ADOLESCENT SEXTING POLICY ANALYSIS: PAPER TIGERS TO PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS[*]

Tara Farrer Harris[1]

ABSTRACT

Adolescence as a developmental phase is characterised by physical, emotional, and sexual maturation, as well as sexual exploration. Adolescents use technology to explore their sexuality and forge their identities. Some adolescents engage in this behaviour through the practice of sexting, which is defined as the exchange of sexually explicit messages, texts, images, or videos across a range of technological devices. Adolescent sexting is problematic because it falls within the ambit of child pornography laws in South Africa and, as such, constitutes illegal behaviour. Internationally, various policies have been implemented to address adolescent sexting, but there is little consensus on the best practices for managing such incidents, especially at the school level. The present article draws on data from a policy analysis of school-based sexting policies and on insights from expert and parent interviews to develop a sexting policy framework for South African schools. The objective is to support South African schools in maximising risk management and reducing sexting. A school-based policy cannot be gendered in nature regarding its response; however, the gendered dialogue surrounding adolescent sexting must be considered when educating young people about the possible negative repercussions of sexting, as well as the gendered motivations for, experiences of, and expectations surrounding sexting.

Keywords: *Adolescent sexting; child pornography; policy analysis; gender; policy initiatives.*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is marked by significant developmental transformations, including biological changes, psychosocial growth, and the onset of sexual maturation, which typically occurs between the ages of 10 and 19 years (Jaworska & MacQueen, 2015: 291). Consequently, sexting—defined as the exchange of sexually explicit messages, images, or videos via various digital devices and platforms (Villacampa, 2017: 10)—should be understood within the broader context of sexual exploration and development. It has become a normalised element within mainstream adolescent culture (Mori, Temple, Browne & Madigan, 2019: 771; Springston, 2017: 142). The phenomenon of sexting has emerged as a central focus in contemporary research on adolescent sexual behaviour, sexual development, and mental health, particularly given the internet's facilitation of immediate access to diverse sexual content (Efrati, 2019: 9; Krishna, 2019: 24; Mori, Park, Temple & Madigan, 2022: 532). Since the inception of scholarly interest in sexting over a decade ago (Mori et al., 2019: 771), research has examined its short- and long-term psychological and behavioural impacts, its prevalence among youth, and its association with cyberbullying (Springston, 2017: 142). In addition, a substantial body of literature addresses the legal implications of adolescent sexting, including its potential classification as child pornography (Kushner, 2013; Lee & Darcy, 2021: 563; Levick & Moon, 2010; Lorang, McNiel & Binder, 2016). However, there remains a notable gap in research concerning the integration of the child's best interests in legal and policy responses to such

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1. Dr. Department of Social Work and Criminology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa. Email: tara.harris@up.ac.za. ORCID: 0000-0003-1292-2283.

behaviour. Technological advancements have further complicated this landscape, as emerging private messaging applications provide increasingly discreet channels for sexting.

As adolescents navigate the often complex processes of sexual development and maturation, they are simultaneously exposed to an ever-evolving landscape of new media technologies. Adolescents are at the forefront of digital engagement, setting the pace for mobile and internet usage patterns characterised by constant connectivity (Gunter, 2019: 5; Madden et al., 2013: 3; Sadleir & Harrison, 2017: 6). As such, they occupy a central position in contemporary discourse surrounding the adoption and impact of new media technologies (Kim, 2016: 29; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012: 9). In an increasingly connected society, digital platforms and technologies have become essential tools for adolescent socialisation (Barrense-Dias, Berchtold, Surís & Akre, 2017: 545), shaping how young people form relationships, interact, and communicate with one another (Gunter, 2019: 7). Furthermore, the rapid development of smartphones and mobile applications has significantly facilitated sexting behaviour among adolescents.

