants to that of young people.

Three researchers reviewed data from key informants and young people, before it was agreed that saturation was reached.

### 3.8 Conclusion

The qualitative methods used in this study lent themselves well to developing an understanding of the phenomenon of sexting. The use of a key informant focus group and individual interviews were valuable to provide a context and key words for interviews with young people. The inductive process used meant the research could evolve as new data was gathered, so that key informant findings were able to inform interviews with young people, and as new insights were provided by young people, new areas of inquiry could be explored with them; this was particularly important given the phenomenon was new, and so little was known. Using semi-structured individual interviews to collect data from young people meant new knowledge was generated that may not have otherwise been revealed, as interviews could be approached without set assumptions. Furthermore, using this method meant we were able to give voice to their experience and concerns (Hansen 2006) and develop an understanding of the phenomenon in their own terms (Heath et al 2009). A range of strategies were used to address ethical concerns, and to ensure young people were given power in the research process; these methods also paved the way for their voice to be heard.
4. Results: experts’ views

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The following chapter reports on the findings of phase one of this research project, which involved focus group and individual semi-structured interviews with twelve key informants, that occurred between November 2009 and April 2010. The purpose of key informant interviews was to develop a basic local understanding of sexting amongst Australian young people, given a lack of available literature about the phenomenon. Key informants included professionals from the academic, education and health sectors. See table 8 for key informant participant identification codes. Results of this phase of the study were published in Youth Studies Australia in December 2011. See table 9 for a summary of themes resulting from individual and focus group interviews with key informants, and see appendix 17 for a copy of the full journal article.

Table 8: Key informant participant identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional role of participants</th>
<th>Participant ID</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cyber safety expert</td>
<td>[P7 (participant 7), FG (focus group)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education policy academic (sexuality education)</td>
<td>[P3, FG]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school teacher / student wellbeing</td>
<td>[P4, FG]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual violence prevention (schools)</td>
<td>[P1, FG]; [P6, FG]; [P5, FG]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual violence prevention research academic</td>
<td>[P10, IV (interview)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social diversity academic / author (youth culture)</td>
<td>[P2, FG]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen magazine author / youth and family psychologist</td>
<td>[P12, IV]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telecommunications security and safety expert</td>
<td>[P11, IV]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth health academic</td>
<td>[P8, IV]; [P9, IV]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 EXPERTS’ VIEWS ON THE NATURE OF Sexting

4.2.1 Stories from the field

Most stories about sexting shared by those who work with young people, involved harmful consequences for those involved, particularly for young women. Those who did not work with young people discussed their second hand knowledge of the phenomenon, with similar stories.

I’m thinking about the worst cases I’ve seen ... Bob basically had parents in Brighton and the parents subscribed to the philosophy of, ‘leave them alone and go on holiday’. So they did. This boy had a party. They all got drunk. There were a whole lot of kids there that this girl didn’t know. She got totally pissed. Woke up in a bed nude. Had written all over her in texta the most ‘foul’ things. But just above her belly button the words ‘soon to be seen on YouTube’. (P12, interview)

A 13-year-old girl met a guy on-line ... he was old enough to drive, so six, seven years age difference. He convinced her to do the sexting - send some pictures over the Internet. Didn’t think anything of it. Down the track ‘I’m going to send all these to your family and all your friends if you don’t come and meet me’. She went and met him and basically it turned out it was a fairly violent rape ... and he actually did it to her another two times. She didn’t tell anybody. She thought, ‘Oh I’m going to get in trouble’. (P5, focus group)

There was a sense amongst participants that sexting is NOT a word young people use.

No, never hear that word if that’s what it is ... you’ve got to be careful assuming everyone knows what it means. (P3, interview)

I think sometimes we’ve got to be very careful when we talk to young people that we don’t use our labels for behaviours ... They talk about what happens rather than the label. (P7, focus group)
Table 9 Emerging themes from key informant interviews

| The nature of sexting | Polarised views on prevalence  
Some ‘at risk’ young people more likely to be involved in sexting  
Polarised views about whether it is a new behaviour |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The origins of sexting | Technology is not to blame for sexting, it is just the mechanism by which the behaviour is undertaken  
A sexualised culture is to blame for sexting  
Young people feel pressured to conform to gender expectations |
| Experts views on the purpose of sexting for young people | Identity exploration  
Peer approval  
Bullying |
| Experts views on the implications of sexting | Legal consequences  
Multi-dimensional aspects of relationships are not explored  
For same sex-attracted young people implications may be positive  
Consequences of the behaviour are different for each gender |
| Experts views on solutions to harmful consequences of sexting | Legal responses  
Engage with young people  
Educate the bystander  
Create a new public discourse about respectful ethical relationships |

4.2.2 Everyone is sexting or media hype?

Views were polarised about the prevalence of sexting. One view expressed by an academic researcher who works in secondary schools, was that the media is over-reporting.

The young people that I've worked with...have never disclosed that they have engaged in sexting behaviour. However, whenever I do professional development workshops for teachers, for parents, everyone’s talking about it seems to be ... sensationalised or over reported by the media. (P8, interview)

Furthermore, concern was raised about the role of the media:

I do think there’s a bit of a media beat up about it ... but in many respects the media beat up actually encourages it. (P12, interview)

For others who spend time in schools however, there was a strong sense that the behaviour is widespread among young people.
After a presentation to students in a school about cyber safety, and in particular sexting, they went out with the teacher/coordinator ... [and] said ‘oh my goodness you’ve really rattled the cages because ... the kids walked out and said, “oh my god, we all do that”’. (P7, focus group)

You only ever [hear] them saying ‘it didn’t happen to me, it happened to a friend of mine’, but they must all be engaging in [this] somewhere on the [spectrum]. (P3, focus group)

4.2.3 Who is sexting and most at risk?

In terms of who is involved, there was general consensus that young men are more often the distributors of images. Some key informants felt most young people are involved in sexting, while others assumed we only hear about the worst case-scenarios.

In terms of who is considered most at risk, while the consensus was that everybody is at risk, young women were felt to be more at risk than young men. Young people with disabilities were also considered an at risk group.

[Young people with] Asperger’s ... have been involved in this thing ... for them it’s really safe. I know a girl at school who’s very flirtatious ... her computer is a girl and she uses that as a vehicle to flirt pretty ferociously, which would undoubtedly ... include really inappropriate messages and images to a variety of people as a way of connecting, when connecting in real life is way scarier. (P4, focus group)

4.3 Experts’ views on the origins of sexting

4.3.1 Mobile phone: the mechanism or the cause?

A commonly held view was that sexting is merely a new manifestation of old motivations and behaviours among young people.

We are using a new technology in order to do it, but at the end of the day it’s not new ... even the sharing of images of women, I mean that’s not new. (P10, interview)

We don’t necessarily acknowledge that the behaviour has been similar for a long period of time. It’s just that the technology facilitates the behaviour in a slightly different way, and ... maybe it makes dissemination of things like photographs easier because normally you would have had to have photocopied them and hung them up on the wall, whereas now it’s a click of a button which may for some young people
mean that the consequences are more severe because they do get out there quicker.
(P8, interview)

It was acknowledged that mobile phone ownership is increasing among young people, and
given most mobile phones today have in-built cameras and Bluetooth, that fast and easy
distribution of images is inevitable.

[They] are much more savvy with using their phones ... mobile phones are probably
the greatest transmitter of pornography out there. (P10, interview)

Moreover, the mobile phone was considered the mechanism that enables the behaviour.

It’s got nothing to do with the technology ... it’s got everything to do with the
behaviour... (P11, interview)

A debate occurred between key informants in the focus group, about whether technology is
shaping our culture or the other way around.

Isn’t it more than a mirror - isn’t it quite cyclical - that what is happening in their lives
is reflected in technology but then ... technology is shaping what’s happening in young
people’s lives, so at the moment we have this cycle in which what is becoming normal
is actually shaped by an enormous market and by a whole lot of factors that are
newish. (P6, focus group)

4.3.2 Nature of adolescence

Given adolescence is an important stage developmentally for sexuality and gender identity
exploration; some key informants felt consensual sexting amongst young people may in fact be
a healthy form of experimentation in the context of developmental changes. Some participants
discussed the fact that developmentally young people need to explore their sexuality, and
denying this is not helpful.

Some of the views we are hearing [in the media] are actually; well young people
shouldn’t be doing this in the first place. Young people shouldn’t be being sexual.
Young people shouldn’t be thinking in these ways ... I think not only is it unrealistic,
but I mean it doesn’t achieve anything to sort of deny that young people are [sexual
beings]. (P10, interview)

We need to view it in the context of adolescent development, and that young people
have often experimented with sexual identity and sexual behaviour in adolescence,
and for me [sexting] is one way that young people are doing that. (P8, interview)
One of the other considerations, and it might be quite controversial, is to actually reflect on who is being hurt by the behaviour ... I’d probably rather that young people were viewing stuff on their mobile phones than if they were ... getting themselves into bars and hooking up with older guys. (P8, interview)

Some key informants talked about the emotional immaturity and brain development of young people being a catalyst for the behavior of sexting.

We’re dealing with emotionally immature young people in many cases, you know, because [sexting] starts in about year 7 where we’ve got ... covert bullying. (P7, focus group)

I think [sexting] happens because kids’ brains are a work in progress and a unique characteristic of all of these kids is an inability to predict the consequences of their actions. (P12, interview)

Young people not having a sense of future, was also discussed, as a factor contributing to the behaviour of sexting among young people.

Because one of the things when I’ve spoken to kids about [sexting], is that you’ll talk about your footprint that you’re going to leave on the world, as far as on the Internet, and you’re talking about you know this could affect your future employment, because of what happened - they don’t care, couldn’t care less. (P5, focus group)

They’re adolescents, they don’t care... (P3, focus group)

One participant talked about young people from different cultural backgrounds feeling the need to be involved in sexting in order to ‘fit in’.

A lot of young people come into this culture and they know, they kind of know what the culture’s about, and its interesting hearing from them, that the culture is about getting all the [sexually explicit images] and using it for these purposes; that’s part of being Australian. (P2, focus group)

Some participants talked about the fact that young people have grown up in a media culture that encourages self-publishing.

They love producing text and producing images; producing stuff that is a kind of invitation; [those] 15 minutes, five minutes, five seconds of fame. (P2, focus group)

With teenagers it’s all about publish. Publish and display, publish and display, publish and display ... so for that generation it is all about publishing. (P9, interview)
4.3.3 Society is not addressing the issue of sexting

Most key informants felt that adults (including those in schools) are not dealing with the issue of sexting, so it is no wonder it is happening.

The problem we've got is that it's such a distasteful subject that you're talking about, that people don't want to talk about it. The less they talk about [sexting], the more prevalent it becomes because kids aren't being told about it. (P11, interview)

Look at society though; society doesn’t want to deal with [sexting]. Society does not want to deal with the issue of sex. (P5, focus group)

You know it’s just another manifestation, a very dangerous one of stuff that we are not addressing effectively in our schools and in our society. (P2, focus group)

A great deal of discussion occurred about sexual health education in schools and limited resources to deliver it effectively.

So I guess my hobby horse would be that ... we’re failing to support teachers in resourcing them in how to deal with something that’s relevant to young people and it’s not that they are unwilling to do it, they just don’t know how to do it and of course it’s difficult because when you talk to a group of young people about sex and relationships and sexual imagery you are talking about stuff that’s going on amongst them and it’s really fraught. (P3, focus group)

Furthermore, many key informants highlighted that most teachers don’t feel comfortable talking about sexual matters like sexting.

There’s a lot of research around what stops teachers from doing sex ed in schools and the research says time and again that it’s concern about flack from parents, it’s a feeling they’ve never been trained so they don’t know how to do it and they might hurt the kids somehow or they might get into hot water and they don’t know how to get out. (P3, focus group)

4.3.4 A sexualised culture

A commonly held opinion was the need to consider sexting within the broader context of the sexualisation of culture.

There is also the sexualisation issue, which I think plays a huge role. If you allow this third parent into your home through the television set – videos, YouTube, fashion. Basically I think the whole thing has blurred the line between what is a girl and what is
a woman ... I see this as incredibly sinister ... creeping corporate paedophilia. (P12, interview)

Moreover, some key informants were concerned that young people have become desensitised as a result of their increased exposure to pornography, with a view that the hard core edge of pornography has shifted, so that what once was hard core, is now considered normal.

The mainstreaming of pornography, including the increasingly hard-core nature of what is widely available, is impacting on what seems normal and acceptable. It makes sexted images of nudity for example look quite tame. (P6, focus group)

It was also considered that sexting among young people is possibly a reflection of what occurs in the adult world.

Along the lines of binge drinking, adults are doing it and the kids are doing it. If you go down to a pub on a Friday night and guys will be going, ‘Check this out’, and they’ve got something, and it mightn’t be child pornography or young kids but it’s some video that’s come off U-Tube of some of the nude stuff and people are standing around laughing and you know you’ve got younger guys in the cricket clubs and stuff and they see it and it’s like, ‘What’s the big issue, oh send it on to me’. (P5, focus group)

And so there’s a lot of pressure on other boys I think to kind of go along with it too. (P1, focus group)

I don’t think that’s different to what’s happening in the adult world. I think that’s exactly the same as what’s happening in the adult world. (P4, focus group)

4.3.5 Gender expectations

The gendered expectations of young people were discussed in relation to the behaviour of sexting, including a view that young women face pressure to present themselves in sexual ways, and young men are expected to be interested in this. A consensus that young women experience pressure from a sexualised media culture was expressed.

Something that seems to be pronounced at the moment [is] the expectation on young women to present themselves in sexual ways ... as objects for consumption. (P10, interview)

That to be a woman to go into adulthood is to be sexy and is to be desirable and to position themselves in these ways ... so there are a whole lot of pressures which would mean that I can see very easily how some young women would feel that they
have to be sending sex messages and that might be a pressure that they are taking on. (P10, interview)

The role models and the images of women that we are seeing do seem to be very narrowly sexualised. Whether or not that’s new, I don’t know that it’s all that new, but it does seem to be happening to perhaps a more extreme degree than perhaps we are used to seeing. (P10, interview)

The fact is all of those things send a message through to 13 year old girls that if you want to be okay, the only way you can do that is (a) by being sexual, (b) by putting out, and (c) by dressing in a way that is going to be sexually provocative and that no matter how beautiful you think you are, you will never really be beautiful enough unless you wear these cosmetics, wear these clothes, have this type of mobile phone and engage in that sort of behaviour. (P12, interview)

Most key informants expressed concern about pressure young women experience from boys.

That boys are sort of saying to girls, ‘if you loved me you would send me a sex image’, or ‘I’m not interested in someone who is not going to do this’, you know, ‘the relationship is off.’ (P10, interview)

Some key informants also expressed concern about the pressure experienced by boys to participate in sexting.

One woman ... said she has a teenage son at an all boy’s school and that her son has felt pressure to be getting sexy images on his mobile phone of girlfriends and girls he is seeing so that he can send them on to the guys ... but also it becomes, not only so that he looks like the cool, you know, ‘I can score women’, but also that, as a male if you are not participating in that culture then you get bullied in terms of homophobic responses. (P10, interview)

I think it would generally be more males sending it on ... and so there’s a lot of pressure on other boys I think to kind of go along with it too. (P1, interview)

4.4 **Experts views on the purpose of sexting**

4.4.1 **Identity exploration**

A few participants felt sexting may be a safe way for young people to explore their sexuality, particularly for same sex attracted young people.
One of the other considerations, and it might be quite controversial, is to actually reflect on who is being hurt by the behaviour because in my mind I’d probably rather that young people were viewing stuff on their mobile phones than if they were going down to Chapel Street and getting themselves into bars and hooking up with older guys. Like I think for some young people, is this a safe way of exploring their identity, and it might be the same, you know, viewing pornography online ... and so for me that seems to be one of the key issues, is viewing it in the context of young people’s sexual development and is this age appropriate behaviour for a 15, 16, 17 year old ... there’s been reports in the media of kids as young as 9, 10, 11, [and] 12. I haven’t seen any evidence of that happening, but if you look at these young people in the context of development... (P8, interview)

4.4.2 Peer approval

Some key informants felt young people were involved in sexting in order to boost their reputation, whether about a sexual bravado, or just ‘showing off’.

I think there is an element of girls producing it for the Paris Hilton effect; the aim is actually about building a reputation because it’s better to have some press than no press ... so it’s better to be somebody with an image and a story than a really boring nobody. (P4, focus group)

But I think there’s probably a component of ... young people wanting to show off to their friends or that kind of sexual bravado kind of stuff ... like, guys have always bragged to their friends about who they’ve slept with. Girls too ... probably increasingly, as I think young women have become more comfortable with having a sexual identity. (P8, interview)

Some key informants also shared a view that young people may be involved in sexting as a joke.

... It’s the party on Saturday night and somebody decides to video a sex act going on ... and they’re doing it as a joke, it’s malicious but they’re not thinking about it. (P5, focus group)

4.4.3 Bullying

Finally, there was a view that young people are sexting to gain ‘power over’ others, as a form of bullying.
I’m just thinking it’s a kind of nice passive way of bullying someone too, isn’t it, to send an image. (P3, focus group)

Absolutely - yeah, a very powerful form of bullying. (P6, focus group)

4.5 Experts views on implications of sexting

Whilst the prevalence of sexting in Australia is uncertain, stories shared by participants leave no doubt that some young people have suffered as a result of participating in the behaviour. Stories of young people feeling unsafe, embarrassed, humiliated, bullied and ashamed were shared. Sometimes this led to young people leaving school or being isolated from their friendship groups. Some key informants considered non-consensual sexting, where an image is misused and sent on without permission a form of sexual violence.

I think if we look at it in terms of damaging reputations or enhancing reputations, the public humiliation if you have had your image sent virally is enormous… (P7, focus group)

A bunch of girls got together…convinced this [other] girl who had a crush on a boy, to do a striptease. They actually filmed it … and the concept was that they would send this striptease via telephone to the boy, the boy would see it, fall instantly in love with the girl [and] realise that … his dream had come true … basically the boy sent back a message saying ‘slut, skank, whore’, and sent it to everybody in his class. (P12, interview)

There was however concern too, for those who may not have told anyone about their experience for fear of all of the above – these young people were considered potentially even more at risk.

That’s someone who’s had (I know this sounds ridiculous), a positive enough negative experience to feel that they can – yeah they’re actually reporting it, so that means that they’ve told someone, or they felt good enough about themselves to go ‘I’m going to report that’. (P4, focus group)

4.5.1 Legal consequences

The potential for young people to be charged with the production or dissemination of child pornography if the image is of a person under 18 years depicted in a sexual manner, was of concern to key informants, with a common view that current legislation does not provide an effective response.
What’s happening is these kids are being caught up in legislation that wasn’t put in place to catch them. (P11, interview)

There was however an understanding by one participant that young people who were not intending to produce child pornography would not be charged.

I’m told ... that they’re not often charged with the production of it because the intention was not to produce child pornography and interestingly the law clearly states that ... if she sends it and it just stays there it’s a private matter between two young people, that would be the end of it. But the minute it is sent, either uploaded to the Internet, or sent to one other person, it then becomes child pornography. (P7, focus group)

There was also a view that young people do not understand the potential consequences of their behaviour.

