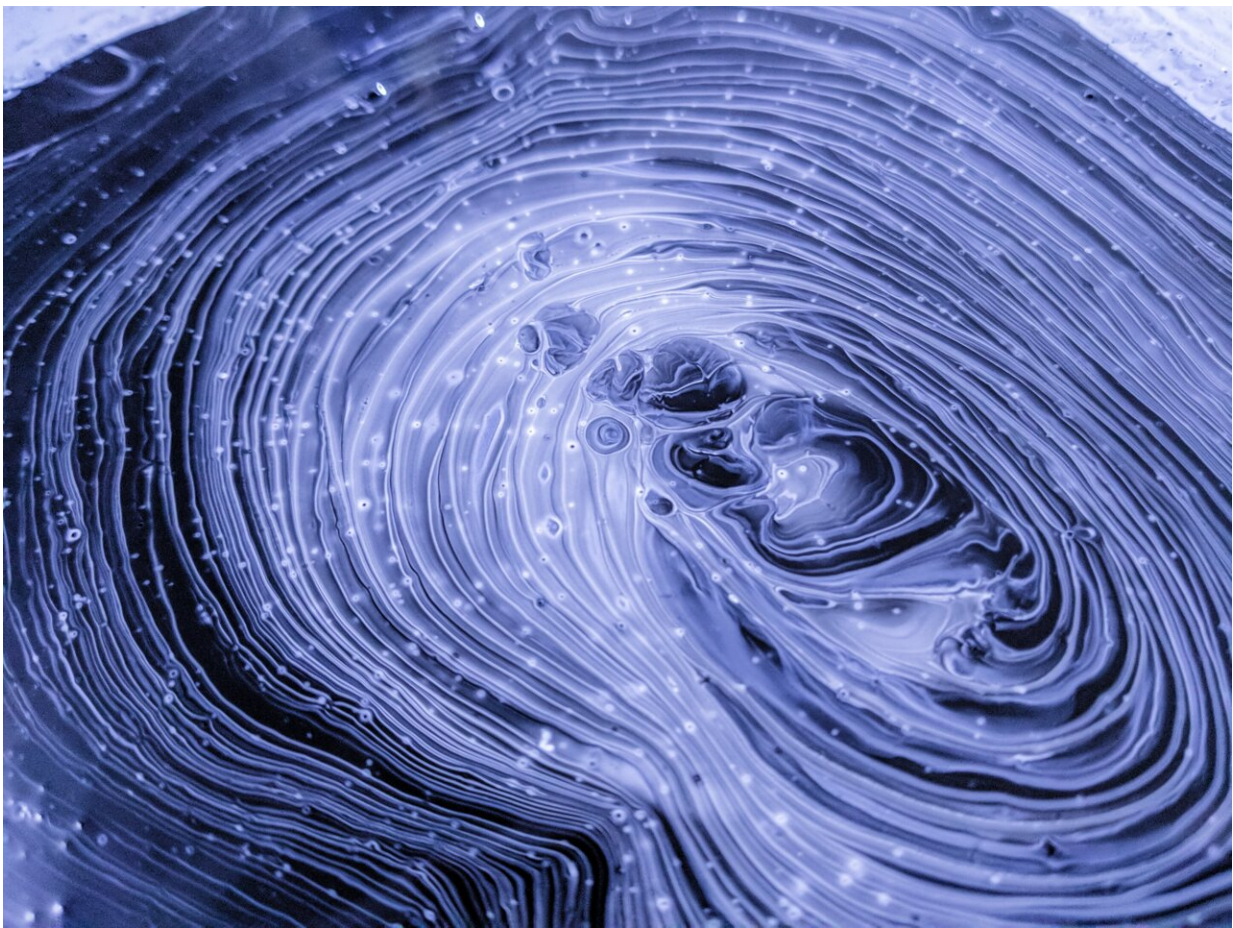


# 20% of young people who forwarded nudes say they had permission—but only 8% gave it. Why the gap?

August 4 2023, by Elizabeth Mary Clancy and Bianca Klettke

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

The sending and receiving of intimate images and videos is increasingly becoming a part of people's sexual relationships—particularly for teenagers and young adults.