Research on adolescent sexting has predominantly concentrated on its prevalence and the associated negative consequences, often overlooking the perspective that sexting may represent a normative aspect of sexual development within the context of a rapidly evolving digital landscape (Levine, 2013: 257; Lippman & Campbell, 2014: 373; Ojeda, Del-Rey, Walrave & Vandebosch, 2020: 11). While sexting may be considered developmentally appropriate for identity formation and sexual exploration, the potential for harmful outcomes cannot be ignored. These include the unintended consequences of consensual sexting, such as the non-consensual distribution of intimate content, misinterpretation by recipients, and instances of revenge pornography. The emergence of the #MeToo movement has further intensified discourse around sexual consent and victimisation, framing sexting within broader societal conversations on sexual ethics (Lehmiller, 2019: 47). In the South African legal context, even consensual sexting among adolescents is criminalised (Sadleir & Harrison, 2017: 39, 41), complicating the developmental understanding of the behaviour. Moreover, sexting that begins consensually may subsequently be shared without consent, highlighting the nuanced and evolving nature of consent within digital interactions. Practices such as upskirting,[1] while not necessarily involving coercion, exemplify non-consensual elements of digital sexual communication. Accordingly, consent emerges as a critical component of adolescent sexting (Sadlier & Harrison, 2017: 43), underscoring the need for comprehensive sex education and policy initiatives that address consent within the framework of healthy sexual development and responsible digital citizenship (Dully, Walsh, Doyle & O'Reilly, 2023: 1077; Sadleir & De Beer, 2014: 146).

As is often the case in research concerning adolescence and sexual behaviour, the gendered nature of adolescent sexting is a critical dimension that warrants careful consideration, particularly in relation to the development of educational interventions. The differing societal responses to image sharing by male and female adolescents are frequently rooted in moral and judgemental frameworks (Lippman & Campbell, 2014: 3; Mori et al., 2022: 537; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2013: 312). Notably, female adolescents tend to occupy a central focus in the discourse on sexting, as they are often perceived to be more vulnerable and are more frequently subjected to coercion or social pressure to produce and share sexually explicit material (Lippman & Campbell, 2014: 372; Choi, Van Ouytsel & Temple, 2016: 166). While gender disparities in sexting practices are not necessarily evident in terms of prevalence or frequency (Springston, 2017: 149), they emerge clearly in relation to experiences of online victimisation, expectations surrounding sexting, behavioural engagement, and attitudes towards the practice. These dynamics also extend to the prediction of digital dating violence and incidents of revenge pornography (Choi et al., 2016: 166; Harris & Steyn, 2018: 15; Harris-Cik & Steyn, 2018: 34; Lippman & Campbell, 2014: 372).

A persistent gendered double standard is evident, whereby female adolescents are judged regardless of their choice to participate in or abstain from sexting. Those who engage in sexting are often subjected to 'slut-shaming', while those who refuse are derogatorily labelled as 'frigid' (Lippman & Campbell, 2014: 380; Ringrose et al., 2012: 45). Despite these stigmas, the existence of such moral judgements does not appear to significantly deter female adolescents from participating in sexting.

Adolescent sexting is a widespread behaviour, with research estimating that between 17 percent and 35 percent of adolescents have engaged in the practice (Donlin, 2010; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones & Wolak, 2012: 18; Phippen, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2012: 11). Given its prevalence—regardless of whether the behaviour is consensual or non-consensual—appropriate policy frameworks must be implemented to safeguard young people. In light of the rapid evolution of digital technologies, the multifaceted nature of sexting, and the increasing urgency to address its consequences, a critical review of existing policies, along with active engagement with relevant stakeholders, is imperative. Within the South African context, the urgency for explicit sexting policies is accentuated by the apparent absence, or limited public accessibility, of such frameworks. While aspects of sexting may be indirectly addressed under broader policy domains such as social media usage, information and communications technology (ICT) responsibility, or digital citizenship, the unique challenges posed by sexting demand a dedicated policy response. Although these behaviours often occur outside school premises, schools nonetheless bear a social responsibility and legal duty of care on issues that frequently affect adolescents (Shubert & Wurf, 2014: 195). Consequently, a specific sexting policy not only reinforces education beyond the academic curriculum but also demonstrates institutional awareness and preparedness. Furthermore, such a policy provides a structured approach for managing sexting incidents and supporting affected learners (Phippen, Bond & Tyrrell, 2018: 11).