Charges can be levelled at different people in the sequence of events and a lot of them go ‘oh my God we just didn’t know that’. (P7, focus group)

4.5.2 Multi-dimensional aspects of relationships not explored

There was a great deal of concern that young people are not learning about mutuality and respect because sexting does not create an opportunity for this.

It’s not necessarily that the exposure to sexual themes or content is in itself harmful, it’s where that sexual content is presenting a very narrow version of sexuality ... then we are kind of setting young people up just to follow in that model. (P10, interview)

You won’t see mutuality and respect and those kind of concepts modelled in sex because sexting images and the vast majority of pornography doesn’t contain those kind of concepts. So sex is a very powerful space for us to work out our gender and our concepts of who we are, and yet young people are getting those images as part of their shaping sense of what sex is, and what gender is, without there being the broader kind of modelling... (P6, focus group)

Participants shared concerns about the fact that the multidimensional nature of relationships cannot be explored through technology (just the physicality)...

I think there’s something about the multidimensional nature of relationships that by kind of definition can’t be explored through technology and that if young people are maybe being strengthened in one hand and not getting, you know experience and
being strong in other forms of communication then that can be imbalanced... (P6, focus group)

The other thing that strikes me about this technology and this way of learning is that it’s a one-way thing. (P3, focus group)

4.5.3 Gender issues

Some participants shared a concern that young women are putting each other down, and that within this power imbalance, they continue to be the victims.

There’s a really interesting girl’s reaction to it as well. There’s a lot of kind of self blame on other girls, like, ‘what the hell did she do that for’, like, ‘she asked for it’ ... then when we started to probe a little bit deeper they were like, ‘oh, but you know, if the girl’s sent [a sext], and she didn’t really mind, then it’s okay’. (P1, focus group)

Can I just say that for me one of the striking things in the stories is the general imbalance in the implications so that young women are finding themselves in a victimised position and young men can have exactly the same images going around but they’re the stud, so it’s the age old difference ... the consequences for young women and gay men are I think different to the consequences for hetero males ... not that it’s not problematic for the other groups, but the power imbalance is. (P6, focus group)

4.5.4 Same-sex-attracted young people

There was an acknowledgement that sexting may in fact be a positive thing for same sex attracted young people.

I guess for a same sex attracted young person like on-line they actually can separate the two worlds, I suppose, because if they don’t feel that they can be who they feel they are in real life because mum and dad don’t agree or the kids at school won’t agree or they’re just terrified they can of course express themselves. (P4, focus group)

That’s right. Anonymity can be positive if you’re [same sex attracted]. (P6, focus group)
4.6 **Experts views on solutions**

Whilst there was a general feeling amongst key informants that sexting is in fact an issue, there was much concern that we are not addressing the problem and that schools, parents and those who work with young people do not know what to do.

Over the last few years more and more people are saying ‘how do we deal with this problem?’ and so they don’t know how to address it. (P3, focus group)

While a variety of responses were expressed regarding strategies for dealing with potential risks associated with sexting, one participant felt the nature of adolescence developmentally makes it too difficult to manage.

I would argue that when it comes to what can we do about it, the answer is nothing, because you can’t legislate against adolescent brains ... the fact is, developmentally, kids do dumb things. (P12, interview)

### 4.6.1 Legal responses

The potential for young people to be charged with the production or dissemination of child pornography if the image is of a person under 18 years depicted in a sexual manner, was of concern to key informants, who agreed that current legal responses to deal with sexting are inappropriate.

So I think that’s a very dangerous road to go down and I think we do need to make a qualitative distinction between young people of a similar age basically exploring their sexuality and the very serious offence of child sexual exploitation because they are not equivalent ... that’s not to say that where it goes wrong and there’s the non consent and there’s distribution of an image, I think that does need to be taken seriously, but I don’t think it’s the same as child pornography ... we do need a legislative model which says that the widespread distribution of someone’s personal sexual image is wrong. That even if the initial image is sent in consent, you can’t then send it elsewhere. (P10, interview)

### 4.6.2 Engage with young people

There was general consensus that research with young people is needed to determine the extent of sexting, in order that appropriate responses are developed. The need for Australian prevalence data to determine the real extent of the phenomenon was highlighted. Furthermore, an emphasis was shared of the need to talk ‘with’, rather than ‘at’ young people,
that scare tactics do not work, and of the importance of discussing the benefits of using technology as well as the risks.

I think that’s the key point ... we have to talk with them, rather than at them, or to them, and I think what’s not working in this space, whether it’s the sexting or the covert bullying, or exposure to porn, all of these sorts of things, it’s the shock jock stuff just does not get there. (P7, focus group)

I find that you can have some conversations with young people but I have to put it within the context of ‘okay, what’s a healthy sexuality; let’s talk about all the good stuff about sex, and the continuum’, and you know like get them into ‘hey she’s alright, she’s not uncomfortable, she’s not ... from another [planet]’. So you talk about all the good stuff ... I often say things like – I see some teachers in the background kind of keeling over – I say things like ‘whoever, whenever, whatever you do, sexually that’s not the issue. The issue is safe sex and self-respect’. (P2, focus group)

Consensus was shared about the need for adults to have conversations with young people about their use of technology in the context of broader discussions about relationships, intimacy, gender, sexuality and ethics.

We need to be bold enough to go there with what the deeper issues are ... find strategies to engage with young people to potentially shift their discourse, so they’re learning about sex and gender ... that sex can be fantastic, it can be fun, and mutually respectful, and engaging you know. We have to have that discourse, because if you create a vacuum, it gets filled straight back with whatever is there ... we need to find strategies to engage with young people to potentially shift their discourse, so they’re learning that sex can be fantastic, it can be fun, and mutually respectful, and engaging you know. (P6, focus group)

It was acknowledged however that having these discussions with young people is not something teachers and parents find easy.

Over the last few years more and more people [in schools] are saying ‘how do we deal with this problem?’ and so they don’t know how to address it ... we’re having trouble keeping up with the technology. (P3, focus group)

But you’ve also got teachers, who are the key people, who go ‘I wouldn’t even know how to begin the conversation’. (P4, focus group)
Participants emphasised the importance of not only focusing on negative aspects of the behaviour.

If we go in assuming, that sending what I think is a sexy picture of myself to my boyfriend, is a problem, then we don’t get anywhere, because I might see that as just an extension of our relationship. (P3, focus group)

These horror stories are coming out and you look at the front page of the Herald Sun. It’s just not the way to do it. What you’ve got to do is be really positive about it and say listen, we know you’re online, you know, you’ve got a great Facebook, [and] you’ve got a great *Bebo* site or a *MySpace* site. We know what you’re up to – great - it’s good that you’re using the technology. (P11, interview)

4.6.3 Educate the Bystander

Some key informants discussed the need for interventions targeted at the peer group level rather than at individuals involved in sexting.

Our bystanders are really powerful people, like they’re the ones who are slipping us the information… (P4, focus group)

I think the issue of the bystander is a really important one and a good focus for working in schools. If you see this is going on what can you do?’ and the whole issue of ‘should you respond?’ I think starting with that, like ‘Is it cool to just let it happen?’ (P1, focus group)

I think there certainly needs to be some work done, probably led by young people, to educate teachers, parents and healthcare professionals around the way in which young people do use technology, and the meaning that they place on the use of technology. (P8, interview)

4.6.4 Create a new public discourse about respectful ethical relationships

Key informants’ comments highlighted the need for frank discussions with young people about respect and responsibility.

We really have to take seriously, masculinity and the way that status and being a man is defined in our culture and that one of the key kind of factors or cultural markers for successful masculinity is around consumption of women, consumption of a sexual image … we do need to be having discussions with young people about the ethical use of these technologies. We need to be talking to them and encouraging them to reflect
about it. Not us saying, ‘Don’t do this because it’s wrong’, but actually asking them to think about what’s the right thing to do ... ‘if a mate sends you an image of their girlfriend, what’s the right thing for you to do? Is the right thing for you to do to send it on or is the right thing for you to do to say to that guy, “Look mate, don’t send me this stuff, that’s between you and her, I don’t want it.” Or is the right thing to do to report him? To report him to a teacher or to the police or something like that.’ (P10, interview)

4.7 CONCLUSION

Focus group and interview data from key informants has highlighted the complex nature and polarised attitudes that exist in relation to sexting amongst young people. Views ranged from the practice being a result of our sexualised culture, to young people simply exploring their sexual identity as they have always done. Participants did not agree on whether or not sexting is something we should be concerned about, or what we should be doing about the phenomenon.

There was however, broad support from key informants for further investigation regarding sexting and young people, with future research efforts needing to identify how young people define sexting, the role it plays in their lives and their suggestions for how best to intervene. However more critical, in the view of key informants, was the need for young people’s voices to be heard. Similarly, key informants were unanimous that solutions do indeed need to be shaped by the expressed experience of young people.
5. Results: young people’s voice

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The following chapter reports on the findings of individual semi-structured interviews with 33 young people aged 15 to 20 years conducted between August 2010 and August 2011. Topics of inquiry were established following my review of the literature and following analysis of data from key informants. Given the sensitive nature of some areas of inquiry, most young people appeared very candid and open in their responses. Many in fact expressed gratitude for being given the opportunity to participate and share their views and concerns. Interviews were between 15-50 minutes.

First, a description of young people involved in the study is given, followed by a detailed discussion of the nature of sexting from young people’s perspective, including the terms they use to describe the behaviour, views on prevalence and their concerns. Also provided are details about the sexted images, including who initially produced and distributed them, who and where they were distributed, views on attitudes to those represented in the images, who is to blame, and consequences of the behaviour for those involved. Secondly, young people’s sense of the origins of sexting is described, with a particular focus on the pressure they feel is experienced by girls and boys, and the sexualised culture they describe as having played a significant role in influencing the behaviour. Finally, young people’s views about potential solutions regarding the negative impacts of sexting are shared, including in particular, educative strategies involving schools, young people, parents and SNS.

5.2 SAMPLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Just over half the participants were female, that is, 18 young women and 15 young men participated in interviews. This lower representation of males is reflective of an ongoing difficulty in recruiting young men into sexuality research (Carmody 2009). Of these participants seventeen were aged 15-17 years, and sixteen were aged 18-20 years. All young people resided in the east.
ern metropolitan suburbs of Melbourne, with all except one participating in some form of education. Although an attempt was made to include as many young people from marginalised settings and different socio-economic and cultural groups, limited numbers of young people were represented from these target cohorts. Two young people identified as same sex attracted, one young person had a disability, one young person was unemployed and one young person was from a non-English speaking background. One third of participants however were participating in an alternative education program at TAFE and some of these participants represented ‘at risk’ young people with substance use and mental health issues

Brackets after each quote include firstly the pseudonym chosen by or allocated to the young person, followed by their gender and age. Table 10 shows participant pseudonyms and basic demographic information including age and education status. Figure 2 presents a summary of numbers of young women and men in each age group. Table 11 provides a summary of themes emerging from interviews with young people Table 11: Themes emerging from interviews with young people
Table 10: Pseudonyms, ages and education levels of young people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young women</th>
<th>Young men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>15-17 years</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELLE, Year 12</td>
<td>FAM, CGEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LYDIA, Year 9</td>
<td>B6, CGEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CASEY, Year 11</td>
<td>DEWALIO, Year 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOLLY, Year 10</td>
<td>JOE, Year 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICOLE, CGEA</td>
<td>B1, CGEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELLIOT, CGEA</td>
<td>B5, CGEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARCY, CGEA</td>
<td>SS, CGEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G5, CGEA</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>G6, Year 9</td>
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<tr>
<td>G7, Year 9</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>18-20 years</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G9, University</td>
<td>B2, CGEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R13, University</td>
<td>B7, CGEA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANDRA, Year 12</td>
<td>ISAAC, TAFE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMILLE, University</td>
<td>MGM1, University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G16, University</td>
<td>SOLARFLARE, Year 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHELBY, University</td>
<td>B11, Year 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROSIE, University</td>
<td>DARIUS, Year 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLLY, University</td>
<td>MATTHEW, Unemployed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CGEA = Certificate in General Education for Adults, at a TAFE (Tertiary & Further Education College)

Figure 1: Numbers of young women and men in each aged group
Table 11: Themes emerging from interviews with young people

| Young people views on the nature of sexting | Young people do not use the term ‘sexting’  
Sexually explicit images were of girls, boys and couples  
Sexting images were photographs or videos  
Images are self-produced or taken of others  
Young women more often represented in compromising poses  
Young people are concerned about sexting  
Polarised views on prevalence |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Views on attitudes to those in the sexted images | ‘Girls are sluts!’  
Concern for the girl in the sexted image  
Sexting in relationships is okay |
| Young people’s views on the origins of sexting | Pressure  
A sexualised culture to blame  
Pornography |
| Young peoples views on the purpose of sexting for young people | Sexting for revenge  
Sexual experimentation  
Risk-taking  
Alcohol  
Sexting ‘for a laugh’  
Attention seeking  
Boredom |
| Young people’s views on solutions to the harmful consequences of sexting | Schools and education  
Educating parents  
Education about legal implications not the only answer  
Social marketing prevention campaigns  
Web based education and information needs to be better promoted  
Filtering systems  
Legal responses  
Challenge the media  
Sexting is too difficult to deal with  
Involve young people in response |

5.3 Young people’s views about the nature of sexting

5.3.1 Young people do not use the term ‘sexting’

Sexting’ is not a word young people use to describe the production or distribution of sexually explicit images (SEIs). Most, but not all had heard the word ‘sexting’, but felt it was a word only used by the media and adults. Moreover, there was no one word that described the phenomenon for all young people. Some terms they used to describe the behaviour included
‘dirty pictures’, ‘sexy pictures’, ‘nudes’, ‘noodz’ and ‘naked pictures’. Some young people also described sexting as the sending of ‘sexy messages’ and a couple of young men even described it as sending ‘pornographic images’.

5.3.2 Sexually explicit images of girls, boys and couples

Most sexting stories shared by participants involved sexually explicit photos of nude or semi-nude individuals, couples or groups of young people. Of the stories involving photos as opposed to videos, most involved SEIs of girls, although some stories involved SEIs of boys too.

There’s the more innocent sort of things that are just like … nude and women’s bodies. Then there’s the really like nitty-gritty … just like the genital, like just full on.
(Rosie, female aged 19)

I’ve seen pictures of girls giving blow jobs at parties when there’s like five other people doing the same thing in the same spot, that kind of stuff and they’re like 15 and 14. (Darcie, female aged 17)

A number of stories also involved videos of young people involved in sexual activity (including sexual intercourse and masturbation); sometimes these images were self produced, at other times young people were videoed or photographed by someone else.

People have sat in the room when their friends have been having sex and videoed it and then just like gone to a club and sent it to everyone… (Elliot, female aged 17)

There’s this one story; he also went to my school. He was going out with this girl and … I’m not really 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.
(R13, female aged 20)

Some young people talked of incidents where young people had created SEIs of themselves masturbating alone.

Its kind of gross, like it’s – I’ll get it out though. So year 10 … she kind of just had an impulse can, yeah, use your imagination … took a photo, sent it to not even her boyfriend, just some guy and I don’t know, they caught the bus together and it just got distributed and I even saw the photo and it wasn’t very nice. (R13, female aged 20)

A number of stories were disclosed about SEIs of girls being distributed by boys after a relationship ended without the girls’ consent.
The boy asks the girl to send him some images or videos or something and then – so she does that and he keeps them forever, you know, in case of blackmail or whatever he wants to do with the images. Then they do have a fight and then – or 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... (B6, male aged 17)

Many stories were shared of boys showing SEIs of girls to friends, or boys discovering a friend had an SEI of a girl on his phone and requesting to see it, highlighting the ease at which SEIs can be shared with the world.

There was a girl at school that had sent a picture of herself to one of the guys and that got blue toothed to almost every friend in school and shown around. (Lydia, female aged 15)

Because you show one mate, and then that mate will show one mate and so on. I have seen photos of a friend have sex with a girl. (Fam, male aged 16)

Some young people talked about sexually explicit images being shown to people in person on a mobile phone or other IT device.

Yeah, people have photos on their phones, like their girlfriends, and show them to their mates and stuff. More often they don’t send it - they just show it. (Solarflare, male aged 18)

Yeah. If a girl had a photo on her phone they would just show you ... they wouldn’t go to the extreme effort to send it and stuff. (G6, female aged 15)

5.3.3 Young people are concerned about sexting

All young women were concerned to some extent about the issue of sexting, even if they did not feel it was prevalent. Some terms used to describe their unease were that it was ‘definitely harmful’, ‘not cool’, ‘completely wrong’ and ‘stupid’. Most young men also expressed at least some degree of concern about the phenomenon, describing it as ‘wrong’, ‘embarrassing’, ‘offensive’, and ‘a big thing you want to stop’. Of the few young men who did not think it was an issue particularly, all did acknowledge however, that it may be an issue for some young women in some circumstances. Nevertheless, amongst these views there was a feeling that it was the young woman’s fault for sending the image in the first place.
Even if the photo will be out there ... and if she hates it - it’s still her decision that she sent it. I’ve got nothing against that. Its just if the person doesn’t like it - then she’s an idiot for sending it in the first place. (B5, male aged 17)

I think [sexting] is like the easiest way to get revenge on someone. It’s in your hands. Definitely especially while like hormones are running. Yeah so I think it is definitely harmful. (G1, female aged 16)

Of particular concern for young people interviewed, were the stories of SEIs of girls being sent on or showed to someone without their consent, which usually resulted in harmful consequences for that young person. Participants talked of young women moving schools, facing family and peer disapproval and stigma.

They just shared them around and all that and I know that a few of the girls ended up becoming quite distressed ... it can ruin the reputation of that person - it can cause them to be bullied, teased. (B11, male aged 18)

I think that it’s quite scarring and can definitely crop up in the future, and will damage people. (Shelby, female aged 18)

Some young women also talked about the impact someone’s involvement in sexting may have on their friends.

So people would come up to me and they’d be like ‘are you friends with so and so?’ and I don’t know, I’d feel embarrassed to tell people I was friends with her ... it was kind of embarrassing just for people to link me with her and say ‘I wonder if R13 does that too?‘ (R13, female aged 20)

Of the stories shared, only a few examples were given of SEIs shared between two people that were not forwarded on to others; usually this was between young people in a romantic relationship, and was considered okay.

I think maybe if it gets into the wrong hands it might be harmful. I don’t know. Between girlfriend and boyfriend I don’t really see it as harmful. (B1, male aged 18)

I think it’s an issue if it gets out of hand. If someone’s sent it to someone and they’ve sent it on to heaps of people and that other person doesn’t know, I think that’s when it becomes an issue. (Nichole, female aged 17)

Additionally, a couple of young women shared a concern about the ease at which SEIs can be captured and distributed from webcam via the print screen function.
You feel really awkward and embarrassed like I’ve had it happen to me; I’ve thought it would be okay to show someone something on webcam and then a few months later I had some guy – I was talking to one of my friends on a friends MSN and I went and spoke to one of his friends and he was just like ‘oh, you’re that girl’. I was like ‘I’m what girl?’ Just like ‘no, I’ve seen you on my friend’s computer’ and I then I suddenly was like, ‘What? What happened there?’ Kind of like, because they print screened and I had no idea and I did not take it well. (Elliot, female aged 17)

5.3.4 Polarised views on prevalence

As this study did not involve gathering prevalence data, determining the extent of the phenomenon across population groups was not possible. However, participants were asked about their sense of prevalence amongst young people they knew, and amongst broader groups of young people, as well as whether they believe the prevalence of sexting amongst young people has been under or over reported. Young people’s views about prevalence were polarised, with a mixture of responses across both genders and all age groups. All participants however did have stories to share about people they knew (although not all known personally) who had been involved in sexting in some form or other, which included individuals having:

- Produced an SEI of themselves, and shared this with others (sent or posted online);
- Distributed an SEI of others (sent, posted online or showed someone on their own handheld IT device or computer;
- Viewed an SEI of others.

