

Study finds despite expectations of privacy, one in four share sexts

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A new study from Indiana University researchers shows that although most people who engage in sexting expect their messages to remain private, nearly one in four people are sharing the sexual messages they receive.

The study, "Sexting among singles in the USA: Prevalence of sending, receiving, and sharing sexual messages and images," was led by Justin Garcia, Ruth Halls Assistant Professor for Gender Studies and research scientist at the Kinsey Institute. It was recently published in the journal *Sexual Health* online.

"There has been a lot of public concern about sexting practices, but there hasn't been enough research examining whether these concerns are justified, examining how people perceive and experience the relative costs and benefits of sexting," Garcia said. "There has also been almost no research looking at sexting practices in large national samples like ours, assessing patterns across major demographic categories including age, gender and sexual orientation."

The study examined sexting attitudes and behaviors, including sending, receiving and sharing sext messages and images, among a national sample of 5,805 single adults between the ages of 21 and 75. Sexting was defined as the transmission of sexual images and messages via cell phone or other electronic device.

Of those surveyed, 21 percent, or nearly one in five people, reported

sending sext messages, and 28 percent reported receiving sexually explicit text messages. Furthermore, 16 percent reported sending sexual photos and more than 23 percent reported receiving sexual photos. The study also found that most sexting happens between couples already in an established relationship, and of those who sent messages, 66 percent of men and 78 percent of women did so to flirt with a relationship partner.

The study also found that sexting is more prominent among younger respondents—and men were 1.5 times more likely than women to send a sexy text.

When it comes to expectations regarding maintaining privacy when sending and receiving sexual messages and images, the study found that 73 percent of participants reported discomfort with the unauthorized sharing of sexts beyond the intended recipients. However, of those who received sext photos, 23 percent reported sharing them with others.

Further, those who received sexts and shared them with others did so with an average of more than three friends.

"That finding suggests that the real risk of sexting is the potential for nonconsensual sharing of sext messages," Garcia said. "It raises the question that if someone sends something to you with the presumption that it's private and then you share it with others—which, when it comes to sexting, nearly one out of every four single Americans are doing, what do we want to consider that type of violation? Is it just bad taste? Is it criminal?"

According to the study, the older a person is, the more risk they associate with sexting. Most participants, between 60 and 74 percent, reported that they believe sexting could hurt their reputation, career, self-esteem, or current relationships or friendships.

The study also found that women were more likely to be upset with sharing than men. And men were nearly twice as likely as women to share with others.

Garcia said that with the continual leakage of private information in the U.S., particularly from high-profile sources, and the effects the discovery of sexting or explicit photos can have on Americans, the issue of privacy expectations continues to be raised.

"For some, sexting may lead to positive outcomes such as increased partner intimacy and satisfaction," Garcia said. "For others, it may lead to negative outcomes such as lowered self-esteem or damage to reputation. But the real risk is not the sending of sexual messages and images per se, but rather the nonconsensual distribution of those materials to other parties. As sexting becomes more common and normative, we're seeing a contemporary struggle as men and women attempt to reconcile digital eroticism with real-world consequences."

More information: Justin R. Garcia et al, Sexting among singles in the USA: prevalence of sending, receiving, and sharing sexual messages and images, *Sexual Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1071/SH15240](https://doi.org/10.1071/SH15240)

Provided by Indiana University

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