The limited availability of South African research on adolescent sexting, coupled with the absence or inaccessibility of national policy frameworks addressing the phenomenon, necessitated an examination of international approaches. Specifically, policy strategies developed within the two dominant discourses on adolescent sexting—namely, the deviant and normative paradigms—were analysed to inform contextually relevant policy initiatives for South Africa. In addition to this comparative analysis, expert and parental interviews provide insights into best practices and essential policy components. This article addresses two objectives of a broader study, namely, to integrate in-depth knowledge and understanding of expert and parental perspectives in formulating meaningful school responses to sexting and to develop a policy framework for secondary schools to address adolescent sexting. The primary aim of this article is twofold: firstly, to critically assess the presumed intent and structural commitments of existing policies addressing adolescent sexting; and secondly, to incorporate the perspectives of key stakeholders in the development of a responsive and contextually appropriate South African policy framework.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The findings are part of a mixed-methods applied study aimed at developing a comprehensive school policy that guides responses to sexting in secondary school contexts. This policy framework was designed to address a range of key considerations, including legal implications, assessment procedures, investigative protocols, remedial actions, and preventive strategies. The study involved the analysis of 12 international policy documents along with data collected from 21 semi-structured interviews with experts and parents. Integrating these data sources enabled methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and validity of the findings through corroboration from multiple perspectives.

Sample

Twelve school-based sexting policies were identified and analysed for this study. These were retrieved through a systematic Google search using key terms including “sexting policy,” “school-based sexting policy,” “anti-sexting policy,” and “adolescent sexting school policy.” Google was selected as the search engine due to its dominant market share, accounting for 74.54 percent of global usage, with approximately 80 percent of internet users relying on the platform and an average of 3.5 billion daily searches (Carter, 2020). Notably, all 12 policies originated from outside South Africa, specifically from the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), highlighting the absence or inaccessibility of comparable South African policies. The inclusion criteria required that policies be a) written in English and b) designed to address adolescent sexting within secondary school contexts. The sample of 12 policies was deemed sufficient, as data saturation had been reached during the analysis.

Experts with specialised knowledge in adolescent sexting, cyber-safety, and/or policy development from South Africa and international contexts were invited via email to participate in semi-structured interviews focused on developing school-based policies to address adolescent sexting. Of the 24 experts contacted, 15 agreed to participate. Three declined, citing time constraints or a lack of subject-specific expertise, while six others did not respond. Ultimately, 13 experts were interviewed, as two withdrew from the process after initially agreeing to participate. The final sample included six South African experts (two interviewed face-to-face and the remaining four via virtual platforms) and seven international experts based in Portugal, the US, and the UK, all of whom were interviewed via virtual platforms. These experts were coded as E to represent expert and the number of their interview, for example, E1 represents expert interview 1.

The interviewed experts contributed robust and insightful perspectives on adolescent sexting, its management, and policy development processes, as demonstrated in Table 1. Participants included academics and practitioners from various disciplines, including criminology, criminal justice, political science, psychology, counselling, information technology, digital rights, and child and sexual offence law. Their professional knowledge, particularly in adolescent development and policy formulation, was integral in informing the study’s final policy recommendations. The expert cohort also reflected gender diversity, comprising seven male and six female participants, thereby enhancing the breadth and depth of the qualitative data collected.

Table 1: Interview experts

Expert	Knowledge
1	Expert 1 is an educational consultant and CEO. He has extensive knowledge of the South African education system, having served as both a deputy principal and principal at prestigious local independent schools. He has extensive experience addressing adolescent risk-taking behaviour.
2	Expert 2 is a professor, licensed psychologist, and director of a behavioural health and research unit. He has published widely, including on adolescent sexting, and has a particular research interest in adolescent relationships and abuse.
3	Expert 3 holds a PhD in the field of adolescent sexting. She has two international publications on the topic in the UK.
4	Expert 4 is a professor whose research interests include children and technology, digital behaviours in the workplace, IT legislation related to social issues, and digital rights. He has an extensive publication record and knowledge in the field of adolescent sexting.