Around one third of all young people felt sexting was prevalent amongst all groups.

It’s running rife at the moment. I reckon it’s just a very occurring thing … yes, it happens a lot. I have a lot of friends that do it and get in trouble with it. (GS, female aged 17)

It definitely is out there everywhere. It’s happening all the time … I just know a lot of people do it. (B6, male aged 17)

About another third of all young people expressed a view that ‘it’s not that common’. However, these participants all believed it was happening at least to some extent.

Well I actually don’t believe it’s happening as much as a lot of people believe … there are people who send photos out, and there are a minority of those photos that would be shared. (B11, male aged 18)
I guess it happens on rare occasions ... I’m not going to sit here and say that it doesn’t happen – it does happen. But I don’t think that it happens as much as people say that it does. (Elle, female aged 17)

Furthermore, a few young people expressed a sense that small numbers of young people are involved in sexting, but that the media is over-reporting this fact.

It’s like teenagers bashing old people. It’s a small minority, but because it’s a bad thing it sells newspapers. (Solarflare, male aged 18)

Not as big a deal as the news and stuff are saying ... Yeah, I reckon they just do it to sell newspapers ... I think old people and parents make it out a lot bigger deal than it really is. (G6, female aged 15)

Many young women and men expressed a view that sexting is more prevalent amongst those aged under 15 years.

Well, it’s always been around I think in the older age groups, like 16 and 17, when hormones really start to kick in and it’s like, ‘hey, look at me’, but it’s definitely getting younger and the technology’s helping that. The fact that I’ve seen 10-year-olds walking around with phones... (Solarflare, male aged 18)

Moreover, young women were particularly concerned about the vulnerability of younger girls.

... I know younger girls at 13 and 14 are just putting themselves out there. The boys only like them because of the way they are and they don’t realise that because they’re so young and immature. (Darcie, female aged 17)

There may be more younger girls at school - maybe just probably not totally aware of the risks, or maybe feel a bit pressured, not able to stand up for themselves, as you are when you’re a bit older. (G16, female aged 18)

5.4 Young People’s Views on Sexting Roles and Behaviours

Most of the stories shared were of self-produced SEIs of girls. Images were sent to boyfriends, boys the girls liked or fancied (who were not boyfriends), boys who had enticed them to send an image, and sometimes these images were sent or shown to groups of people, or posted on SNS. Fewer stories were shared of self-produced SEIs of boys distributed or shown to girls or posted on SNS. Furthermore, there were also stories of SEIs produced by those other than the person or people in the image/s; these were sometimes sent or shown to individuals, sometimes sent to groups of people, and sometimes posted on SNS. Table 12 provides a
summary of the thematic analysis that describes the nature of sexting episodes from young people’s point of view.

Table 12: Themes relating to young people’s views on the nature of sexting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describing the SEI</strong></td>
<td>• SEIs of individual girls or boys (naked or semi-naked, breasts, penises)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Images of couples having sex (intercourse, young women giving young men ‘head jobs’, a boy coming on a girl’s face)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Images of girls involved in masturbatory sexual activities (sometimes with objects)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who initially produced &amp; distributed SEIs &amp; to whom &amp; where</strong></td>
<td>• Self-produced SEIs of girls sent to boyfriends, boys they like, or boys who requested an image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-produced SEIs of girls sent to girls (usually to entice girls to send SEIs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-produced SEIs of girls/boys posted on SNS, e.g. Facebook, Chat Roulette, Rate my X-Girlfriend, Formspring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Others producing SEIs of individuals, couples or groups (usually at parties)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Roles</strong></td>
<td>• Produced &amp;/or distributed SEIs of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Produced &amp;/or distributed SEIs of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Received SEIs of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How does someone receive/view SEI</strong></td>
<td>• Personally received SEIs via own mobile phone, iPod or other ICT, e.g. mobile phone, computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Viewed SEIs in person on someone else’s ICT (sometimes being shown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Viewed SEIs on SNS, e.g. Facebook or X-Girlfriend webpage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What happens once SEI distributed</strong></td>
<td>Negative impact for:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Person/s in SEI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Friend/s of person in SEI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Person/s who distributed SEI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>➢ Person/s who requested the SEI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4.1 *Self-produced sexually explicit images of girls*

Some young people shared knowledge of girls having sent sexual photos of themselves to their boyfriends.

I’ve had friends that have had girlfriends send photos to them... (Darius, male aged 18)
Yeah, people have photos on their phones, like their girlfriends, and show them to their mates and stuff. (Solarflare, male aged 18)

Secondly, cases of self-produced SEIs of girls sent to boys they liked or fancied were recounted by both young women and men, which was often to attract the boy’s attention.

A lot of the girls that I’ve heard of getting involved in [sexting], they do it to send it to a guy that they think likes them. So they think, ‘I’ll really set the hook on him and reel him in’. (Solarflare, male aged 18)

Some young people talked about the negative consequences this led to for some young women they knew who had sent self-produced SEIs to a boy they liked; where the image was then sent on or shared with others without their consent.

There was a girl at school who sent a message, a picture of herself, not really explicit but underwear and stuff, to a guy that she thought liked her. He thought, ‘This is great’, and sent it around to all his mates. (Solarflare, male aged 18)

My best friend sent a picture of her boobs to a guy that she liked at her school and thought that he wouldn’t show anyone and then it was obviously going to get around and it did. It got around the whole school. (G5, female aged 17)

Thirdly, participants talked of SEIs sent to boys who had asked for a photo; sometimes these boys were called ‘randoms’*

Yeah. I don’t know, just a guy. Like you don’t know them very well or whatever and you’re talking to them and they’ll just ask you for photos. (G6, female aged 15)

A couple of participants also recounted stories of girls sending self-produced SEIs to groups of people.

It’s not always a girl sending a photo just to the guys in a relationship. Because we had one girl at our school ... she had a reputation that we heard that she was ... sending nudes, and she would just send it to a round of people. She was a bit weird in the head. (B5, male aged 17)

5.4.2 *Self-produced sexually explicit images of boys*

Some young people relayed stories of self-produced sexually explicit images of young men (usually of their penis) having been sent to girls they liked (often to entice the girl to send an SEI back).

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*Randoms = term used to describe Facebook friends who are friends of friends or acquaintances not known in person
I’ve had people from work sending me pictures ... I’ve been with my boyfriend for almost a year and this has been happening while I’ve been with him as well. The most recent was at New Years’. I was [on holiday] with my family and I had my phone on the counter and a message came in. My dad was the one who picked up my phone. So that was it - awkward conversation. (Elle, female aged 17)

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. (Elliot, female aged 17)

Additionally self-produced SEIs of boys were reported as having been posted on SNS.

I used to know this guy back when I was 14, he ended up taking a picture of his penis and putting it up on his MSN picture thing and having that as his display picture which I find is a bit weird, I wouldn’t be doing that myself. (B2, male aged 18)

Most young women, who talked of self-produced SEIs of boys, shared their bewilderment at why a young man would send a photo of his penis.

It’s pretty much one way I reckon. I mean I don’t know many girls who want to have a picture of their boyfriend’s penis [laughs]. (Molly, female aged 16)

Moreover, one young woman when asked if she thought girls liked seeing photos of boys’ penises, commented:

No. They’re pretty disgusting. Pretty ugly. (G6, female aged 15)

5.4.3 Sexually explicit images distributed on social networking sites

Many young people shared stories of having viewed SEIs on SNS such as Facebook, Chat Roulette and Rate My X-Girlfriend. Of the SNS where sexual photos and videos were posted, Facebook was considered the most common.

So if you want soft porn you’d just go on Facebook if you really wanted to, and search in a couple of names and you’re away. (Joe, male aged 16)

There’s heaps on the Internet on Facebook. I even consider – you know when girls put up those picture shots of themselves and they’re almost naked, I don’t know, I consider that a type of sexting, because everybody else has to see that. (Sandra, female aged 18)

One young man noted the ease at which Facebook can be accessed on mobile phones, leading to an inevitable easier access to the sexted images in these cases.
Now with all the iPhones that have Facebook on their phones and stuff and if it’s on there they’ll just go through and look at it. (Solarflare, male aged 18)

Some young women talked about SEIs of girls being posted on ‘Rate My Ex-Girlfriend’ sites.

There’s entire websites on the Internet where boys can go and post photos of ex-girlfriends that have cheated on them and stuff like that. (Rosie, female aged 19)

There is this disgusting website and its about … boyfriends who put pictures up of their ex-girlfriends, and they’re like ‘check this bitch out’ and all this stuff. (Sandra, female aged 18)

Chat Roulette is a SNS, where people can connect to others worldwide via webcam. It was mentioned a number of times by young women in particular, as a space where sexually explicit images of young people are shared.

Some people like to use it as a sexual way and do nasty things on there … yes it’s disgusting … there’s men just jerking off and there’s women getting naked or men getting naked and telling you to get naked because you’re looking at them and they’re looking at you… (G5, female aged 17)

I think I was on there for about half and hour with some mates and we saw about 15 penises. People literally sit there, put the camera up to their genitals and just masturbate for other people to see. Yep. And they also like request to see, I don’t know, your breasts or get involved together and masturbate together, so it’s actually quite a big thing. (Molly, female aged 16)

It’s just a bunch of idiots, pretty much, just getting their junk out on camera … my friend’s have pictures where they’ve put on a silly hat and they take a photo of that, but then the other screen is of someone else’s naked body. (Elliot, female aged 17)

5.5 Views on attitudes to those in the sexted images

5.5.1 ‘Girls are sluts!’

As previously mentioned most sexting stories involved SEIs of girls, with a number of young people (particularly young women), discussing the negative view of the girl in the sexted image. Some of the words participants had heard used to describe girls were ‘slut’, ‘slutty girl’, ‘whore’, ‘skanky little girl’, ‘dirty’ or ‘just an idiot for sending it in the first place’. 
It’s kind of harmful to her personally because everyone will be like ‘oh, this girl’s dirty’... there’s some really - how can I say this in a nice way? All right, slutty girls out there who just don’t care. They’ll send naked pictures and stuff... (Fam, male aged 16)

I have a lot of guy friends and they just say, ‘oh look at this bitch’ and all that. That’s the way they say it. They use very nasty words... (Darcie, female aged 17)

There was also an observation by some young women of a gender bias, in terms of how girls in the SEIs are viewed as opposed to boys in the images.

There’s a slut as a girl and then there’s a boy that’s not a slut ... I don’t believe in that.
I hate the label slut and stuff - yes we get called a lot more than what guys’ do, which is pretty bullshit. (G5, female aged 17)

If it happens with a guy, it’s nothing. If it happens to a girl, there’s a lot more stigma attached. If family finds out - disapproval as well. (G9, female aged 18)

Furthermore, some young people (particularly young men) thought there were certain types of girls that appear in the sexted images.

You see them in school and the length of the skirt, you know what you’re looking at and you know what you’re going to get ... yes on Facebook. You know her name, go and search her name and have a look, ‘Oh there we go.’ (Joe, male aged 16)

I think there are probably more photos of girls, but that’s probably because boys’ know to ask the right girls – if you know what I mean. They know to ask the ones that they’re likely to get a photo from. (Elle, female aged 17)

A few young men talked about feeling differently about the girl who they had seen in a SEI.

Yeah, cause when you look at that person you can never look at them the same way ... yeah, you think she’s a bit of a slut, or yeah, she looks a bit different, like a slut. She could be easy. (B3, male aged 17)

If it’s someone you know, it probably would make you more want to have a look at it because you know them and you want to see what the picture’s about [and] ... it probably would change what he thinks of the girl. (B5, male aged 17)

5.5.2 **Who is to blame?**

Some participants were of the view that it was girl’s fault for sending an SEI of themselves in the first place.

You can’t just blame it on the boy. She did send it to him. (B3, male aged 17)
I think anyone that sends pictures like that is an idiot. If you’re doing it, you’re asking for it too. (Elliot, male aged 17)

Alternatively, a smaller number of participants expressed a negative attitude towards the boys who posted on SNS or sent to girls SEIs of themselves. A few young men also felt it was the boys fault, as highlighted by this comment:

Well the media covers these stories and ... a lot of the time it puts the blame on the female rather than on the males who are sharing it ... like the people in those photos, they’re no different from anyone else, they’re just expressing their sexuality and they’ve done so to someone they trust who, in this case, has betrayed them, so it’s not the person in the photo who I view negatively, it’s the person who shared it around. (B11, male aged 18)

5.5.3 Concern for the girl in the sexted image

Some young women talked about feeling sorry for the girl in the sexted image.

I never really spoke to her about it – I thought it was a bit sensitive and I didn’t even tell her that I knew about it because I felt really sorry for her. (Polly, female aged 19)

I’ve had to tell a couple of girls that pictures have been sent around and that was a bit awkward ... so if pictures like that get out, that person’s going to cop it a lot. You just feel bad for them more than anything; I normally just ignore it. I don’t want to get involved in it and make them feel even worse than they’re clearly already feeling. (Elliot, female aged 17)

Stories were also shared of boys feeling remorse after they had sent or shared SEIs of girls with others.

A lot of people feel bad after it’s sent out. Like the guy feels bad. (SS, male aged 17)

I got very angry at that guy, but now, like afterwards, he felt really bad. He said he’d just print screened it so he could see it again and another friend had seen it. (Elliot, female aged 17)

Some young men even talked about cases where the sending on of a SEI of a girl by a boy was stopped because a boy spoke up about it not being okay.

I think she just sent a topless photo or ... I think it just got spread around to a couple of the boys, but I’m pretty sure it got stopped pretty quickly. I think one of the guys was like ‘that’s really mean.’ (Polly, female aged 19)
The guy was my mate. In the end we got him to say, ‘no, don’t show it around’ and [he] deleted it. (B7, male aged 18)

5.5.4 Sexting in relationships okay

There was a view by some participants that SEIs sent between boyfriend and girlfriend were okay, or at least ‘not as bad’ as those sent to others.

Between boyfriend and girlfriend I don’t really see it as harmful. (B1, male aged 17)

I know a lot of people who maybe have gone away for uni or for jobs and things like that. Their boyfriends are in different countries. 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. (Camille, female aged 20)

In contrast a few young women talked about sexting not being something that happens once young people are in a relationship, but rather an activity undertaken in the build up to the relationship or with ‘randoms’.

Yeah. I don’t know, just a guy. Like you don’t know them very well or whatever and you’re just talking to them and they’ll just ask you for photos ... yeah. Most people if they have a thing, they send photos; they don’t really once they start going out ... yeah I reckon it’s like when they start to like each other they’re sending each other photos and stuff. (G6, female aged 15)

Additionally, a couple thought boys would only share photos of x-girlfriends (that is, once the romantic relationship was over).

I don't reckon he'd show the picture ... but once they're over or whatever, he'd probably show it, yeah. (B5, male aged 17)

Only one story shared was about photos produced and distributed amongst same sex attracted young people, which involved two same sex attracted girls who exchanged SEIs; this was considered acceptable.

Well one of my friends - she’s actually gay ... I know that there has been – they’ve sent pictures. It hasn’t been all of her past relationships, but maybe one or two ... it just stayed between them. So that was the good thing. (G16, female aged 18)
5.6 Young people’s views on the origins of sexting

Young people had a lot to say about why they thought sexting was happening. Of greatest significance were young people’s views about a pressure they feel exists to be involved in the behaviour; both young men and women spoke of this pressure, however the experience took a different form for each gender. A significant number of young people shared concern about a sexualised media culture, and that this places pressure on young people to conform to gendered stereotypes in order to fit in. Table 13 provides a summary of themes related to young people’s views on the origins of sexting.

Table 13: Themes relating to young people’s views on origins of sexting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pressure</strong></td>
<td>• Boys pressure boys to send (to fit in and be accepted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Boys pressure girls to send (with promises they won’t send the image on)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sexualised culture</td>
<td>• Sexualised music videos, TV programs and marketing of products normalises sexting and creates expectations on young people to be involved in sexting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pornography</strong></td>
<td>• Increasing accessibility and hard core (violent and abusive) nature of pornography normalises sexting behaviour and affects what boys want from girls sexually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attention seeking</strong></td>
<td>• Girls sext to attract attention from boys they like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bullying</strong></td>
<td>• Young people bullied with the threat of image distribution without consent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Young people being young people</strong></td>
<td>• Young people do not care, are bored, do it for fun (sometimes fuelled by alcohol)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Young people know the potential consequences but do it anyway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Young people are risk-takers</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

5.6.1 Pressure

Pressure was a topic discussed by most young people, including a view that girls feel pressure by boys to produce and distribute SEIs, and that boys feel pressured from each other to request, show, post and send these images.

a) Girls pressured by boys

Stories were shared by many female and male participants of girls feeling coerced, threatened, bribed or pressured to produce or send an image to a boy (which was not always a boyfriend). Sometimes boys asked for a photo, with the promise they would not pass it on or show it to anyone else; some young people felt this pressure mostly existed in romantic relationships.
Sometimes boys pressure just girls, but I think they pressure their girlfriends and partners more ... they do that, ‘I thought you loved me thing.’ I’ve seen that happen a lot at school ... yeah it’s almost a threat. ‘If you don’t send a photo, if you don’t do this, if you don’t.’ (Matthew, male aged 18)

There definitely is pressure on some girls coming from some of the guys, so some of the more immature males would put pressure on girls. (B11, male aged 18)

Stories were shared of boys sending naked photos of themselves to girls, often as a form of coercion to convince the girl to send an SEI.

He’s 16 ... his girlfriend had a boy send a picture to her - of I think it was his penis and he used that as pressure to get her to send a picture. I don’t think this girl’s too bright, so she sent a picture... (Darius, male aged 18)

One young woman talked about a game that gets played out between boys and girls.

‘Just send me a pic of’ – it starts out as a game. It starts out like when you’re talking to guys about that kind of thing it’s a real game. It’s like you’re trying to dodge the subject and they’re trying to corner you. It’s full on... (Casey, female aged 15)

One young woman also spoke of an expectation that existed for girls to produce and distribute SEIs.

The guys yeah, they do start to expect a certain oomph from girls, I don’t know how to describe that exactly but yeah, they do expect stuff and it gets to the point where some girls think ‘okay if I want a boyfriend that’s what I’m going to have to do. I’m going to have to become that person, so I can get that guy’. (Casey, female aged 15)

It’s sometimes girls even feel that it’s an expectation, even if the boys don’t actually ask. I’ve heard of girls ... I mean boyfriends haven’t even said ‘I’d like to see your breasts’, but they send pictures anyway ... I guess they feel that that’s the way that they can be loved. (Molly, female aged 16)

One young woman discussed her own strategy for dealing with requests for SEIs from boys.