Image-based "sexting" has steadily increased over the past few years. [Aggregated data](#) from population-representative studies in the United States, which included 110,380 teenage participants, found about one in five teenagers had either sent or received nudes online. Australian studies report [similar rates](#).

The figures are [slightly higher](#) among lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals. However, minimal data have been collected from the broader queer community, including from trans and gender-diverse people.

Research [shows](#) there is little harm associated with sexting when all parties involved have consented, including for teenagers. That said, [consent](#) isn't always properly given and received. In such cases there are increased risks of abuse and sexual violence.

Harm from sexting occurs when there are breaches of consent. At the same time, our work in this space shows navigating consent online is much more complex than it might initially seem.

## **When sexting can lead to harm**

People sext for numerous reasons, [such as to](#) flirt, to maintain [intimate relationships](#), or for body image reinforcement. But this act can also be weaponized. Non-consensual forms of sexting include:

- coerced sexting, where someone is forced or manipulated into sexting

- receiving unwanted sexts (also known as "cyberflashing")
- non-consensual sharing of someone's sexts with others.

These examples of image-based abuse are highly [problematic](#) and harmful to victims. Those who have had their intimate images distributed without their consent (sometimes problematically referred to as "revenge porn") are more likely to [experience](#) stigma, shame, reduced employment prospects, suicidal thoughts or self-harm as a result.

Yet, in two studies [published in 2019](#) and [2021](#), we found people who share these intimate images are usually either unaware or dismissive of the potential concerns.

These people nominated a range of motivations which could be considered relatively harmless, such as sharing pictures because the person depicted was "hot" (according to 44% of respondents), or seeing it as "not a big deal" (48%), or as a joke (31%).

## **A case of crossed wires?**

Our latest study, [published in](#) the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, found a stark difference between the proportion of people who said they had given consent to have their intimate images shared, and those who said they'd received consent to do this.

Specifically, from our survey of 2,126 young cisgender adults, 8% said they had knowingly given permission for their sexts to be shared. Men (17.7%) were almost six times more likely than women (3.4%) to have consented to this.

In contrast, of those who indicated they had shared another person's sexts, 20% said they had received prior consent (with no substantial differences between men and women).

When it came to unwanted or unwelcome sexts, women were more likely to non-consensually disseminate these images. This suggests at least some non-consensual forwarding of nudes may relate to not having wanted to receive them in the first place.

We don't yet have a large enough sample to determine the rates for people outside the gender binary. However, [preliminary data](#) from our work suggest their experiences may be similar to those of cisgender women.

Overall, our findings raise important questions about how people conceptualize "consent" when navigating digital spaces. The discrepancy between those who said they received permission to forward someone's sexts and those who said they gave it suggests something is amiss.

## **Progress is pending**

There is currently little research and minimal legislative clarity regarding how we define and apply digital consent, both in Australia and globally.

Navigating consent online isn't as straightforward as in face-to-face situations. While the initial exchange of intimate images between two people is often consensual, questions of consent tend to become murkier over time.

For example, what happens if you shared your intimate images happily at the start of a relationship, but it has since gone sour and ended?

Also, since consent can be revoked at any time, should we enforce the deletion of intimate images once the sender revokes their consent? How would this process be managed and monitored?

Further, how would affirmative consent (which has been introduced via

legislation in several states) play out online? How do we define "enthusiastic consent" in an online interaction?

This is clearly a topical issue. A federal [parliamentary inquiry](#) is under way to address current and proposed consent laws.

Ideally, the concept of online consent would be included within respectful relationship education. Young people should know how to have clear conversations about how their intimate images may be used—both in the present, and in the future when a relationship has ended.

Our ongoing research is focused on finding ways for people to articulate their expectations around consent realistically and effectively. In the meantime, if your intimate images have been uploaded online, or otherwise shared without your permission, there are steps you can take.

If the individual responsible won't respond or willingly withdraw the images, you can contact the [e-Safety Commissioner](#) to have them taken down from online.

There are also [legal implications](#) for those who share someone's intimate images without consent—or threaten to do so. If you're in this situation, contact your state or territory police as a first step.

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