Expert	Knowledge
5	Expert 5 has been in education for over 20 years locally and abroad. He is a school principal specialising in change management.
6	Expert 6 is a CEO and a leading authority on social media law. Her areas of expertise include managing sexting and pornography offences as well as educating young people about the risks of irresponsible social media and internet use.
7	Expert 7 is the head of an international cluster of schools. He has more than 25 years of experience in global education, including in the UK, South Africa, and Portugal. He has comprehensive expertise in adolescent risk-taking behaviour from a senior leadership position.
8	Expert 8 is a CEO, cyber-safety speaker, and public relations consultant. Her areas of expertise include responsible digital engagement and protection against cyberbullying.
9	Expert 9 is a professor and director of research, as well as a senior fellow of a prestigious academy. She has over 16 years of teaching and research experience, including in sexting, and boasts an extensive publication record.
10	Expert 10 has a PhD in Criminal Justice. His areas of expertise include the intersection of teenagers and technology, cyberbullying, social networking, and sexting. He consults internationally on the prevention of and response to adolescent technology misuse. He also has an extensive publication record in journals and books.
11	Expert 11 is internationally recognised as an expert on personality and relationships. He is a registered clinical psychologist.
12	Expert 12 is a professor who specialises in cyberbullying, adolescent mental health, and electronic intimidation. She consults with schools to prevent cyberbullying and empower young people against the negative aspects of digital engagement. She has a substantial publication record that includes the topic of sexting.
13	Expert 13 is a local principal state law adviser with 20 years of legal and parliamentary experience, specifically in sexual offences and child sexual exploitation.

An open-ended survey was developed using the SurveyMonkey® platform and disseminated via Facebook® to reach parents of adolescents. The study aimed to gather preliminary insights into parental attitudes toward adolescent sexting and the potential implementation of a school-based sexting policy. Responses from the survey informed the development of a basic semi-structured interview schedule to explore these perspectives in greater depth. Subsequently, face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight parents whose children were enrolled in South African secondary schools. One additional participant chose to provide their responses via email. These parental insights were instrumental in shaping contextually relevant policy recommendations grounded in stakeholder engagement. The parents interviewed were coded as P to represent parent and the number of their interview, for example, P1 represents parent interview 1.

Procedure

The study received ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria's Ethics Committee under reference number 22166221. All ethical considerations were rigorously adhered to throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and participation in the study was entirely voluntary. The interview questions were carefully designed to ensure that they did not pose any risk to the physical or emotional well-being of the participants.

The 12 policy documents were imported into NVivo 12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package, to facilitate systematic qualitative coding. CAQDAS offers several advantages, including efficient data management, streamlined coding and recoding processes, identification and visualisation of relationships between themes, and enhanced time efficiency (Rodik & Primorac, 2015: 14). The qualitative coding process followed a structured six-step procedure: Step 1 involved uploading the policy documents into NVivo in a readable format; step 2 consisted of pre-coding the data; steps 3 and 4 entailed node creation and verification respectively; step 5 involved the detailed coding of content; and step 6 focused on refining nodes and sub-nodes into coherent themes (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013: 27). References—defined as the number of data segments coded to a particular node—were examined across nodes and sub-nodes to assess their viability and relevance for thematic development.

Table 2 outlines the analytical process in detail to support the dependability and transparency of the findings. The same six-step coding procedure was applied to the analysis of the expert and parental interview transcripts to ensure consistency across data sources.

Table 2: NVivo policy analysis

Content analysis steps	Explanation
Step 1: Policy upload	All relevant sexting policies were uploaded in a readable format, such as PDF.
Step 2: Pre-coding	The sexting policies were read and re-read to ensure data familiarity. The query and word frequency commands were used to ascertain the frequency of word usage within all policies.
Step 3: Node creation	Nodes were created by assigning labels to them to code relevant themes.
Step 4: Node check	All the created nodes and sub-nodes were queried to ensure their relevance. Those not deemed relevant were deleted, such as "recognition of development."
Step 5: Coding	All the sexting policies were analysed and coded into the relevant nodes and sub-nodes. The number of codes and references each sexting policy represented was checked. The percentage of each reference covered in the overall policy was analysed.
Step 6: Refinement	The nodes and sub-nodes were refined to represent themes drawn from the sexting policies.

All expert and parental interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter Voice Notes. Thematic analysis was initially conducted manually using Microsoft Excel, a method deemed appropriate due to the conversational nature and extended length of the interviews. Content analysis was used to identify recurring themes in participant responses. Verbatim extracts, referred to as meaning units, were identified in relation to specific interview questions. These were subsequently condensed into shorter summaries, or condensed meaning units, which captured the core content of each response. Codes were then assigned to the condensed meaning units, representing sub-themes or categories that contributed to the development of overarching themes.