I normally just kind of see it as boys being boys and just tell them that my main excuse has normally just been ‘sorry, I can’t send and receive picture messages’, which for a while was actually true. But now that I can send and receive pictures messages, I’m still going to be going with the excuse of I can’t send and receive them ... I have tons of friends that get messages like that and they do the same thing as me ... saying ‘no, I don’t have picture messaging’. [It] works every now and then but then when they

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really persist and you pretty much just tell them to ‘shut it’. Its just like well if you want to go find those sort of pictures, there’s one on the Internet. You can go look at that. (Elliot, female aged 17)

And finally some young women talked about the expectation (or more subtle pressure) to be involved in sexting, simply as a result of having viewed images of girls they know.

Kind of like, I don’t know, it gives you a bit less confidence. Makes you bit uncomfortable because it kind of makes you feel like; ‘am I expected to do that too?’ (Lydia, female aged 15)

b) Boys pressured by each other

Most young men expressed a view that pressure exists amongst boys to be either obtaining SEIs from girls or to be showing each other these images.

For example, say if I don't think its 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.’ (B7, male aged 18)

They just do [it] because they want to brag to their mates, ‘I got this girl to send me photos’, and stuff like that ... they like to impress other people, their mates and stuff, you know, ‘look what I got!’ (Fam, male aged 16)

Young women also talked of the pressure they believe boys experience from each other to request SEIs from their girlfriends.

Yeah I’d say that boys pressure girls and I’d probably say boys pressure boys as well with the whole showing each other images and you know ‘look what I got’ and they’re like, ‘oh, I’ve got to get one too, something to share back sort of thing. [I'll] take one of my girlfriend.’ (Casey, female aged 15)

Yes, I think there's pressure amongst guys as well, because if their friends all have dirty pictures then they will want to ask their girlfriend as well, even if they're totally not like that. I've seen guys that have had to fit in with those kind of boys because they felt they didn't have any other friends. (Sandra, female aged 18)

Some young men talked of the silent treatment they got if they were not into sexting, or of being called ‘gay’, as highlighted by these comments.

Yes, it’s more like that silent treatment you get, like I don’t look at porn and then they don’t talk to you. (Joe, male aged 16)
Well some people will be like, ‘oh you’re gay or something.’ (87, male aged 18)

One young man reflected on a story of a boy at his school who told people he had an SEI of a girl on his phone, and received pressure to show others the image.

There was mainly one kid who was in my school - he had a photo or he reckoned he had a photo. But he wouldn't show anyone. But everyone else was pressuring him to let them see it. That went on for like a week, and I didn't hear anything after that ...

He probably didn't have the photo... He was getting pressured into it, but they were being idiots about it, so was he. But they were still pressuring him into it. (Matthew, male aged 18)

About half of all young men who participated in interviews also shared their concern about this pressure. Some expressed that amongst their friends it would be okay to not look at or distribute SEIs, and even to challenge their behaviour in relation to passing the image on.

I had people offer to send it to me and I was like, ‘no, I'm fine, I don't really need that.’ (Solarflare, male aged 18)

If it's like a mate’s girlfriend you just go, ‘what are you doing?’ You just look at them and you just go, ‘oh, not cool.’ (Joe, male aged 16)

b) Pressure to view without knowing what it is

An issue that came up regularly amongst both genders, yet more commonly discussed by young men, was of being sent or shown SEIs, without actually having agreed to view them first. This was sometimes of people they knew.

Yeah, they don't say, ‘hey check out this photo of so and so’. It's just like ‘check this out’ ... they shove it in your face ... it's because it's just hand-held, they can just do it. They can be right in your face about it. (Solarflare, male aged 18)

Usually when someone has photos they don't say, ‘oh, I've got naked photos, do you want to see?’ They go to the person and say, ‘yeah, look at this’ ... and you want to look at it, like, ‘oh, what's the photo?’ And that's how it is most of the time. Nearly 95 per cent of the time, ‘oh, have a look at this’ and then they look because, you know, why wouldn't you? So it's not like everyone's got photos on their phone and they're like, ‘oh, I've got a naked photo’ and they're swapping them around and stuff; it's just like, ‘oh yeah, look at this girl I got a photo of last night’ ... Yeah, they send photos to each other sometimes, but mainly it's just showing each other. (Fam, male aged 16)
Mostly it's just like, if you have your blue tooth on, on your phone or something and someone else has got a picture, they'll be like, 'oh accept this'. Then if you don't know what it is, and they won't tell you and you, accept it, then it's on your phone. (Lydia, female aged 15)

5.6.2 A sexualised culture to blame

A number of young men talked about a media culture that places pressure on young people to behave in more sexualised ways.

Definitely pressure. ‘If they can [sex], why can’t you’, to their girlfriends ... yeah and the film clips, and it’s pressure from boyfriends, but the boyfriends probably get it from the media, thinking that’s normal. But it’s really not. (Matthew, male aged 18)

I think a lot of young people would say that [the media] wouldn’t come into the equation, but then I don’t believe they would fully understand the impact that the media does have upon them and how strongly the media actually affects each individual. (B11, male aged 18)

a) Sexualised media

Young women also shared concerns about this media culture.

I have this view that [sexting is] definitely coming from companies that want to push their products onto younger and younger children ... I think it's also one of the easiest sort of areas where you can sell products. To be desirable you have to do A, B, C and D. If you make a child feel like that’s what they should be doing, that they should have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, then definitely you have your customers. (Molly, female, aged 16)

The other day, we went into the newsagency. What's that magazine called, FHM or whatever? It’s not Playboy, but I honestly think the cover of it pretty much is. What annoyed me the most was me and my boyfriend were standing there and then he was telling me how the kids Christmas catalogue was on the upper shelves and the men’s magazine was on the bottom shelf. If a kid walks in, he's going to see that, not the kid's Christmas catalogue, so they should honestly swap it around or even put it in a back section. If girls, especially Year 7, Year 8, see that, they think, ‘yes, I want to get in hot positions like that, and I want to send that around, because obviously guys think that’s nice.’ (Sandra, female aged 18)
b) **Sexualised music videos**

A view reflected by some young people was songs with lyrics about sexting and sexualised videos in popular teen music normalises the behaviour of sexting. Some young people reflected on the song ‘Send Me a Dirty Pic’ by Kesha, a song about sexting released in 2010, popular with young teen girls at the time.

You know that song, ‘Take a Dirty Picture?’ See, songs like that honestly ... even that Rihanna’s song about her like in chains and stuff, you know, honestly, you don’t sing that on the radio when 12 year olds can listen to it. It really does, yes, it influences their sexuality, because then they want to be like that, they want to take pictures. They send it out and its terrible. (Sandra, female aged 18)

I think with music and like music videos and things like that – I know you wouldn’t let your kid watch MTV or anything just because any song that comes on the radio now is somehow about sex or something along those lines. So I think children are being influenced – not influenced, but having things of a sexual nature pushed on them at a much younger age, which is making them sort of like mature quicker ... We have year sevens in our school now going around saying like ‘oh, I’m naughty - call me.’ I’m not even kidding. That has happened. (Elle, female aged 17)

c) **Influence of adult role models**

Some older young women talked about the influence of teen role models for girls, and how their behaviour influences those who look up to them.

I think women want to display what they’re displaying on the videos, they want to look more bigger breasts or get skinnier and they want to do all that kind of stuff and they want to replicate what they’re doing ... yes, definitely by music and role models, like Snoop Dog. Whoa look at him, he's doing this with all these girls and stuff and Charlie Sheen, how he goes about having porn stars looking after his kids. It's like, 'he's my hero', I think if anything it has an impact, probably just desensitising people to it, I suppose. (Polly, female aged 19)

It's really terrible – I really think that the problem could end up getting worse if something isn’t done because I think kids are exposed to it at a much younger age. You know Hannah Montana and the girl from High School Musical? They've both had nudie photos; they've taken them of themselves. (Rosie, female aged 19)
5.6.3 Pornography

The topic of pornography use emerged in early interviews with young people, with discussions mostly about the accessibility of pornographic material, and its increasingly hard-core nature, and how this potentially influences the behaviour of sexting among young people.

I feel as though a lot of [sexting is]... ’cause of the easy access to pornographic material and also Playboy and a lot of those kinds of magazines, seeing as though they’re so easy to buy, they’re on the newsstands. (B1, male aged 17)

I guess it’s getting bigger for guys, because most boys out there use porn, so when you can’t access it then you go to the sluttiest girl or the very open and outspoken girls and you go to them and they’re open to send and then it kind of spreads out. (Joe, male aged 16)

Some young people talked about the normalised nature of pornography use amongst adults, and how this influences young people’s sexting behaviour.

I’m just thinking because hasn’t society sort of dictated its okay to show pornographic imagery on electronic like technology? I mean if there’s porn on the Internet then I don’t think it’s that much of a step to go to mobile phones. It is true teenagers do learn from adults and if adults are taking part in that sort of activity then why wouldn’t we? (Molly, female aged 16)

5.7 Young People’s Views on the Purpose of Sexting

Smaller numbers of young people discussed the purposeful behaviour of sexting amongst young people.

5.7.1 Sexting for revenge

A number of young people reflected on stories of SEIs having been distributed with the purpose of hurting someone.

Well you might send it for revenge. So you could be sending it to get back at someone. (Casey, female aged 15)

They might break up or they might be fighting or something, and then they get sent out to their friends ... to get back at them, you know, hurtful. (B6, male aged 17 years)
5.7.2 *Sexual experimentation*

Only two young people talked about sexting being about adolescent sexual experimentation.

Well, it’s going to happen. It’s sort of like teenagers experimenting with sexual stuff.
It’s hormones that [are] going nuts. It’s going to happen. (Solarflare, male aged 18)

5.7.3 *Risk-taking*

Some participants talked about sexting as a form of risk-taking behaviour, with reflections from some participants that young people do not think through the potential consequences of their behaviour at the time.

Yeah, kids are always doing illegal stuff, I guess, like drinking and whatever. But I don’t know, I guess people drink for a reason but people don’t really have any reason to send pictures around. (G7, female aged 15)

I think people kind of want to take a bit of a risk. ‘I feel like such a bad ass if I do it because it’s illegal.’ It’s the same thing as like going out with a fake ID or getting your older brother to buy you alcohol. It’s the same thing; you just don’t think much of it. (R13, female aged 20)

I think a lot of the time its an impulse thing. It’s not always the most thought-out idea. They’ll think, ‘oh, I want to do this, I want to send this photo, I want to send this message’, and they perhaps don’t think it through quite as much, or at the time things are good so it doesn’t seem like it could have a negative outcome. (G9, female aged 18)

5.7.4 *Alcohol*

Stories were shared about sexting, which involved the use of alcohol.

I have a few friends that get drunk and then look at their phone the next morning being like ‘Oh my God, why did I send that to that guy?’ (Elliot, female aged 17)

Not weed or anything like that but drugs could be something, but definitely alcohol. It influences you a lot and ... I don’t really drink at all but you just see how trashed people get and they don’t know what they’re doing when they’re doing something with a guy ... when people are taking pictures. (Darcie, female aged 17)

5.7.5 *Sexting ‘for a laugh’*

A few young women thought boys sent photos of their penis to others for a joke.
I think guys would be like I’m going to send a photo of my penis and it’s going to be really funny. (Rosie, female aged 19)

They just do it because they want to brag to their mates, ‘I got this girl to send me photos, and stuff like that’. It’s not forced to do it; they just do it for a laugh. (Fam, male aged 16)

5.7.6 Attention seeking

Some male and female participants felt that girls in particular produce and distribute SEIs of themselves for attention.

It’s common knowledge that you’re going to send this photo to a guy that you barely know, you’ve only been texting him for a couple of weeks – but at the back of their minds, they must have some inkling that it’s going to happen. But they do it anyway because they need the attention. Like you see on social networking sites all these photos of girls taking photos of themselves in bathrooms and – just of themselves – it’s still a cry for attention, I think. (Camille, female aged 20)

They like attention from guys, so they take a picture of themselves, send it so that the guy’s like ‘oh yeah, you’re good looking and hot’ and stuff like – they like the attention. (Fam, male aged 16)

5.7.7 Boredom

A couple of young people thought young people sexted because they were bored.

They’re bored, I don’t know. I mean from experience, not my own experience, but everyone else’s experience like they just seem a bit bored or attention seeking. Or they haven’t got enough attention at home so let’s create some drama at school, I don’t know. (R13, female aged 20)

5.8 Young people’s views on solutions

Participants were asked to comment on current strategies used to prevent the negative consequences of sexting including educative responses, web based responses, and legal responses (see table 14 for a summary of themes relating to solutions). Most young people shared information regarding each of these areas, with almost all discussions in some way related to the need for more information and education about sexting and its potential negative implications.
I think just educating people, so they know what they’re getting themselves into if they actually put a photo out there, how it can be sent to other people. (G16, female aged 18)

Maybe if people knew exactly how permanent stuff like that is, how you can never really delete anything off the Internet, maybe something like that. (G18, female aged 19)

5.8.1 Schools and education

A number of young people felt schools should have a role in educating young people about sexting, with criticisms about the way in which schools are currently dealing with it (or not dealing with it).

I don’t think schools implement enough responsibility with what goes on with the students outside of the room whether that be texting, bullying or peer support or anything like that. I don’t think schools do enough. (B8, male aged 18)

We get regular emails about safety on the net and stuff like that which most of its pretty pointless common-sense stuff. (G14, female aged 15)

If they had sex ed videos with maybe actual young people talking about [sexting], because they have lots of sex ed videos with young kids talking in them but they’re from like 40 years ago. (G3, female aged 17)

Some young people talked about their preference for education about issues like sexting to be delivered by experts from outside the school setting.

No, not teachers because no one really listens to them - it’s too awkward for teachers. ‘Cause they sit there and even though they’re people, everyone looks at them like teachers, they don’t have a life. They look at them like an authority figure... (B8, male aged 18)

I really think there needs to be a lot more talking about [sexting], probably not from a teacher or someone like that, someone who comes from somewhere else entirely. Not even a government agent, just someone who can really talk to kids, [who] will listen to them and say, ‘Hey, guess what happens with all the information you put on the Internet’ and then start with that. (G15, female aged 19)

Two young women suggested peer education might be a useful strategy for educating young people about sexting and its potential consequences.
People are more likely to listen to people their own age or people that have had past experience… (G16, female aged 18)

Maybe [it] would be good having even a group of people my age going into a school and talking to kids about [sexting]. (G15, female aged 19)

However, some young people did not like the idea of learning about sexting from their peers.

I would probably rather hear this information from a teacher rather than one of my peers because I might not believe them. Students obviously aren’t as smart as teachers ... (G7, female aged 15)

5.8.2 Educating parents

Some young people talked about the need to educate parents about technology use.

Well parents need to be educated on how to educate their kids, I think and to start at an early age. (B11, male aged 18)

It would be really good to educate parents – because I think a lot of adults don’t really understand about the Internet and they don’t really understand that even if you have your Facebook profile on private, its not hard to find – because Facebook sells all your information to third party companies. That’s how they make their money. (G15, female aged 19)
Table 14: Themes of young people’s views on solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of solution</th>
<th>Young people’s views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>• Criticism about way schools deal with sexting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Education about sexting needs to be delivered by experts from outside school setting (not teachers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teachers need to use up-to-date resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>• Educate parents about technology, so they can educate children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Parents know less than children about Internet safety and security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal implications</td>
<td>• If young people knew potential consequences (production and dissemination of child porn) that they wouldn’t sext</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Young people do know about legal consequences, but do it anyway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Knowing potential illegality of sexting means it is more appealing for some young people to be involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Laws regarding child pornography not appropriate for dealing with sexting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filtering systems</td>
<td>• Skepticism about Internet filtering systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social marketing</td>
<td>• Social marketing prevention campaigns effective for raising awareness about potential negative implications of sexting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web based education</td>
<td>• The Internet is not a place young people go for information about staying safe online</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Young people have a lack of regard for government web sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Info targeted at young people about sexting not promoted well enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Viewing websites in school class time is a good idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>• Facebook good place for social marketing prevention campaigns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Facebook a social space young people do not want information about issues like sexting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge the media</td>
<td>• Challenge the negative influence of the media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young people need to be involved</td>
<td>• Talk with, not at young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Peer education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Have boys share their views about the girl in the sexted image</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### 5.8.3 Education about legal implications

Some young people talked about the need for more education about the legal implications of sexting, feeling that if young people knew about the potential consequences (in relation to the production and dissemination of child pornography) they would not sext.

It would scare off quite a few people – not everybody but quite a few. I think ... if some of them were more aware of the implications and outcomes of what could
happen when doing that, there would be a lesser chance of it happening. (G9, female aged 18)

I do think that something that would deter boys, especially a bit older boys from that sort of thing, is the legal [implications], because I don’t think a lot of them realise [if] they have a photo of a 14 year old on their phone and then they text it to someone else, they’re trafficking child pornography. If they get busted, if they get caught for that, or someone tells someone - that’s serious trouble. (G15, female aged 19)

Most young people however, felt that knowing about the potential legal consequences would not make a difference.

Young people know a lot about what’s legal and illegal on the Internet and they still break the law regardless. Most people – yes the majority of people I know download music and movies and all that and it’s considered the norm, despite the fact that it’s illegal. (B11, male aged 18)

I mean, if you get caught then there should be – or there is penalties – but the chance of getting caught is so slim that I don’t think it bothers people if they know. (B1, male aged 16)

I don’t think they would stop; they wouldn’t because that’s the same with cyber bullying. They’re not going to stop just because they say you can get in trouble for it. (G10, female aged 18)

When asked if knowing about the potential harmful implications of sexting (including the legal consequences in particular) would make a difference to young people’s behaviour, many young people thought not. There was a general feeling that young people do not think it through, and believe ‘it won’t happen to me’.

When you’re young it’s pretty much hard to think of what’s happening at the time, it’s just you want to get everything done here and now. (B2, male aged 18)

Some people believe if young people knew about the consequences, they wouldn’t [sex]. I don’t think that’s true. I think that – because its like you get told ‘don’t drive a car faster than the speed limit’. Everyone knows you don’t do it, everyone knows that if you do it there is a chance that you’ll have an accident but no one thinks it will happen to them. (Rosie, female aged 19)

A couple of young women felt that knowing the potential illegality of the behaviour made it even more appealing for some young people to participate in sexting.
It wouldn’t stop them. If anything it could possibly make them do it more. Because if it’s illegal then it’s more rebellious to be doing [sexting] - it’s more fun. (Elliot, female aged 17)

I don’t think it’d make much of a difference when it comes to legal versus illegal, I think people kind of want to take a bit of a risk. ‘I feel like such a bad ass if I [sex] because it’s illegal.’ It’s the same thing as like going out with a fake ID or getting your older brother to buy you alcohol. It’s the same thing; you just don’t think much of it. (R13, female aged 20).

5.8.4 Social marketing prevention campaigns

Some young people thought social marketing campaigns were an effective strategy for raising awareness about the potential negative implications of involvement in sexting.

TV ads are effective because you’re watching TV and ... you’re being forced to see it. (B4, male aged 16)

I’ve started to see more ads for anti-bullying stuff and all that so I think maybe they need to do a few ads for this type of stuff and maybe – to show people where they can go for help. (G12, female aged 15)

5.8.5 Web based education and information

Young people were asked to comment on their views of the use of online resources and information to educate about sexting. Most young people felt the web was not a place young people tend to go to for information about this kind of issue.

I don’t think people would look at websites. If I heard, ‘oh there was a website you can look up on sexting’ I wouldn’t go into it. (G10, female aged 18)

A number of young women and men talked specifically about their lack of regard for government web sites.

No, I would never go into a government website ... government websites are awfully dorky ... yeah they could be worded a lot better and I don’t know, be a bit cooler maybe. (B13, male aged 18)

Anything that’s got the Australian Government stamp on it, you think ‘oh, whatever!’ (G15, female aged 19)
Of the few young people who thought websites were a useful space to place information and resources about the potential negative implications of sexting, there was a view they were not advertised well enough, so young people do not know where to find the information.

I think online stuff’s really good, everyone can access it and you don’t really have to be embarrassed about seeking out some sort of information. But knowing about it’s another thing. (G8, female aged 20)

Additionally, the idea of exploring websites in class time was suggested a useful strategy.

I don’t reckon personally anyone would just go to the site … but doing it in classes or something – that would be a good idea. (G5, female aged 17)

Some young people thought Facebook would be a good place for social marketing prevention campaigns about sexting.

But maybe if you had ads on the side of the [Facebook] page that they’re actually seeing … because I know there’s little ads on the side of Facebook … you might not always take notice of … but you know its there. You may read it if you’re bored just looking at the screen. (G16, female aged 18)

For others, Facebook was a social space they did not want warnings about issues like sexting.

Facebook and places like that aren’t the best way to communicate ideas, I guess, because that’s the way you’re having fun. You don’t want to constantly have this warning against you. (G14, female aged 15)

5.8.6 Filtering systems

A number of young people were skeptical about filtering systems.

It would be pretty sad when we have to move down to filtering. (B13, male aged 18)

Honestly, it just takes a bit of determined research and you can get past that kind of stuff. There’s so many ways you can get around that kind of stuff, routing stuff, rerouting, going through different servers, and even like government bans … it takes me five seconds to download a different router and go through a different country’s server and then you get access to whatever it was you were trying to get. (G13, female aged 18)
5.8.7 Legal responses

There was acknowledgement by most participants that current laws regarding child pornography are not appropriate for dealing with sexting.

I think people shouldn’t be charged for being a sexual offender just for sending a photo, because you don’t even know the case. They may even be pressured into it. (G16, female aged 18)

There shouldn’t be a law where you can’t take a photo of yourself, but if you’re consenting it should be all right. But if that person sends it around there should be a law to stop that. (B4, 16)

5.8.8 Challenge the media

A couple of young people suggested challenging the negative influence of the media.

The best way to do that would probably be to influence the media to change the way it expresses [itself], which of course is quite difficult to do, because the media’s just looking to sell. (B11, male aged 18)

I think that something that we should be doing about it is, I think that more legislations need to be made to control what the media can and can’t do ... like some of the music video clips. Some of those shouldn’t be shown between six and nine ... also like even lame shows like Neighbours. Because that’s like the time that kids are in the car and stuff - like those ads for Viagra. Can you imagine trying to explain that to a child as you’re driving them to childcare or something. (G11, female aged 17)

5.8.9 Sexting is too difficult to deal with

There were a number of young people who felt the issue of sexting was too difficult to deal with, even though they thought is was something that needed addressing.

Yeah, you can’t really do anything about it though, it would be really good but, I mean, people are always going to have cameras and stuff on their phones... (B6, male aged 17)

It’s a little bit hard to say what to do because everyone’s got this information on drugs and alcohol, but everybody still does drugs and everybody still does alcohol. Its hard because you can say, you know, its bad and you can say that girls have committed suicide and the effects of it and stuff, but some girls are just going to take it and be like, ‘yeah, yeah, whatever’ and keep doing what they’re going to do. So it’s a really
hard question to answer. Like I wouldn’t even know where to begin... (G4, female aged 17)

5.8.10 Involve young people in responses

Some participants talked about the importance of involving young people in designing responses to the issue, and that conversations need to be facilitated with young people in order for this to happen.

I think if you really want to make a difference you actually have to sit down and talk to teenagers because they’re not going to make the effort to actually check it out ... I reckon the most effective thing to do would actually be probably to hand it over into the teenage community. (G1, female aged 16)

Talk to them about it instead of just – yeah, just talk to them about it ... so they understand it rather than screaming at them or something. (B6, male aged 15)

One young woman thought it could be useful for girls to hear what boys thought of girls in the sexted images.

...I think maybe having some kind of, I don’t know how you’d do it but being able to speak to boys of that age group, what their opinions of girls are that do it, what their honest opinions of these girls are that do it... (G15, female aged 19)

5.9 Conclusion

Interviews with young people have revealed just how complex the phenomenon of sexting is. Stories shared have highlighted a range of different combinations of scenarios involving the creation, sending, posting, showing and distribution of sexually explicit images. Of particular concern is the pressure young people feel exists, to be involved in the behaviour, whether from each other, or as a result of a highly sexualised media culture. Of particular significance is the gendered nature of young people’s views on both the nature and origins of sexting. Young people’s views on strategies for dealing with potential consequences of sexting have highlighted important implications for the design of future prevention strategies, including in particular the need for involving young people in the development and design of solutions.
6. Discussion

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This study was precipitated by concerns about the potential harms for young people of involvement in the behavior of sexting. Given research regarding the phenomenon is in its infancy, and little data is available, this study sought to uncover how young people describe sexting and its consequences, their views on reasons for young people’s participation in the behavior, and finally what they think we should do about it, if anything. While a considerable amount of grey literature has concentrated on these topics, little is known from the perspective of young people. My individual interviews with young people have uncovered a wealth of valuable new information and insight into these matters, and are therefore filling an important gap. It is of significance that many of the views of young people were also reflected in comments of key informants. A specific discussion of key informant findings from phase one of the study can be found in my peer-reviewed journal article in appendix 17. This discussion chapter about strengths and limitations, and the place of my findings in the wider research framework focuses primarily on phase two concerning young people’s views on the phenomenon of sexting, rather than the first phase involving key informants, which served primarily to prepare for interviews with young people.

I will discuss key findings in relation to aims of the study, which was to explore the phenomenon of sexting from the point of view of young people, with a particular focus on the nature of sexting, perceived origins and potential responses to address the harmful consequences of the behavior.

The data has further layers – the exploration of which is outside the scope of this thesis. My discussion will explore important features of the findings, rather than all of the findings.

I will begin my discussion by highlighting limitations and strengths of the study.

6.2 LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY

Whilst every attempt was made to include young people from a range of different backgrounds, abilities and groups, including same sex attracted young people, those from non-
English speaking backgrounds, homeless young people and those from low socio-economic groups, a limitation of this study is that only a small number of these young people were represented, thus more research with these target groups is needed to compare and contrast data with the general population. A potential limitation is that participants were invited to share their views of the behaviour of sexting among others, rather than their own personal experience of sexting. Given the sample of young people were all from the outer east of Melbourne, it is possible that some participants may have used the same group of students as a reference point, however, given young people came from at least 15 different schools and universities, this is unlikely for most participants. Finally, in terms of limitations, it was not within the capacity of this study to analyse and compare data from key informants to young people, and from young people across each age cohort, except on rare occasions where very obvious and important responses were made.

In contrast, an important strength of this study is that it has revealed Australian young people’s understandings of the phenomenon of sexting in their own words, and is one of the first qualitative studies about sexting and young people conducted. Furthermore, given sexuality related studies have difficulty attracting male participants (Carmody, 2009), the almost equal participation of young women and men in this study is an additional strength, as is the fact that ethical approval was provided to allow participation of mature minors without parent/guardian consent, given research shows young people who have been bullied do not talk to parents about cyber-bullying for fear of removal of technological privileges (National Crime Prevention Centre 2009); this was an important factor in encouraging young people’s participation. Conducting two stages of data collection was strength of this study, with the involvement of key informants ensuring key issues were identified and placed in a local context before data collection with young people commenced.

Now I will return to a discussion of the research findings in relation to major aims of the study.

6.3  The nature of sexting

Although the aim of this study was not to examine prevalence of sexting, that all young people had stories to share, and that most involved someone they knew is of significance, especially given young people were represented across a range of different ages, schools and group settings.
6.3.1 Describing sexting

This study raises important questions about how sexting should be defined. It is significant that the Australian Online Macquarie Dictionary (2008) definition of sexting, originally used for this study, is not representative of many aspects of sexting expressed in participants’ stories. Research findings suggest this may be due to a gap in knowledge about the phenomenon at the time the term entered the dictionary, or to the emergent and changing nature of young people’s use of new digital media technologies.

While ‘sexting’ is a term used by legislators, law enforcement, educators and mass media, results show that young people do not use this term. This finding has implications for the design of prevalence surveys, educational resources and information targeting young people, which should include language that is relevant for them. Furthermore, Mitchell et al (2012) argue, ‘the term sexting may be fatally compromised by its multiple and expansive colloquial use’ (p. 19). Lounsbury (2011) suggests the term has been used to describe a wide variety of activities that may be better described as ‘youth-produced sexual images’; results of this study also show this may in fact be a more accurate way to describe the behaviour among young people.

Young people shared many stories of sexually explicit images (SEIs) posted on social networking sites (SNS), which is not surprising given SNS use is the most popular online activity for young people (ACMA 2009). This fact is, however, not captured in most literature on sexting. Another important finding is that sexually explicit images are not always shared with others via text, email or posting on SNS, as is referred to in most literature, with some young people suggesting that being shown images on other people’s hand held devices in person may be more common than being sent an SEI via SMS. This finding highlights a gap in data gathered from prevalence studies, and has important implications for future research.

6.3.2 Roles and who is involved in sexting

Conversations with young people have highlighted that the roles of young people involved in sexting are potentially more complex than has been reported in previous surveys, studies and literature on the topic. For example, the terms ‘subject, producer, distributor, and recipient’ (Ryan 2010), often overlap, as interviews with young people have revealed that ‘subjects’, who are usually girls, are most often ‘producers’ too, and ‘recipients’, who are usually boys, are
often ‘distributors’ too. Furthermore, the terms ‘victim, receiver, forwarder and saver’ (Shah 2010) fail to recognise that the victim is not always the person in the SEI, an assumption often made. As many young people shared stories of having been shown or sent SEIs without actually consenting to this first, their role could be defined as ‘receivers’ of the image, but also ‘victims’, because they were frequently disgusted by the images they viewed. Finally, findings of this study have also revealed an additional role not discussed in the literature – that of the ‘requester’ of the SEI, who incidentally is usually a male, and often reportedly uses pressure or coercion to obtain the image.

Although most studies and surveys showed at least some difference in sexting behavior between girls and boys, some authors have continued to argue there is little difference in the behaviour across gender (Funnell 2009; Lenhart 2009); my results contradict this view. Sexually explicit images were much more likely to be of girls, most were reportedly sent to boys, and most involved self-produced images. Whilst there were reports of self-produced images of boys (usually involving their penises) sent to girls, these reports were much fewer.

Another important finding of this study that has implications for future research is the view that those in the middle years (aged 9-14), who are transitioning from childhood to adolescence, were more likely to be involved in sexting. This result is in line with what is known about developmental stages of adolescence and brain development; those in their early teens are more inclined to act on impulse, engage in risky behaviour and be less capable of thinking through potential consequences of their behavior (Johnson, Blum & Giedd 2009). Given concerns exist regarding the needs of this cohort, having received little policy attention in Australia and sometimes dubbed the ‘forgotten years’ (NSW Government 2009; ARACY 2011; Commonwealth of Australia 2009), future research about sexting, should endeavor to engage with this target group.

6.3.3 Consequences of the behaviour of sexting

The harmful consequences for young women in particular, of producing and sharing sexually explicit images of themselves, have been highlighted by the findings of this study, with a commonly held view by participants that young women as opposed to young men, are more likely to be negatively impacted by the behaviour; a theme also reflected in key informant data, media reports and expert opinion papers. Given most of the stories shared involved SEIs of girls as opposed to those of boys, it may be of no surprise that the majority of concern
expressed was for girls. Apart from the occasional report of a boy feeling embarrassed for sending an SEI of themselves or feeling regret or remorse about having distributed an SEI of a girl to others without her consent, few stories were shared of boys suffering negative consequences for producing, sending, posting or distributing SEIs. Stories were shared of girls moving schools, being bullied and teased, receiving family disapproval and experiencing ruined reputations as a result of involvement in sexting, which fits with anecdotes, key informant stories and media reports of consequences for those involved. An additional important finding in relation to the impact of sexting on young women, is the impact on a girlfriend of the girl in the sexted image. A number of young women talked of the embarrassment experienced by being a friend of the person in the sexually explicit image (SEI), and the expectation to sext through this association, which highlights that girls who appear in SEIs are not the only ones at risk; the perceived stigma attached to being a friend or peer of the girl in the SEI puts them at risk too.

Findings reinforce the notion of a sexual double standard whereby boys’ sexuality is rated for being active and pursuing sex and young women are rated for saying no or being ‘good girls’ (Hird & Jackson 2001). Young women tread a fine line of being called a ‘slut’ if they sext, or fear being dumped or rejected if they do not.

Even though more participants felt girls should be blamed for sending a sexually explicit image of themselves in the first place, than boys for distributing the SEI without the girls’ consent, it is of significance that both young women and men were concerned for the girl in the sexted image; a concern also expressed by key informants and reported in the few studies and surveys that gathered information about young people’s views on sexting (Phippen 2009; AP-MTV 2009; Lenhart 2009; Cosmogirl.com 2008).

6.4 THE ORIGINS OF SextING

6.4.1 Young people feel pressured to sext

As highlighted in Chapter 4, many young people talked about a pressure experienced by girls and boys to be involved in sexting. This pressure however took a different form for each gender. Although some authors have discussed concerns about this pressure (Hand, Chung & Peters 2009; Kee 2005; Powell 2009; Flood 2008), as did key informants in this study, there has been little reliable evidence other than small mention of pressure experienced by young
people in three prevalence studies (Lenhart 2009; Cosmo.girl.com 2008; AP-MTV 2011). In contrast, an overwhelming number of stories were shared by young people of girls feeling coerced, threatened or bribed to produce or send an SEI to a boy, including stories (although fewer) of self-produced SEIs of boys (usually of their penises) sent to girls to coerce the girl to send an image back. The descriptions of the behavior of sexting by young people in this study, fit with the gendered rule that boys are sexually motivated and pursue girls (by pressuring them to send images), and that girls are passive objects (Powell 2010; Holloway 1984), who send boys sexually explicit images of themselves at the boys’ request.

Findings have confirmed the concern of some feminist authors (Powell 2010; Powell 2011; Quadara 2010; Flood 2008), that ICTs and SNS are being used as vehicles in the perpetration of gendered sexual violence targeting women. This view is based on a concept developed by feminist author Liz Kelly (1987), that places sexual violence on a continuum, in recognition that,

... a woman does not have to experience physical force to experience sexual violence, and that subtle systematic forms of sexual harassment, pressure and coercion are part of the same behaviour as the most violent of physical assaults. (Powell 2010, p. 18).

The ACSSA (2011) research project aiming to explore the use of ICTs, SNS and mobile phone technology in the facilitation of sexual violence amongst young people will be a welcome addition to an understanding of sexting in this regard.

An additional important finding of this research not reported in other studies, is the pressure boys experience from peers to be involved in sexting, with many young men having discussed the expectation they feel exists amongst peers. Fear of exclusion or being called ‘gay’ if they choose not to view SEIs of girls they know, or do not have images on their own phones is an experience of some boys; this certainly has implications for future responses to the issue. These findings highlight that young men are not necessarily to blame, but are also victims of a sexualised environment that places pressure on them to conform to gendered stereotypes.

6.4.2 A sexualised culture influences sexting behaviour

Mass media plays a powerful role in the socialisation of young people (Levy 2006; Harris 2005; McNay 2000; Goldman 2000), shaping their sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviours (Tankard-Reist 2009). It is therefore of particular concern that young people believe sexting
has become normalised as a result of a media culture that presents women in highly sexualised ways, including in advertising, music videos, commercial television and pornography (Primack, Gold, Schwarz & Dalton 2008; Tankard Reist 2009). While there is ongoing debate about the effects of pornography use (Flood 2008; Flood 2009; McKee, Albury & Lumby 2008), there is evidence that pornography exposure can lead to objectifying understandings of women, and sexist and unhealthy notions of sex and relationships (Sabina, Wolak & Finkelhor 2008; Stark & Whisnant 2004; Carrol, Padilla-Walker, Nelson, Olson, McNamara & Madsen 2008), a view also expressed by some key informants. Conversations with young people in this study have reflected concerns about these very same issues, with both young women and men feeling uncomfortable and concerned about a deeply embedded porn culture (Dines 2010) that is increasingly widespread, accessible and hard-core (abusive and sometimes violent), and has normalised the behaviour of sexting.

6.4.3 Sexting influenced by developmental aspects of adolescence

Because of a growing body of research that adolescence is a time of continued brain growth and change, whereby the frontal lobes responsible for functions such as memory, planning and impulse control are one of the last areas to mature (Johnson, Blum & Giedd 2009; Ostrager 2010), it is not surprising that many young people felt others participated in the behaviour without actually thinking through the potential consequences. An understanding of young people from a developmental perspective highlights that some young people may be unable to anticipate the potential ramifications of their actions, this view is reflected in findings of this study by both key informants and young people, and fits with what is known about risk-taking as a normal developmental milestone of adolescence (Sharland 2005; Hassan & Creatsas 2000).

An additional finding that is in contrast to some literature (Funnell 2009: Katzman 2010; Mattey Dilberto & Mattey 2009) and key informant views, is that young people do not feel others sext because it is a safe way to test out the sexual territory in a way that does not pose the risk of pregnancy or contracting sexually transmitted infections.

6.5 Responses to prevent harms caused by sexting

Limited evidence exists of young people being asked to share their views regarding potential solutions to the issue of sexting; my findings are addressing this gap. Both key informants and
young people identified solutions from within the areas of education, research and evaluation, and challenging our sexualised culture. A firm view was expressed of the need for young people’s involvement in the design and evaluation of these responses. See figure 5 for a summary of participant views on prevention strategies.

Figure 2: Summary of prevention strategies

6.5.1 Education

Most of the literature about addressing harms associated with sexting, is based on the premise that if young people understood the potential consequences of their behaviour they would not participate in sexting (Katzman 2009; Muscari 2009; Ryan 2010; Brown, Keller & Stern 2009). This view is contrary not only to evidence related to risk-taking and young people (Zirkel 2009), but also to evidence provided by young people in this study; most were aware of the potential negative consequences of sexting, including the legal implications, however they felt this was not a factor that would prevent young people’s participation in the behaviour. Therefore, although many young people believed it was important they received accurate information about the potential implications of involvement in the behavior of sexting, other findings of this study highlight that education is clearly not the only answer.
Although some young people felt the schools they attended had delivered useful information about sexting, it is of continued concern that many others, including key informants, criticised schools for not doing this effectively, or not doing it at all. Although there are signs of improvement in this area (Smith et al. 2009), key informants recommendations for more consistent, comprehensive sexual health education that provides opportunities to explore the non-biological aspects of sex and relationships, including issues like sexting, is still needed.