Following this manual process, a quality check was conducted using NVivo 12. The Excel spreadsheet containing the coded data was uploaded to NVivo, and the same thematic analysis procedures were applied to ensure consistency with the policy analysis phase. To further ensure the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted. The draft school-based sexting policy developed from the study was shared with two expert participants, both of whom provided favourable feedback, confirming the policy's relevance and applicability.

RESULTS

The policy analysis yielded 15 overarching themes, 10 sub-themes, and three sub-sub-themes. The expert and parental interviews generated 12 themes, 14 sub-themes, and three sub-sub-themes. Notably, 11 core themes emerged consistently across the policy documents and interview data: age differentiation, policy aims, consequences of adolescent sexting, definitions, duty of care regarding adolescent sexting, gender dynamics, legal implications of adolescent sexting, prevention of adolescent sexting, reporting of adolescent sexting incidents, responding to adolescent sexting incidents, and stakeholders. However, three themes—recording an adolescent sexting incident, youth risk assessment, and valuable resources—were exclusive to the policy analysis and did not emerge in the interview findings. Conversely, the interview data revealed a distinct theme absent from the policy review: a lack of policy integration regarding adolescent sexting.

The findings are presented thematically, beginning with the 10 shared themes identified in both data sets, followed by an exploration of themes unique to the policy analysis and those exclusive to the expert and parental interviews. This structure facilitates a comprehensive comparison and highlights the complementary nature of the data sources in developing an informed and context-sensitive policy framework.

Theme 1: Policy aim

Seven of the 12 reviewed policies explicitly articulated the aim of their sexting policy, generating a total of eight references. These aims typically guided staff and students on the procedures to follow after a sexting incident. For instance, Policy 6 stated that it was "created to provide a guide for both staff and pupils as to how the school will proceed and what steps will be taken should an incident of sexting be reported or suspected". Policy 5 framed its aim as defining sexting and outlining management strategies, while Policy 11 highlighted "the role of our schools in the awareness and prevention of sexting".

In the interview data, the aim of a sexting policy was mentioned 12 times, reflecting its perceived importance among experts and parents. Participant P2 emphasised the need for a clear, structured protocol, describing the aim as "*a protocol, in terms of steps, that are unpacked*". Expert E10 suggested a harm reduction approach, stating that the aim should be grounded in "*a harm reduction model*". E2 added further nuance by distinguishing between consensual and coercive sexting, proposing that the policy aim be "*two-pronged*", including both "*education about digital citizenship*" and proportionate disciplinary measures to ensure that "*there are repercussions for violating someone's rights*".

Theme 2: Definitions

Among the 12 reviewed school policies, 11 provided definitions of sexting. While these definitions varied, they shared core similarities, particularly regarding the nature of the content and the means of transmission. Policy 1 described sexting as "the sending or posting of sexually suggestive images, including nude or semi-nude photographs, via mobiles or over the Internet", Policy 7 adopted the term youth-produced sexual imagery, defining it as "images or videos generated by children under the age of 18 that are sexual or are considered to be indecent", and specifying that such content may be exchanged among youth or between youth and adults using various digital platforms. Policy 6 extended its definition to encompass textual content, stating that sexting relates to "the sending of indecent images, videos and/or written messages with sexually explicit content", often disseminated through "electronic communication devices such as mobile telephones, tablets, laptops, and desktop computers" and "shared via social networking sites and instant messaging services".

The definitional focus varied among stakeholders. While experts E6, E8, and E13 emphasised legality as the most salient aspect, others, such as E1 and P9, prioritised intent.

Still, some respondents (e.g., E4, E6) stressed the importance of distinguishing sexting from externally produced pornography and non-youth-generated content. Altogether, 12 references supported the inclusion of a formal definition in school sexting policies.