Despite the fact that many online campaigns and video resources have been developed to warn young people and parents of the potential dangers of sexting, that most participants were not aware of these resources, is a finding that also has important implications for policy and practice in the area of prevention. Participants’ distrust for educative resources developed by government agencies, and a view that young people do not access educative information about issues like sexting online, is also of significance to those designing educative responses, as is that most of the current education campaigns and resources targeting young people about sexting, do not appear to have been informed by young people’s views.

A research project conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing (Third, Richardson, Collin, Rahilly & Bolzan 2011), that involved young people educating adults about keeping safe online, has implications for solutions in this area. The project sought to address the technological disconnect between adults and young people and highlighted many benefits of involving young people in teaching adults (including parents in particular) about social networking and cybersafety.

6.5.2 Challenge sexualised culture

The suggestion by some young people that the highly sexualised media representation of women and increasing access to pornography needs to be challenged for normalising the behaviour of sexting, is mirrored by feminist authors (Tankard Reist 2009; Powell 2010; Flood 2008; Rush & La Nauze 2006) and key informants, and has important implications for media authorities and corporate advertising legislation. Findings of this study suggest opportunities need to be created for young people to engage in discussions about gendered assumptions expressed in mass media that provide narrow descriptions of gender and sexuality, which potentially lead to the behaviour of sexting.
The use of video and online educative resources that have received criticism for reinforcing gender stereotypes by shaming the initial sender, who is usually a girl (Galfoway 2010), could be a useful tool for debating these issues with young people. Public health frameworks such as the Victorian Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women (Victorian Government 2010), also offer useful policy frameworks for this work.

This study also has implications for the use of the ‘bystander approach’ in the prevention of issues related to sexting. This new model, which was proposed by key informants, involves engaging with men as bystanders to violence against women (Burn 2007; Banyard 2007), to challenge the behaviours and attitudes of other young men (Powell 2010; Powell 2011). Stories of boys having expressed their disapproval of sexting behavior amongst peers, and concern for the girl in the sexted image, highlight the potential of this approach in stemming the unauthorised distribution of sexually explicit images of young women. A sexual ethics framework, developed by Carmody (2009), and highlighted by key informants, also poses a potentially useful approach in the primary prevention of the harmful effects of sexting. By learning about sex and relationships from within a sexual ethics framework means young people can discuss the complexities of sexting with a focus on issues of consent and safety (Carmody 2009) by encouraging both young women and men to be aware of their own needs at the same time as being mindful of the needs of others.

6.5.3 Research and evaluation

While policy makers, educators and parents continue to debate the issues regarding young people’s experience and use of new digital technologies, ‘the voices and experiences of young people remain largely absent’ (Weber & Dixon 2007, p. 5). One of the most important findings of this study therefore, is that young people believe they should be involved in the design of solutions, a view also reflected in the literature (Weber & Dixon 2007; Collin, Rahilly, Richardson & Third 2011) and amongst key informants. My results highlight and affirm that when young people are invited to participate in discussion about issues that affect them, that they will have valuable things to say. The meaningful and insightful contributions shared by young people in this study have proved they certainly have the capacity to help shape the way we respond to the issues created by sexting.

This study has uncovered new knowledge, however many gaps still exist. Accurate Australian prevalence data is needed to determine who is involved, how often and in what capacity. In
particular prevalence data is required from those who may be most at risk, with particular attention to groups identified by key informants and young people in this study, including young people in their early teens, young people from non English speaking backgrounds, and young people with disabilities.

Although some young people were concerned that sexting was too prevalent and difficult to deal with, it is of significance that most felt not enough was being done to prevent the potential harmful consequences for those involved. Results therefore support the need for solutions at both the treatment and preventative end of the health care spectrum. At the treatment end, the mental health consequences for young people who experience guilt, shame and victimisation, along with fear of criminal charges being pressed, highlight the need for health professionals who work with young people to understand the implications of the phenomenon and how to address these. Most of the solutions discussed by young people in this study, however, focused on strategies for preventing the potential harmful effects of the behavior, which has been the focus of this discussion.

A unanimous view amongst young people, which was supported by key informants and in the literature (McGrath 2009; Powell 2009) that current legislation to deal with sexting is not appropriate, suggests the need for legislative change in this area is critical to ensure young people are not doubly victimised by a legal system that does not recognise the underlying social pressures that contribute to the behaviour. The previously mentioned Victorian Parliamentary Law Reform Inquiry into Sexting, which has extended the date for submissions to the Inquiry until December 2012, is creating an important forum for the expression of public opinion in this area, to assist this review process.

The current rapid and increasing pace of change in the arena of communication technologies and digital culture, which has been highlighted by the results of this study, creates an urgent challenge for researchers; however continued research to understand the nature and origins of sexting is necessary for developing appropriate solutions to prevent harms caused by the behaviour.
7. Conclusion

This study has filled an important and significant gap in literature about sexting amongst young people. Many findings have supported what is known anecdotally, and what has been reported in grey literature and the small selection of research publications available on the topic.

A gap continues to exist in accurate prevalence data, particularly from an Australian perspective. Results highlight the importance for those gathering this data, of ensuring that measures use definitions that describe and encompass all aspects of the production and distribution of sexually explicit images by young people, rather than broad descriptions that leave out important aspects of the behaviour; this study provides useful data that can be used for this purpose.

The gendered nature of the phenomenon of sexting, that means young women feel pressured by young men to produce and distribute sexually explicit images of themselves and young men feel pressured by each other to source these images, has important implications for prevention strategies, as does the feeling by many young people that a sexualised media culture is responsible for influencing this behaviour.

Of particular significance for those involved in developing policy and educational strategies is that young people are potentially aware of the implications of involvement in sexting, and yet continue to participate in the behaviour despite this. Findings have highlighted that a range of different approaches are required for preventing the harmful implications of sexting. Review of legal frameworks, the development of online safety measures, educating parents about online risks, supporting schools to have discussions with young people about new gender discourses, creating bystander approaches and most importantly involving young people in the design of solutions, are all prevention strategies that should be considered. For a summary of recommendations see Table 15.
Table 15: Summary of recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of recommendations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accurate Australian prevalence data is needed to determine the true extent of the behaviour.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responses to prevent the harmful implications of sexting must take into consideration the potential origins of the behaviour, namely a sexualised culture that places pressure on young people to conform to narrow descriptions of gender and sexuality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young people need to be involved in the design of solutions.</td>
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Young people’s communication practices have been transformed by ICTS with much research highlighting the many benefits and potential opportunities they present. Although the challenges and risks may at times be over-emphasised in popular media and social research (YAW-CRC 2011), results of this study highlight that ICTs, have certainly provided a new medium for risk-taking, sexual coercion and violence, and for reinforcing gender stereotypes and the sexualisation of children. Prevalence of sexting is yet to be determined, however that young people are uneasy and anxious about the potential harms caused by the behavior is cause for concern.

As Weber and Dixon point out,

> It is when new technologies have become … an accepted aspect of everyday culture, that they are the most powerful and transformative, developing the potential to shape social norms (Weber and Dixon 2010, p. 5).

If indeed this is the case, it highlights the importance of this research, and the need for future research to understand the phenomenon more fully.
8. References


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9. Appendices
APPENDIX 1: Literature review search terms

Key search terms used for literature review via Super Search (search engine of the UoM)


Sext* or text messag* OR instant messag* OR SMS OR cell* phone OR mobile phone OR MMS OR communicatin Technolog*

Youth OR adolescen* OR young person OR young people OR teen

Sex* OR nud* OR Porn*

Cyberbully* OR electronic bully* OR digital

Youth OR adolescen* OR young person OR young people OR teen

Sex* OR nud* OR Porn*

Cyberbully* OR electronic bully* OR digital


Youth OR adolescen* OR young person OR young people OR teen

Sext*

Cell phone* OR Mobile Phone* OR Text messag* OR SMS (Short Message Service) OR Technolog* OR cyber OR electronic OR digital
APPENDIX 2: Plain language statement [PLS] (key informants)

Sexting & Young People Study

I am a Masters student in the Department of General Practice (DGP) at the University of Melbourne (UoM). My research project is a qualitative study to understand the phenomenon of ‘sexting’ from the perspective of young people. My Supervisors are Dr. Lena Sanci and Associate Professor Meredith Temple-Smith. You are being invited to take part in this research study. Please read the following information and please ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information before you decide to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

The issue of ‘sexting’ is increasingly gaining media attention both nationally and internationally, however very little, if any, formally appraised knowledge about the phenomenon exists, particularly from young people’s perspective. Hence it is difficult to make any valid judgments about its use or role within the lives of young people. The Australian Macquarie Dictionary added the word ‘sexting’ to its repertoire of 85 new words for 2008, indicating the phenomenon is well established. Understanding ‘sexting’ from the perspective of young people will place us in a better position to meaningfully determine its epidemiology, which is important for the development of strategies to reduce any potential harm to young people. This first phase of the project involves a focus group and individual interviews with key informants, to develop a contextual framework for the issue.

Why have I been asked to participate?

You have been invited to participate based on your research, professional knowledge and/or experience of the issue. Between four and ten participants will be involved in this focus group to provide us with a broad perspective of the views and theories surrounding the issue of ‘sexting’ amongst young people.

What will happen to me if I take part?

The focus group (60 – 90 mins) will be held at the University of Melbourne and will be facilitated by an experienced research facilitator. I will be present to take notes of the discussion. It will be digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim with your permission. All information collected about you during the course of the research, will be kept strictly confidential. A pseudonym will be used to identify you, so that you cannot be recognised. It is intended that results will be published and presented at conferences. We will send you a copy of the results if you would like. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

Contact for Further Information If you have any questions, concerns or would just like more information about the project, please contact myself, my supervisors or the Research Ethics Office. Shelley Walker: s.walker@unimelb.edu.au, 9754 3057 or 0400 814 892; Lena Sanci: l.sanci@unimelb.edu.au, 8344 6152; Meredith Temple-Smith: m.temple-smith@unimelb.edu.au, 8344 3371. If you have concerns or complaints about the way the research has been conducted, please contact the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Melbourne: 8344 2073.
APPENDIX 3: Consent form (key informants)

Sexting & Young People Study

Name of participant: ____________________________________________

Name of investigator: __________________________________________

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.

2. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form, it will be retained by the researcher.

3. I understand that my participation will involve a focus group and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.

4. I acknowledge that:
   • The possible effects of participating in the focus group have been explained to me;
   • I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
   • The project is for the purpose of research;
   • I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
   • I have been informed that with my consent the focus group will be audio-taped and I understand that audio-tapes will be stored at University of Melbourne and will be destroyed after five years;
   • My name will be replaced by a pseudonym in publications arising from the research;
   • I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I agree to this.
   *

I consent to the focus group being audio-taped yes no

I wish to receive a copy of the summary report on research findings yes no

Participant signature: __________________________________________

Date: ________________________________________________________
APPENDIX 4: Interview guide (key informants)

Sexting & Young People Study

Introduction
This focus group is the first phase of the project, which is about us developing a contextual framework for the issue, given the lack of public research and literature about the phenomenon. The second phase will involve individual face-to-face interviews with young people to develop an understanding and meaning of the issue from their perspective.

What will happen in the focus group?
The focus group will go for 60-90 minutes. Susan will be asking questions, and I will be taking notes of the things that are discussed. We will also be audio taping the discussion. It’s OK to interrupt us to stop the group, or the audiotape, if you don’t wish to continue (if someone feels uncomfortable or upset about things that are being said). Therefore, it’s OK for you to withdraw at any time, and you don’t need to give us a reason either.

Questions
- Icebreaker
- How would you describe/name the phenomenon ‘sexting’?
- How would you describe the different dimensions/forms of ‘sexting’?
- What risks do you feel ‘sexting’ poses for young people?
- How prevalent do you think the issue of ‘sexting’ is amongst YP?
- Which YP do you think are most at risk in terms of ‘sexting’?
- What do you see as the effects of ‘sexting’ upon young people?
- What, if anything do you think needs to be done about ‘sexting’?

Conclusion
How did you find being involved in the focus group? If you have any questions, concerns or would just like more information about the research project you can contact the Research Ethics Office, Shelley or her supervisors. The results of the research will be published in a report, in journal articles and potentially in the media and at conferences. We will send you a copy of the results if you would like, which are likely to be published at the end of 2010, and the results will be available on a website for you to access. Finally, we’d like to thank-you for participating & sharing your knowledge, expertise & experience with us.
APPENDIX 5: PLS (young people)

Sexting & Young People Study

My name is Shelley Walker. I am a Masters student, and I am doing a research project to find out what people your age think about the issue of ‘sexting’. ‘Sexting’ is a new word that means “the sending of sexually explicit photos or videos via ones mobile phone”. When I finish my project it will mean that I will have completed a Masters in Research. I have two people helping me with my project, who are called my supervisors. Their names are Lena Sanci and Meredith Temple-Smith. We all work in the Department of General Practice at Melbourne University. The project has had been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the University of Melbourne.

You are being invited to take part in this research study, but before you decide if you would like to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish, and please ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

As you may be aware, there has been lots of information in the media about the issue of ‘sexting’ amongst young people. Some school staff, police and services that work with young people are also sharing stories about young people sending or receiving sexually explicit photos or videos via their mobile phones. We are concerned that the voices of young people are missing from the discussion that is going on about these issues. We feel it is really important that we talk to young people, to get a picture of the issue from their point of view. The kinds of things we will be asking young people about are; what if anything do they know about ‘sexting’; if it is happening, who is doing it; where and when it happens; how young people feel about ‘sexting’; and finally if they think we need to do something about it; and if so, what is it they think we should do.

What will happen to me if I take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. If you want to be part of the project, you will participate in an individual interview that would take about an hour. The only person with you in the interview would be me, who would be asking you a range of questions. The interview will be audio recorded, and I will take some notes as well. The interview will take place at Knox Youth Services, Knox Community Health Service or Swinburne TAFE Wantirna. Occasionally participating in an interview like this can bring up issues for people that they would like to talk to someone about. You will receive a pack of information about services and supports you can contact if you need to. You will not be expected to share information about yourself (apart from your age and gender). We are more interested in your views and understanding of the issue of ‘sexting’ amongst other young people.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

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All information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential in a locked cabinet, where only the researchers have access to this information. You will be referred to by a pseudonym and any information about you will have your name and address removed to prevent you from being recognised.

What will happen to the results of the research study?
The results of the research will be published in a report, in journal articles and potentially in the media and at conferences. We will send you a copy of the results if you would like, which are likely to be published at the end of 2010. You will not be identified in any reports or publications. Your research information and records will be kept for a minimum of five years after we publish the data, and then this information will be destroyed as per University guidelines.

Contact for Further Information
If you have questions, concerns or would just like more information about the project, please contact my supervisors or myself:
Shelley Walker – s.walker@unimelb.edu.au, ph. 9754 3057 or 0400 814 892
Lena Sanci – l.sanci@unimelb.edu.au, ph. 8344 6152
Associate Professor Meredith Temple-Smith - m.temple-smith@unimelb.edu.au, ph. 8344 3371

Concerns or Complaints
If you have any concerns or complaints about the way the research has been conducted, you can contact the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Melbourne – ph. 8344 2073, fax: 9347 6739
APPENDIX 6: Consent form (young people)

Sexting & Young People Study

Name of participant: __________________________________________

Name of investigator: _________________________________________

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.

2. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form, it will be retained by the researcher.

3. I understand that my participation will involve an interview and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.

4. I acknowledge that:

   • The possible effects of participating in the interview have been explained to my satisfaction;
   • I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;
   • The project is for the purpose of research;
   • I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
   • I have been informed that with my consent the interview will be audio-taped and I understand that audio-tapes will be stored at University of Melbourne and will be destroyed after five years;
   • My name will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research;
   • I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I agree to this.

I consent to the interview being audio-taped yes no

I wish to receive a copy of the summary report on research findings yes no

Participant signature: ______________________________

Date: ______________________________
APPENDIX 7: Young people’s contact details

Sexting & Young People Study

GENDER (please tick one box)
- Male □
- Female □
- Unspecified □

AGE (please tick one box)
- 15 – 17 years □
- 18 – 20 years □

Would you like to receive the final report?
- Yes □
- No □

Contact details (for getting in touch & sending final report)

Name: __________________________________________________

Email: __________________________________________________

Phone: __________________________________________________

Postal Address: (if you’d like a copy of the report sent to you)
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________
APPENDIX 8: PLS (parent / guardian)

Sexting & Young People Study

Introduction

My name is Shelley Walker. I am a Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne, and I am doing a research project to find out what young people know and understand about the issue of ‘sexting’. ‘Sexting’ is a new word that means “the sending of sexually explicit photos or videos via ones mobile phone”. When I finish my project it will mean that I will have completed a Masters in Research. I have two people helping me with my project, who are called my supervisors. Their names are Dr. Lena Sanci and Associate Professor Meredith Temple-Smith. We all work in the Department of General Practice at Melbourne University. The project has had been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the University of Melbourne. Your child/young person in your care is being invited to take part in this research study, but before you decide whether or not you would like them to take part in the research, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish, and please ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

As you may be aware, there has been lots of information in the media about the issue of ‘sexting’ amongst young people. Some school staff, police and services that work with young people are also sharing stories about young people sending or receiving sexually explicit photos or videos via their mobile phones. We are concerned that the voices of young people are missing from the discussion that is going on about these issues. We feel it is really important that we talk to young people, to get a picture of the issue from their point of view. The kinds of things we will be asking young people about are; what if anything do they know about ‘sexting’; if it is happening, who is doing it; where and when it happens; how young people feel about ‘sexting’; and finally if they think we need to do something about it; and if so, what is it they think we should do.

Does my child/young person in my care have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not they take part. If you decide for them to take part, they are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you are happy for your child/young person in your care to be part of the project, they will participate in an individual interview of 30-40 minutes. I will be facilitating the interviews, which will be audio recorded, and will take place at Knox Youth Services, Knox Community Health Service or Swinburne TAFE Wantirna. Occasionally participating in a focus group or individual interview like this can bring up issues for young people that they’d like to talk to someone about. They will receive a pack of information about services and supports they can contact if they need to after the interview, along with tips for keeping technologically safe. They won’t be expected to share information about themselves (apart from their age and gender). We are more interested in their views and understanding of the issue of ‘sexting’ amongst other young people.
Will my child / young person in my care taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information, which is collected about them during the course of the research will be kept confidential in a locked cabinet, where only the researchers have access to this information. In the study they will be referred to by a pseudonym and any information about them will have their name and address removed to prevent them from being recognised.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the research will be published in a report, in journal articles and potentially in the media and at conferences. We will send your child/young person in your care a copy of the results if they would like, which are likely to be published at the end of 2010. They will not be identified in any reports or publications. Their research information and records will be kept for a minimum of five years after we publish the data, and then this information will be destroyed as per University guidelines.

Contact for Further Information

If you have questions, concerns or would just like more information about the project, please contact myself or my supervisors: Shelley Walker – s.walker@unimelb.edu.au, ph. 9754 3057 or 0400 814 892, Lena Sanci – l.sanci@unimelb.edu.au, ph. 8344 6152, Meredith Temple-Smith - m.temple-smith@unimelb.edu.au, ph. 8344 3371 or the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Melbourne – ph. 8344 2073, fax: 9347 6739.
APPENDIX 9: Consent form (parent / guardian)

Sexting & Young People Study

Name of participant: ___________________________________________________________

Name of parent/guardian: ______________________________________________________

Name of investigator: __________________________________________________________

1. I consent to the participation of my child/the young person in my care in this project, the
details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written plain
language statement to keep.

2. I understand after I sign/return this form it will be retained by the researcher.

3. I understand that the participation of my child/the young person in my care will involve an
interview and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language
statement.

4. I acknowledge that:
   - The possible effects of participating in the interview have been explained to me;
   - I have been informed that my child/the young person in my care is free to withdraw from the
     project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I
     have provided;
   - The project is for the purpose of research;
   - I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information my child/the young person in
     my care provides will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;
   - I have been informed that with my child/the young person in my care’s interview will be audio-
     taped and I understand that audio-tapes will be stored at University of Melbourne and will be
     destroyed after five years;
   - My child/the young person in my care’s name will be referred to by a pseudonym in any
     publications arising from the research;
   - I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to my child/the
     young person in my care, should I agree to this.

I consent to the interview being audio-taped yes no

We would like to receive a copy of the summary report on research findings yes no

Participant signature: __________________________________________________________

Date: ________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX 10: Resource pack contents

Sexting & Young People Study

For minors to give to Parent/Guardian
- Talking Sexual Health – A Guide for Parents Booklet
- SAFE SEXTING: No Such Thing brochure
- Cybersmart Guide for Parents (Aust. Communication & Media Authority)
- Parentline (telephone counselling, info. & referral for parents) brochure
- Parentzone (resources and support for parents) brochure
- Who’s looking out for your child online? brochure (Aust. Gov Net Alert)
- Parent/Guardian Consent Form
- Parent/Guardian PLS

For young people after individual interviews
- List of local services & supports
- Information for Opting-in via Snowball Sampling
- Cybersmart Kids Online Resources (ACMA)
  - The Cybersmart Guide to Socialising
  - How to be Phone Smart & Stay Safe
- Am I Old Enough: common legal issues for YP – Victorian Legal Aid
- Sexual Assault: the law, your rights as a victim – Vict. Legal Aid
- KISS: Guide to Safe Sex
- Services & Support Brochures/Resources
  - Knox Community Health Service
  - Same Sex Attracted YPs Support Group
  - Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault
  - Eastern Drug & Alcohol Service
  - Action Centre (Youth Health Service)
  - Knox Youth Services
  - EACH Youth Health Clinic
  - Beyond Blue (Depression info/support)
  - Kids Help Line
Giving meaning to the phenomenon of ‘sexting’ from young people’s perspective

We’re looking for 15-20 year olds who’d like to participate in some research about technology & young people!

Don’t know what ‘sexting’ is...
It’s the sending or receiving of sexually explicit images & videos via a mobile phone

We don’t want to know about your experience of sexting.
We are interested in what you know & think about it!

If you’re interested contact Shelley Walker
0400 814 892  s.walker@unimelb.edu.au

Shelley is completing a Masters in Research at the Department of General Practice at The University of Melbourne
APPENDIX 12: Third party script (young people)

Sexting & Young People Study

Shelley Walker, the Youth Health Worker from Knox Community Health Service is completing some research with the University of Melbourne to find out what young people know and think about the issue of ‘sexting’. ‘Sexting’ is when someone sends or receives a sexually explicit photo or video via their mobile phone. Shelley is seeking young people your age to be involved in individual interviews to talk about what they know and think about the issue of ‘sexting’ amongst young people. She would like to talk to you about the possibility of your being involved.

Shelley has been invited to our class/group (TAFE/University/SSAY program/youth council/JPET to talk more about the project and what it would mean for you to be involved, and to provide an opportunity for you to ask questions so that you can make a decision about whether you want to be involved or not. As this is happening at the end of our class/group session you do not have to stay if you are not interested.

You are under no obligation to participate if you don’t want to, and it is important that you understand that if you decide NOT to participate that this will not affect your assessments / grades / or the way you are treated within this course / program.
APPENDIX 13: Researcher script (young people)

Sexting & Young People Study

Phase 2: The voices of young people

Hello! My name is Shelley. I’m a student at the UoM, and I’m doing a research project to find out what people your age think about ‘sexting’, which means ‘the sending of sexually explicit photos or videos via ones mobile phone’. It’s up to you whether or not to take part, and if you decide to take part you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

Invitation to be involved

I’d like to invite you to be a part of this study, but before you decide if you’d like to take part, it’s important you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. As you’re probably aware, there’s been lots of info. in the media about the issue of ‘sexting’ and we’re hearing lots of stories about cases in schools & from police. We’re concerned young people’s voices are missing from the discussion, so we feel it’s really important that we talk to them, to get a picture of the issue from their point of view. Young people won’t be expected to share information about themselves (apart from their age and gender). We’re more interested in their views & understanding of the issue of ‘sexting’ amongst other young people. You’re under no obligation to participate if you don’t want to, and it’s important that you understand that if you decide NOT to participate that this will not affect your assessments/grades/or the way you are treated within this course / program.

What would being involved mean?

If you want to be part of the project, you would participate in an interview for 30-40 minutes. You will be given a PLS with more info about the project, and a form for you or your parent/guardian to sign to show you understand what you’re being involved in. If you’re under 18 years you’ll be required to get parent/guardian consent, unless there’s a good reason why you can’t do this. I’ll give you some info. to take home and a form for your parent/guardian to sign. I’ll be the only one in the interviews with you, which will be audio recorded, and will take place at Knox Youth Services, Knox Community Health Service or Swinburne TAFE. There will be a report of the research, which you’ll be able to get a copy of. The info might also be reported in the media, but you won’t be identified in these.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All info. collected will be kept confidential in a locked cabinet, where only the researchers have access, & you’ll be referred to by pseudonym, so any info. about you will have your name/address removed so it’s hard for you to be recognised. Results will be published in a report, journal articles & maybe the media & conferences. We’ll send you a copy of the results if you’d like, which are likely to be published at the end of 2010.

What do you need to do if you want to be involved?

I’m going to give you some written info. about the project (PLS’s) and consent forms for you or your parent/guardian to sign, as well as a form to record your contact details so that I can get in touch with you about when the interviews will happen.
APPENDIX 14: Mature Minor Process

Sexting & Young People Study

- Young person aged 15 - 17 indicates they are interested in participating in the research
  - Assess willingness & ability to obtain parent/guardian consent

- Young person does NOT WISH TO or is UNABLE to obtain parent/guardian consent
  - Assess mature minor eligibility of young person
    - Young person assessed as NOT mature minor
      - NOT eligible
    - Young person assessed as mature minor
      - ELIGIBLE to participate
APPENDIX 15: Interview guide (young people)

Sexting & Young People Study

Hi! I’m Shelley. I’m going to tell you a bit about myself and the research project and what it means to be participating in this interview. Some of the information I tell you might be a repeat of information you already know (from your teacher / your phone call with me / an email / etc.), but I need to go through it again, just to make sure you are really clear about what it is you are taking part in, and what this means for you.

I’m a STUDENT at the UoM, and I’m doing a research project to find out what people your age think about the issue of ‘sexting’. ‘Sexting’ is a new word that means “the sending of sexually explicit photos or videos via ones mobile phone”. I have two people helping me with my project, who are called my supervisors. Their names are Lena Sanci and Meredith Temple-Smith. We all work in the DGP at UOM.

What is the purpose of the study?

As you are probably aware, there’s been lots of information in the media about the issue of sexting amongst young people. Some school staff, police and services that work with young people are also sharing stories about young people sending or receiving sexually explicit photos or videos via their mobile phones. We’re concerned that the voices of young people are missing from the discussion that’s going on about these issues. And we feel it’s really important that we talk to young people, to get a picture of the issue from their point of view, so that’s why you’ve been invited to participate.

What will happen in the interview?

The interview will go for 30-40 minutes. I will be taking notes, and will also be audio taping the discussion. It’s really important that you know it’s OK for us to stop the interview at any time, or to stop the audio tape, if you don’t wish to continue (if you feel uncomfortable, or upset about things that come up for you in the interview) or you just don’t want to go on and complete the interview. So it’s OK for you to withdraw at any time, and you don’t need to give me a reason either. I’d also like to mention that occasionally participating in an interview like this can bring up issues for people that they’d like to talk to someone about. It could be that later today something comes up for you that you need to talk about in relation to the interview or it may even be in a few days or even a week. I’ll be giving you a pack of information about services and supports you can contact if you need to, including phone numbers and websites. But you can also phone me if you need to.

I’m going to be asking you questions about the issue of sexting, to get a better picture of what young people know and understand about the issue. Please don’t share information about yourself, as that’s not what we are interested in. We’d rather know what you think about it, and know about it amongst other young people. If you absolutely feel the need to share a story about someone you know, you can make up a name or just talk about this person in the 3rd person (they, he, she or them). This means yours and your friends or the people you knows confidentially can be protected as much as possible. Your name will not appear in the results of the research – we will use a pseudonym, which means we will make up a name for you, so it
will be hard for others to recognise your comments. Also, please DO NOT share any information about illegal behaviours, as I can’t guarantee absolute confidentiality in relation to illegal behaviour that you talk about. The only other thing I need to mention is that if you share something that I think means that you are at risk of hurting yourself or others, or at risk of being hurt, that I am ethically bound to inform someone who can help you.

Questions
How would you describe or name the phenomenon that is called sexting?
How would you describe the different types or forms of sexting?
What do you think the risks of sexting are for young people?
How prevalent do you think the issue of sexting is amongst young people?
Which young people do you think are most at risk in terms of sexting?
What do you see as the effects of sexting upon young people?
What, if anything do you think needs to be done about the issue of sexting?

Conclusion
Reminder of the rationale for project
How was the experience of being interviewed?
Go through resource pack, reminding that issues may arise later on, and they can contact services, supports or access websites for information. If you have any questions, concerns or would just like more information about the research project you can contact me or my supervisors or the Research Ethics Office.
The results of the research will be published in a report, in journal articles and potentially in the media and at conferences. We will send you a copy of the results if you would like, which are likely to be published at the end of 2010, and the results will be available on a website for you to access too.
APPENDIX 16: Distress / disclosure protocol

Sexting & Young People Study

For responding to emotional distress, & discloser of emotional/sexual abuse/illegal activity

A participant becomes emotionally distressed

- Turn audio recorder off; and ask if they would like to stop the interview;
- Listen empathically to how they’re feeling and what issues they are concerned about;
- Explore whether they know someone they’d like to talk to, & encourage if they think it’d be helpful, particularly parents if supportive;
- If not, refer to resource list for appropriate counselling or support organisation.

Disclosure of physical or sexual harms or abuse

If disclosure is made by YP less than 18 years the following protective actions are taken:

- Ask if this is the first ever disclosure or if they have told others.
- Remind the young person that the researcher is obliged to tell someone about this disclosure, based on the requirements of mandatory reporting legislation, detailed to young person at the beginning of the interview and in the PLS and Consent Form.
- Report the incident to the Vic. Dept of Health, Child Protection Unit. If there is a belief that the concerns raised require a family services response, rather than child protection, these services will be engaged.
- Ask what current support they have & if they’d like to talk to someone about it; encouraging them to do so if this is the case. If not, they will be referred to the resource list and assisted to find appropriate counselling or support.
- Document disclosure & contact Responsible Researcher (Lena), Supervisor (Meredith) or Counsellor at Knox Community Health Service for debriefing or on-call support.
- The Victorian Child Protection Unit can also be contacted (and the anonymity of the young person maintained) for advice about whether the case requires reporting.

Disclosure of illegal activity

If a YP discloses knowledge of involvement in illegal activity:

- Make YP aware that they or someone else has potentially committed a crime.
- Advise YP that confidentiality in relation to this crime will be maintained unless (as stated above) the offence is one that Shelley is mandated to report.
- Contact Victorian Police Sexual Offence & Child Abuse Unit for confidential advice.
- Support YP to access counseling/support to explore options to deal with situation.

Contacts for confidential advice or debriefing

- Dr. Lena Sanci - 8344 6152 (& mobile number)
- Associate Professor Meredith Temple-Smith – 8344 3371 (& mobile number)
- Victorian Child Protection Unit (Eastern Metro Region) - 1300 360 391
- Knox Police Sexual Offence & Child Abuse Unit (SOCAU) – 98817939
- Jenni Thompson (Counsellor, Knox Community Health Service) – 9757 6200
Youth Studies Australia

VOLUME 30 NUMBER 4 2011

Daniel and Abbey are 15 years old and have been together for two months. Daniel texts Abbey, “Send me a ‘noodz’”. Abbey is worried Daniel will “dump” her if she doesn’t, so she sends a naked photo of herself via mobile phone text, asking him to promise he won’t show anyone else. Daniel assures Abbey he won’t, but then can’t resist texting the photo to his mate. Within a week, almost everyone in school has seen the photo. It is anecdotes such as these, echoed by secondary school staff, local police and youth health service workers in Melbourne’s outer east, which prompted this study.

Young people are growing up in an increasingly sexualised world driven by technology (McGrath 2009), with mobile phone ownership among Australian young people aged 15 to 17 years having risen to 90% (Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) 2010). Sending and receiving text messages, taking photos and accessing the internet are mobile phone activities that have been taken up at ever-increasing rates by young people (Mackay & Weidlich 2009; Brown & Bobkowski 2011). “As digital culture becomes increasingly pervasive and embedded in young people’s everyday experiences” (Weber & Dixon 2010), young people’s relationships with each other, in terms of how they interact and socialise, are being transformed.

Advances in technology offer many opportunities to improve youth health; however, this progress also brings potential risks. The introduction of text, Bluetooth and webcam mean

APPENDIX 17: Youth Studies Australia journal article

Sexting and young people
Experts’ views

Young people’s ‘sexting’ – defined by the Macquarie Dictionary Online (2010) as the sending and receiving of sexually explicit images via mobile phones – has become a focus of much media reporting; however, research regarding the phenomenon is in its infancy. This paper reports on the first phase of a study to understand this activity more comprehensively. Interviews were conducted with notable key informants (including teen culture authors and professionals from the academic, education and health sectors) to create a context for a second phase involving interviews with young people. Insights were offered into reasons for young people’s participation, potential consequences and solutions. Highlighted was a gap in reliable data from the perspective of young people themselves, and the importance of their voice in understanding and developing effective strategies to prevent and deal with this phenomenon.

by Shelley Walker, Lena Sanci & Meredith Temple-Smith

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by Shelley Walker, Lena Sanci & Meredith Temple-Smith
sexual images can be forwarded to cyberspace easily and rapidly. These images then “become part of a young person’s digital footprint, which may last forever and potentially damage future career prospects or relationships” (NSW Government 2008). Of particular concern is that images of young women are reportedly being distributed without their consent, and mobile phone technologies are being used “as vehicles for the perpetration of sexual assault” (Quadara 2010; Powell 2009).

The viral spread of these images and the associated shame have reportedly led to social, psychological and legal consequences for victims (Katzman 2010). A wealth of local anecdotes abound of young people being excluded from friendship groups and moving schools, with reports of their having experienced emotional distress and school suspension (O’Keefe & Clarke-Pearson 2011), and, in the more extreme cases, committing suicide (Tomazin & Smith 2007). Furthermore, young people face the risk of criminal charges for the production and distribution of child pornography (Prince & Jordan 2004; Krause 2009; Weiss & Samenow 2010), although there has only been one criminal case against a young person in Australia to date in relation to sexting (Pace Legal 2010). However, the story in the US is quite different. A report by Wolak and Finkelhor (2011) presents a typology of sexting episodes involving young people based on a review of more than 550 cases from law enforcement agencies there. At least a dozen peer-reviewed law and policy journal articles were sourced regarding this topic in the US (examples include Ryan (2010) ‘How the state can prevent a moment of indiscretion from leading to a lifetime of unintended consequences for minors and young adults’, and Wood (2009) ‘The failure of sexting criminalization: A plea for the exercise of prosecutorial restraint’).

Issues relating to the practice of sexting among young people have been increasingly gaining media attention both nationally and internationally. An online search (see Table 1) of 10 academic databases (Psychology and Behaviour Sciences, Medline, PsychINFO, Web of Science, PubMed, CINAHL PLUS, Academic Search Premier, Expanded Academic ASAP, JSTOR and Google Scholar) revealed very little reliable literature, particularly from an Australian perspective.

A few expert opinion papers were sourced; most are authored from a North American viewpoint. The little available quantitative data is of poor quality, and contradictory. Two consumer surveys by young women’s magazines in Australia (Battersby 2008) and the US (Cosmogirl 2009), and the first quantitative study to be cited in a peer review journal, involving 16- to 25-year-old Hispanic women (Ferguson 2010), have indicated that as many as 20%–40% of respondents aged 12–19 years have been asked to send or have posted nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves in cyberspace. In contrast, a Victorian independent schools survey (Association of Independent Schools of Victoria (ASIV) 2009) and a US report (Lenhart 2009) found as few as 4%–7% of 12- to 17-year-olds were involved in this behaviour.

Only one qualitative study about young people and sexting was sourced. Pew Research Center in the US conducted a mixed-methods study (Lenhart 2009) involving telephone surveys and focus groups with young people aged 12 to 18 years. This report describes sexting as one of three main categories of behaviour that involves the exchange of images between young people. It is suggested that images are sent 1) between romantic partners, 2) between partners and shared with others, and 3) between young people where at least one person hopes to be in a relationship with the other. Lenhart’s report showed very little evidence of difference in the behaviour of sexting related to gender. However, many other authors (Hand, Chung & Peters 2009; Kee 2005;...
Powell 2009; Flood 2008) argue it is young women’s sexual images in particular that are being distributed without their consent, and that ultimately this is just another means of controlling and exerting power over women.

Muscari (2009) suggests “the topic of sexting is nonexistent” in health research literature and, along with Katzman (2010), believes we must recognise sexting as a public health problem.

Much of the popular literature discusses the need for education targeting young people about the potential consequences of sexting (Muscari 2009; Brown, Keller & Stern 2009). It has been posed in the literature and in policy responses (Marwick et al. 2010) that if young people understood the potential consequences of their behaviour they would not be sexting, a view contrary to evidence on risk-taking among young people (Zirkel 2009). Despite this, in Australia a number of government campaigns (NSW Government 2008; Diliberto & Mattey 2009; Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) 2010) have attempted to warn young people and parents about the potential harmful effects of sexting. In 2009 the NSW Government launched the Safe Sexting – No Such Thing campaign (based on a recommendation from a Time for Action: the National Council’s Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Children (The National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2009). Apart from a video resource for schools (Developing Ethical Digital Citizens 2009), to promote discussion about sexting among students (which was developed with and by young people), there is no evidence that these campaigns have been informed by young people’s understanding or experience of the practice, and therefore their effectiveness in dealing with the phenomenon remains to be seen.