Inclusion versus exclusion of pornography

Three policies explicitly exclude pornography from their definitions. For instance, Policy 8 stated that its sexting policy did not address "Children sharing adult pornography or exchanging sexual texts which do not contain imagery", or the downloading and sharing of adult sexual imagery by minors. Expert interviews also addressed this exclusion. E4 argued that "*self-produced is the thing around sexting nudes. ... If they're sharing porn and stuff, I think that's for a different policy*", while E6 emphasised the legal distinction: "*I don't think you can classify it in the same category. ... Legally, it's different*". In contrast, Policy 3 incorporated pornography within its definition, including "*sending and receiving text-based messages relating to sexual behaviour by pupils which don't contain imagery and pupils sharing adult digital pornography*". Across interviews, 10 references supported the inclusion of pornography, with E1 asserting that "*For it to be a sound policy, it needs to be more inclusive than exclusive. Any sexual image that you send to somebody in that context, whether it's your person or another, it's got the same intention*".

Youth-produced sexual imagery

Six policies (1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) adopted or referenced the alternative term youth-produced sexual imagery. Policy 7 clarified the rationale: "The phrase 'youth-produced sexual imagery' is now used instead of 'sexting' because 'youth-produced' includes young people sharing images that they, or another young person, have created of themselves. 'Imagery' covers both still photos and moving videos". This term received support in the interviews as well, with eight references emphasising the self-generated nature of the content. As E9 explained, "*It should be user-generated. ... The term sexting is around a self-produced, or you have taken a picture of somebody else you are in a relationship with. ... I looked into the definitions around sexting quite carefully; the consensus was that it was around self-produced imagery*".

Theme 3: Consequences of adolescent sexting

Six of the 12 policies addressed the consequences of sexting, ranging from general risks (Policy 5) to specific harms such as "embarrassment, bullying, and increased vulnerability to sexual exploitation" (Policy 4), and "extremely damaging and long-lasting consequences" (Policy 6). Interviewees echoed these concerns, emphasising education rather than punishment. P4 stressed that adolescents "*should be taught the consequences of their actions*", while E5 questioned "*how do we make sure that they authentically understand ... the consequences ... rather than ... the big stick approach*". P8 and E10 supported educating young people on "*the dangers, the legality, and the consequences*".

Theme 4: Legal implications of adolescent sexting

Nine of the 12 policies analysed incorporated legal aspects of sexting, with Policy 6 explicitly stating, "It is an offense to possess, distribute, show, and make indecent images of children". Expert and parent interviews referenced legal concerns 15 times. E13 highlighted Section 54 of the South African Sexual Offences and Related Matters Act (32 of 2007), emphasising mandatory reporting: "A person who knows the sexual offences being committed against a child must report such knowledge immediately." P2 raised civil considerations: "*One probably should allow someone to get the evidence to pursue a civil case, in terms of whatever damage was done*". These insights underline the need for clear legal guidance in formulating a sexting policy, as P2 articulated: "*very clear guidelines that come from legislation*".

Criminalising children

Three policies made five references cautioning against criminalising minors. Policy 3 recognised outdated legislation, advising that schools "should always take a measured approach and seek to avoid criminalising children". Policy 7 added that criminalisation "should be avoided where possible". Experts echoed this; E9 warned of severe consequences: "*such as ending up in the sex register, which is dreadful*". E4 noted victims' reluctance to report due to fear of criminalisation but acknowledged exceptions: "*not being against the criminalisation of children when they are behaving criminally*".

Theme 5: Youth risk assessment

Five policies made 15 references to risk assessment, with Policy 4 providing for risk mitigation, stating that "any relevant facts about the young people involved which would influence risk assessment" should be considered during initial reviews. This illustrates a systematic approach to safeguarding.

Theme 6: Reporting an adolescent sexting incident

Eight policies provided 18 references detailing incident reporting mechanisms. Policy 1 described a multifaceted reporting structure: "The young person may report through an existing reporting structure, or a friend or parent may inform someone in school or college." Policy 10 mandated same-day reporting with individuals to: "report such conduct the same day to the school principal". Policy 11 allowed anonymous reporting and required written documentation within two days. Only one interview referenced reporting mechanisms, recommending a "*template for reporting for teachers.… There must be some other clear, protected way of getting the information from the start*".