Understanding sexting from the perspective of young people is fundamental to the development of strategies for preventing potential harms (Heath et al. 2009). This paper reports on the first of two phases of a study that aims to give young people a voice to promote a better understanding of the phenomenon. Phase two is currently under way and involves the gathering of qualitative data from young people aged 15 to 20 years. An important early step was the development of a local context for the study, which would identify appropriate language and recruitment strategies for individual interviews with young people. Thus, in Phase one, discussions were held with experts from the youth health, education and cyber safety sectors (Table 2 describes the informants and lists their participant IDs). Initially, results of these consultations were not intended for publication; however, given the current sparse academic literature on sexting and young people, we felt that placing the results of our expert consultation phase in the public arena would stimulate much-needed debate on the topic. Although the data collected for this paper is not exhaustive, the systematic analysis of the data obtained from key informants raises important issues for discussion among those who work with young people as well as for young people themselves.

### Methods

Given the relative newness of the phenomenon of sexting among young people, a qualitative approach of inquiry was used, as is often the
strategy when little or nothing is known about a phenomenon. This meant we were able to approach the study without set assumptions or being constrained by pre-determined categories for exploration (Patton 1990).

A mixed-methods approach was used, with initial information collected via a focus group of seven participants, and subsequent data gathered via five individual interviews. It was hoped that the initial group process would lead participants to raise issues not anticipated by the interviewer, and that participants would challenge each other’s views or opinions to create a lively and stimulating discussion (Hansen 2006). Thus, it was anticipated that the purposeful use of group interaction would generate data (Kitzinger 1994; Morgan 1996). Furthermore, focus groups are considered an economical way to gather a large amount of data in a short time span (Heath, Brooks & Cleaver 2009). As this phase of the research was about setting a backdrop for interviews with young people, this was an important factor for the research, given the limited time available.

Choosing individual semi-structured interviews as an additional means of collecting data meant we were able to support an expansion of the study group to include valuable sources that otherwise would not have been involved in the study, including those not wanting to share opinions in a group setting and those unable to attend the focus group. A preliminary analysis of focus group data was completed to provide new themes for questioning in individual interviews. This mixed-method approach allowed us to build on information gathered in the focus group to create a more complete picture. Data were reviewed by three researchers, and it was agreed that saturation was reached at this point. Careful consideration was taken to select an appropriate number of research participants for each stage of data collection. Purposive sampling was used to recruit key informants, which meant we were able to locate important and information-rich cases by deliberately seeking to include people (Barbour 2001). It meant the researcher had a degree of control in selecting the sample, to ensure data gathered provided a “full and sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Rice & Ezzy 1999). Twelve key stakeholders with diverse experience and views were sourced through the first author’s own professional networks and snowball sampling. Those recruited were professionals notable in their field including researchers; cyber safety experts; those working with individual young people in a teaching, support, counselling or sexual violence prevention role; an author who writes for the general public; and a popular teen-magazine psychologist.

Individual and group interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, thematically coded and systematically analysed using a grounded-theory approach (Hansen 2006).

Results

Mobile phone: The mechanism or the cause?

A commonly held view was that sexting is merely a new manifestation of motivations and behaviours among young people that have been around forever:

“We are using a new technology in order to do it, but at the end of the day it’s not new … even the sharing of images of women, I mean that’s not new. (Violence prevention research academic [P10])

We don’t necessarily acknowledge that the behaviour has been similar for a long period of time. It’s just that the technology facilitates that behaviour in a slightly different way, and … maybe it makes dissemination of things like photographs easier because normally you would have had to have photocopied them and hung them up on the wall, whereas now it’s a click of a button, which may for some young people mean that the consequences are more severe because they do get out there quicker. (Youth health research academic [P8])

It was acknowledged that mobile phone ownership is increasing among young people and, given most mobile phones today have in-built cameras and Bluetooth, that fast and easy distribution of images is inevitable:

[They] are much more savvy with using their phones … mobile phones are probably the greatest transmitter of pornography out there. (Violence prevention research academic [P10])

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SEXTING AND YOUNG PEOPLE 148
Are all young people sexting or is it just media hype?

Views were polarised about the prevalence of sexting. One view expressed by an academic researcher who works in secondary schools, was that the media is over-reporting:

The young people that I’ve worked with … have never disclosed that they have engaged in sexting behaviour. However, whenever I … do professional development workshops for teachers, for parents, everyone’s talking about it … it seems to be … sensationalised or over-reported by the media. (Youth health academic [P8])

However, for others who spend time in schools, there was a strong sense that the behaviour is widespread among young people:

After a presentation to students in a school about cyber safety, and in particular sexting, they went out with the teacher/coordinator … [and] said “Oh my goodness you’ve really rattled the cages because … the kids walked out and said, ‘Oh my god, we all do that’”. (Cyber safety expert [P7])

You only ever [hear] them saying, “It didn’t happen to me, it happened to a friend of mine”, but they must all be engaging in [this] somewhere on the continuum. (Education policy academic [P3])

I’m saying of course it’s out there … when people say it’s not happening, yes, it’s not being reported. (Telecommunications security and safety expert [P11])

Furthermore, concern was raised about the role of the media:

I do think there’s a bit of a media beat-up about it … but in many respects the media beat-up actually encourages it. (Teen magazine author/youth and family psychologist [P12])

A commonly held opinion was the need to consider sexting within the broader context of the sexualisation of culture:

A sexualised culture

The gendered expectations of young people were discussed in relation to the behaviour of sexting, including a view that young women face pressure to present themselves in sexual ways, and young men are expected to be interested in this:

… something that seems to be pronounced at the moment, [is] the expectation on young women to present themselves in sexual ways … as objects for consumption. (Sexual violence prevention research academic [P10])

I think it would generally be more males sending it on … and so there’s a lot of pressure on other boys I think to kind of go along with it too. (Sexual violence prevention – schools [P1])

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A commonly held opinion was the need to consider sexting within the broader context of the sexualisation of culture:

There is also the sexualisation issue, which I think plays a huge role. If you allow this third parent into your home through the television set … videos … YouTube … fashion … Basically I think the whole thing has blurred the line between what is a girl and what is a woman … I see this as incredibly sinister … creeping corporate paedophilia. (Teen magazine author/youth and family psychologist [P12])

Moreover, some key informants were concerned that young people have become desensitised as a result of their increased exposure to sexually explicit images that were once considered “hard core porn”:

The mainstreaming of pornography, including the increasingly hardcore nature of what is widely available, is impacting on what seems normal and acceptable. It makes “sexted” images of nudity, for example, look quite tame. (Sexual violence prevention – project worker [P6])

It was also considered that sexting among young people is possibly a reflection of what occurs in the adult world:

We’d better remember this isn’t a youth issue; this is affecting everybody across society … I don’t think it’s different to what’s happening in the adult world. (Secondary school teacher / student wellbeing [P4])
Should we be concerned?
While the prevalence of sexting in Australia is uncertain, participants’ stories did demonstrate reasons for concern. Non-consensual sexting, where an image is misused and sent on without permission, was considered a form of sexual violence by some key informants:

*Where there is pressure … coercion … those are harassing, potentially aggressive behaviours, even if that image is sent consensually … the risk then of it being sent on without consent is of concern.* (Sexual violence prevention research academic [P10])

There was, however, a view that consensual sexting may in fact be acceptable:

*… one of the other considerations, and it might be quite controversial, is to actually reflect on who is being hurt by the behaviour … I’d probably rather that young people were viewing stuff on their mobile phones than if they were … getting themselves into bars and hooking up with older guys.* (Youth health research academic [P8])

What should we do, if anything?
While a variety of responses were expressed regarding strategies for dealing with potential risks associated with sexting (Table 3), one participant felt that the developmental nature of adolescence makes it too difficult to manage. Others were concerned that assumptions are made about young people’s behaviour that may be untrue; and, consistent with much media reporting and expert opinion, was a view by key informants that current legal responses to sexting are inappropriate. The potential for young people to be charged with the production or dissemination of child pornography, if the image is of a person under 18 years depicted in a sexual manner, was of concern to key informants, who agreed that current legislation is ineffective:

*I think that’s a very dangerous road to go down and I think we do need to make a qualitative distinction between young people of a similar age basically exploring their sexuality and the very serious offence of child sexual exploitation because they are not equivalent …* (Violence prevention research academic [P10])

Consensus was shared about the need for adults to have conversations with young people about their use of technology in the context of broader discussions about relationships, intimacy, gender, sexuality and ethics:

*We need to … find strategies to engage with young people to potentially shift their discourse, so they’re learning … that sex can be fantastic, it can be fun and mutually respectful, and engaging …* (Sexual violence prevention project worker [P6])

It was acknowledged, however, that having these discussions with young people is not something teachers and parents find easy:

*Over the last few years more and more people [in schools] are saying, “How do we deal with this problem?” and so they don’t know how to address it … we’re having trouble keeping up with the technology.* (Education policy academic [P3])

Participants emphasised the importance of talking “with” rather than “at” young people, ensuring discussions are not framed to focus on the negative aspects of behaviour:

**TABLE 3** Summary of suggested solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed solutions to manage potential risks of sexting among young people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• advocating for legislative policy review to ensure current laws are appropriate for dealing with sexting;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• advocating for more comprehensive relationship/sexuality education in schools;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• challenging the cultural discourse that promotes gendered sexual violence against women;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• creating conversations with young people to understand/address the phenomenon;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• determining the real prevalence of sexting among young people;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• engaging with, and providing information/education to, parents about young people’s use of ICTs, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• focusing on the benefits of new technologies for young people, along with the associated risks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
think there certainly needs to be some work done, probably led by young people, to educate teachers, parents and healthcare professionals around the way in which young people do use technology, and the meaning that they place on the use of technology. (Youth health research academic [P8])

Finally, but not least importantly, key informants expressed consensus regarding the need for Australian prevalence data to determine the real extent of the phenomenon among young people.

Discussion
This study confirmed a gap in rigorous research about the phenomenon of sexting among young people. Furthermore, it has highlighted the complex nature and polarised attitudes that exist in relation to almost every aspect of the behaviour. A range of views were raised by key informants about whether sexting is common practice among young people or just “media hype”; whether the practice is a result of our sexualised culture, or just young people exploring their sexual identity as they have always done; whether or not sexting is something we should be concerned about; and, finally, what (if anything) we should be doing about the phenomenon.

There was no doubt among key informants that sexting is “a new iteration of previous practices” with advances in information technology making the transmission of images faster and access easier (Hand, Chung & Peters 2009; Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA) 2010); it is this aspect of sexting that is new. These views are consistent with media reports and expert opinion (Chalfen 2009; Muscari 2009).

A particular concern raised by key informants in our study was the potential gender bias of the behaviour. A commonly held view was that young women are more likely to be negatively impacted by this behaviour, a theme also reflected in media reports and expert opinion. The possibility of a link between sexting and gendered sexual violence targeting women (Powell 2009; Flood 2008), where young women are being coerced or pressured to send images, was a view shared by key informants, albeit with varying levels of concern.

The findings of this study support the need for solutions at both the treatment and preventative end of the health care spectrum. At the treatment end, the mental health consequences for young people who experience guilt, shame, victimisation, along with fear of criminal charges being pressed, highlight the need for health professionals who work with young people to understand the implications of the phenomenon and how to address these. An obvious response posed by key informants, and supported elsewhere in the literature, is the need for legislative change (Powell 2009) to deal with what some refer to as “e-crime” (McGrath 2009), an area that to date has not managed to keep up with the fast-paced growth of technology. There was consensus among key informants on the need to educate young people, their parents and teachers of the potential risks involved in the behaviour; this view is reflected in much of the literature (Katzman 2010; Muscari 2009; Ryan 2010; Brown, Keller & Stern 2009). Participants emphasised the need for prevention education to be taught within a sexual ethics framework that provides young people with the skills necessary to make informed ethical decisions. In line with this view, Carmody (2009) argues for a new approach to sexuality and sexual assault prevention education based on developing skills in ethical intimacy.

Finally, key informants were unanimous in their view that effective solutions need to be shaped by the expressed experience of young people, with reference to developmentally appropriate changes. In line with this, a recent literature review suggests that “much popular writing (and some research) includes descriptions of young people, online technologies, and privacy in ways that do not reflect the realities of most children and teenagers” (Diliberto & Mattey 2009). It is vital, therefore, that opportunities are created for young people’s voices to be heard.

Conclusion
This paper was precipitated by concerns about the potential short- and long-term harms for young people involved in the behaviour of sexting. Reliable prevalence data is lacking, as is qualitative data about the meaning of
sexting from the perspective of young people in an Australian context. Not surprisingly there was broad support from key informants for further investigation regarding sexting and young people. Future research efforts need to identify how young people define sexting, the role it plays in their lives and their suggestions for how best to intervene. Combined with prevalence data, this information will inform and support responses to prevent and minimise harm to young people.

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THE PROJECT IN BRIEF

‘Sexting’ involves the production and distribution of sexually explicit images via communication technologies.

This is one of the first studies to explore the phenomenon of sexting from the perspective of young people. It addresses a gap in knowledge about the nature of sexting, the reasons why young people are involved in the behaviour and potential solutions for addressing harmful implications.

A focus group and individual interviews were held with 12 key informants in the first phase of the project. Findings helped frame interviews with young people, and affirmed that young people’s voices needed to be heard.

The 2nd phase involved individual interviews with 33 young people aged 15-20 years. Results highlighted a number of important themes:

- Young people don’t use the word sexting
- Sexually explicit images are often distributed without consent
- Young people are concerned about sexting
- Young people feel pressured to sext
- Some young men challenge the behaviour of friends who distribute images of girls without their consent
- Just knowing about potential legal implications doesn’t stop young people sexting.
- Young people need to be involved in the design of solutions to address harms caused by sexting

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WHAT WERE THE QUESTIONS WE WERE TRYING TO ANSWER?

WHAT DID WE DO?

**Phase 1. Experts’ views**
- A focus group and individual interviews were conducted with 12 key informants, who were professionals with expertise and knowledge in the areas of youth health and Cyber-safety.
- Researchers, cyber-safety experts and those working in student wellbeing, sexual assault prevention and counselling roles were represented.
- Key informant interviews assisted in the design of topics for investigation with young people in Phase 2.

**Phase 2. The voice of young people**
- Individual interviews were conducted with 33 young people aged 15 to 20 years, from August 2010-2011.
- Young people were recruited from recreation, education & health settings in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne.
- Open-ended questions were used, that allowed young people to explore topics important to them.

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

**Young People’s views on the nature of sexting**
- Some young people think the media is over-reporting sexting, others think everyone is doing it.
- Young people don’t use the word ‘sexting’. ‘Nudes’, ‘noodz’, ‘sexy pics’ and ‘dirty pictures’ were some of the words they use.
- Images included photos and videos of individuals, couples and groups of young people posing nude or semi-nude, masturbating or participating in sexual activities.
- Images were distributed via text message, posted on SNS, or shown via hand held technological device.
- Most stories involved self-produced photos of girls, and many were distributed without their consent.
- Young women were more often represented in compromising situations.

There’s entire websites on the internet where boys can post photos of ex-girlfriends that have cheated on them and stuff like that. (G6, female aged 19)

My best friend sent a picture of her boobs to a guy she liked and thought he wouldn’t show anyone and it got around the whole school. (G5, female aged 17)

He was going out with this girl and ... there was a video and I’m pretty sure it was just him coming on her face and she wasn’t really impressed with it and they broke up. (G13, female aged 20)
WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

YOUNG PEOPLE’S VIEWS ON THE ORIGINS OF SEXTING

A number of different motivations for involvement in sexting were shared, including for fun or a joke, boredom and sexual experimentation. Many felt young people know about potential legal implications of involvement in sexting, but this doesn’t stop the behaviour. Some thought origins of the behaviour could be found in risk-taking, and the potential illegality of the activity, made it even more appealing for some.

Pressure to sext

Many stories were shared of girls feeling coerced, threatened or bribed by boys to produce, and send sexually explicit images. Sometimes these were saved as blackmail or revenge or posted on SNS like ‘rate my ex-girlfriend’. Young people also thought sexting had become normalised in response to a media culture that presents women in sexualised ways. A connection between sexting and the increasingly widespread accessibility and hard-core nature of porn was also expressed.

The guys expect a certain oomph from girls … and it gets to the point where some girls think ‘okay if I want a boyfriend that’s what I’m going to have to do’. (G11, female aged 16)

A boy sent a picture to her—of I think it was his penis and he used that as pressure get her to send a picture… (B9, male aged 18)

[Knowing about the legal consequences] wouldn’t stop them, if anything it could possibly make them do it more, cause if it’s illegal then it’s more rebellious to be doing [sexting]—it’s more fun. (G16, female aged 17)

I guess [sexting’s] getting bigger for guys, because most boys out there use porn so when you can’t access it you go to the sluttiest girl or the very open and outspoken girls and they’re open to send. (B4, male aged 16)

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

YOUNG PEOPLE’S VIEWS ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF SEXTING

Girls face disapproval for producing and distributing images of themselves, and are often called derogatory names like ‘slutty girls, ‘whores’, skanky little girls’, or ‘just an idiot for sexting it in the first place’. This negative view highlights a sexual double standard, whereby girls who send images are viewed responsible for the fall-out that proceeds, even though boys may have coerced or pressured them to send the image in the first place.

If [sexting] happens with a guy, it’s nothing. If it happens to a girl, there’s a lot more stigma attached. (G9, female aged 18)

It’s kind of harmful to her personally because everyone will be like ‘oh, this girls’ dirty’ … there’s some really, how can I say this in a nice way? Alright, slutty girls out there who just don’t care. They’ll send naked pictures and stuff. (B2, male aged 16)
WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

**Young People’s Views on Solutions**

Participants were asked to comment on current strategies to prevent harmful implications of sexting on young people. The following are some of the things they had to say:

- Knowing about the potential legal implications does not prevent young people sexting
- Parents need to be educated about cybersafety
- Schools have a role to play in education
- Online educative resources are not promoted well enough
- Facebook is not the best place for social marketing campaigns about sexting
- Prevention information on government websites is not regarded highly
- Filtering Systems that monitor sexual content on the Internet are easily hacked by young people
- Gendered stereotypes expressed in mass media need to be challenged.
- Young people need to be involved in the design of responses.

Young people know a lot about what’s legal and illegal on the Internet and they still break the law regardless … yes the majority of people I know download music and movies and it’s considered the norm, despite the fact that it’s illegal. (B11, male aged 18)

No, I would never go into a government website … [they] are awfully dorky … yeah they could be worded a lot better and I don’t know, be a bit cooler maybe. (B13, male aged 18)

Facebook and places like that aren’t the best way to communicate ideas, I guess, because that’s the way you’re having fun. You don’t want to constantly have this warning against you. (G14, female aged 15)

I think if you really want to make a difference you have to sit down and talk to teenagers … I reckon the most effective thing to do would actually be probably to hand it over into the teenage community. (G1, female aged 16)

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

**Some Recommendations**

- Accurate Australian prevalence data is needed to determine the true extent of the behaviour of sexting amongst young people.
- Responses to prevent the harmful implications of sexting must take into consideration the potential origins of the behaviour, namely a sexualised culture that places pressure on young people to conform to narrow descriptions of gender and sexuality.
- Participants’ views on solutions highlight that young people have the capacity to contribute to meaningful discussions about how we can prevent the harmful implications resulting from involvement in the behavior of sexting.

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