Theme 7: Responding to an adolescent sexting incident

Nine policies (13 references) detailed the response protocols. Policy 8 instructed staff to escalate incidents to the designated safeguarding leads. Policy 3 promoted proportionality: "the primary concern at all times will be the welfare and protection of the young people involved". Interviews contributed 16 references, advocating for context-based responses. E10 proposed a "*continuum of response*", and P2 linked that "*the severity* [of the response] *depends on content, intention*". Three policies highlighted that situational assessment or context are crucial in responding to an incident. Policy 6 stated: "Depending on the specific circumstances and gravity, the incident will be investigated on the discipline-safeguarding continuum." Experts stressed the importance of distinguishing "*aggravated versus experimental, consensual versus intentionally hurtful*" sexting (E10). Coercion was referenced in eight policies and 23 interviews. Policy 7 called for tougher consequences if "the presence of exploitation, coercion, a profit motive, or adults" were involved. E4 asserted, "*if there is evidence of coercion, you should involve law enforcement*". Six policies (12 references) noted the importance of consent. Policy 7 outlines differentiated responses for consensual images. Eight references to consent were made across the interviews. E6 stressed the need to "*differentiate between consensual and coercive*" sexual behaviour. Lastly, three policies considered the severity of the image. Policy 3 referred to a different response for an image of "severe or extreme nature." P2 highlighted the need to assess the nature of the image before determining the course of action for example a "*partial boob shot or a full-on sexual act*".

Parental involvement

Six policies (16 references) addressed parental roles. Policy 5 advised involving parents early unless such involvement posed a risk to the adolescent involved. With the interviews,

11 references were made to this sub-theme, and P7 suggested that involvement varies by age: "*crucial for a 12 or 13-year-old, but not so much for an 18-year-old*".

Police intervention

Police intervention was referenced 34 times in 10 policies. Policies 5 and 7 suggested immediate referral to "police and/or children's services" in aggravated cases. Only four references were made throughout the interviews. E6 affirmed schools' duty to notify the police, and E10 urged alignment with law enforcement to prevent unnecessary criminalisation.

School discretion

Six policies endorsed school discretion. Policy 5 allowed for internal resolution without police involvement; Policy 7 advised that responses be "underpinned by careful assessment". No interviewees mentioned school discretion.

Theme 8: Prevention of adolescent sexting

Four policies (seven references) advocated proactive prevention. Policy 5 supported a "proactive, preventive and educative approach underpinned by preventive learning about issues, such as consent, relationships, online safety, recognising abusive and coercive behaviour to help support learning on sexting". Eleven interviewees reinforced this, including E2, who called for "*a health promotion, risky behaviour prevention model*", which was seconded by P3's emphasis on "*awareness and open discussion with adults who can give the proper guidance and knowledge for prevention*".

Educational initiatives as a preventive measure

Seven references to education were made across five polices. Policy 11 provided programmes for students, staff, and parents. Across the interviews, education was a prevalent subject with 21 references. P2 proposed covering "*legal, psychological, spiritual, and employment implications*". E10 stressed "*recurring education about the potential consequences*".

Communication as a preventive measure

Two policies focused on open dialogue. Policy 1 encouraged parental engagement, while Policy 6 embedded sexting education in assemblies and lessons. Interviews (23 references) endorsed early and honest conversations. E5 stated the need to "*confront them authentically*", while E11 hoped to "*start the conversations early and avoid awkwardness*".

Theme 9: Valuable resources

Four policies included external support resources, such as National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) contact details (Policy 1) and UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) guidance (Policy 12), suggesting efforts to connect policy with broader frameworks.

Theme 10: Gender dynamics

Only one policy briefly mentioned gender. However, the interviewees (15 references) deeply explored gendered experiences. E3 noted gender differences in "*the context of sexting*" and peer dynamics. P3 stressed the need for "*understanding the kind of communication they're having through these platforms; the girls would probably understand it differently from the boys, or the girls will be more sensitive than the boys*".

Gendered double standard

Nine references described harsher judgement towards girls. E12 highlighted "*slut-shaming*", and E3 criticised assumptions that "*females who sext lack self-respect*". However, E3 also

mentioned that "*gender policing within the peer group seems to be an issue affecting both boys and girls*". E4 noted the neglect of boys' vulnerabilities.

Male vs. female concern

Participants expressed greater concern for girls. E5 remarked on the objectification of girls and women in boys' schools. E9 observed that boys often treated sexting as "*a joke, a bit of banter*".

Gendered motivations for adolescent sexting

Motivational differences were noted across nine references. E2 highlighted the importance of understanding "*why boys behave in these ways*", while E9 noted "*massive gender diversity in motivation*".

Theme 11: Age differentiation

Two policies incorporated age considerations, including chronological age and developmental maturity, in understanding an incident. Twenty-three interview references supported age-specific policies. E7 advocated "*sanctions with different age ranges and age-specific boundaries*". E10 added, "*a 17-year-old is different from a 13-year-old*".

Healthy sexual relationships

Five references stressed the importance of acknowledging adolescent sexual development. E2 called for early discussions on "*healthy relationships*" to "*prevent early sexual debut or sexting debut*".

Normative sexual development

Six references framed sexting as developmentally typical. E2 described sexting as "*normative. … It's just that's when we start to develop sexuality, and we start to express sexuality*". E11 linked it to the historical norms of early marriage: "*your body knows that and can't switch it off*".

The moral panic of adolescent sexting

Seven references questioned societal overreaction. E4 asserted: "*There's clearly a moral panic*", and E9 argued for "*open and robust discussions to protect adolescents*" to mitigate "*unhelpful, moral panic*."

Theme 12: Duty of care concerning adolescent sexting

Five policies (six references) highlighted institutional responsibility. Policy 2 acknowledged the need to act when "legal or safeguarding boundaries are crossed". Four interviewee references were made with P9 noting the schools' significant but not exclusive responsibility.

Staff guidance

Nine policies included staff guidance. Some policies (e.g., 4, 5, 6, and 12) included specific aspects of viewing the imagery and/or text messages. Policy 12 emphasised compassion: "Do not say or do anything to blame or shame, … reassure them they will receive support." Training provisions were also noted in policies 1, 8, and 11.

Theme 13: Stakeholders

Only Policy 5 referenced stakeholders, advocating for "careful management" with multiple actors. Interviews (21 references) supported this. E1 stressed the importance of leadership involvement and called for a policy that "*reflects the views and experiences of those involved*".

Theme 14: Recording of an adolescent sexting incident

Five policies (17 references) stressed the importance of detailed record-keeping. Policy 5 instructs that "Formal written records should be completed immediately or within 24 hours. Records should include the date, time, place, persons involved, nature of the disclosure, and any relevant details."

Theme 15: Lack of policy integration regarding adolescent sexting

Seventeen references highlighted fragmented or outdated policies. E2 warned of "*over-policing*", while E9 observed "*extreme polarised responses around sexting in schools*". Some questioned schools' roles, indicating their involvement in sexting incidents could be construed as "*intrusive and abusive*" in itself. E11 asked, "*What's the school's business? And what isn't?*" P7 criticised the misunderstanding of adolescent sexting behaviour by adults as a "*new way of communicating*".

DISCUSSION

It is pertinent to reflect critically on the 12 analysed school policies to derive interpretive insights that inform the broader findings of this study. A notable proportion of these policies explicitly stated their objectives, underscoring the necessity of articulating a clear purpose within policy documents. While nearly all the policies attempted to define sexting, the definitions used revealed significant inconsistencies, thereby illustrating the definitional ambiguity that characterises discourse on adolescent sexting. This ambiguity is further exacerbated by the divergent inclusion or exclusion of general pornography and self-generated sexual content, which complicates the operationalisation of sexting in policy frameworks.

The emphasis on articulating the consequences of sexting is crucial for fostering adolescent awareness and supporting informed decision-making regarding sexual agency. The inclusion of legal ramifications within the policies examined reflects an acknowledgement of statutory obligations, as adolescent sexting remains criminalised in many jurisdictions. Nonetheless, the limited mention of criminalisation in only three policies suggests a prevailing inclination towards non-criminalisation, consistent with a broader international shift towards a "normalisation discourse" (Albur, Crawford, Byron & Matthews, 2013; Döring, 2014). This orientation also suggests a prioritisation of the child's best interests.

Despite this, the minimal inclusion of risk assessment—referenced in only five policies—is concerning, as it implies that risk management in responding to sexting incidents remains inadequately addressed. Procedural mechanisms such as reporting, documenting, and responding to sexting incidents are integral to policy efficacy; however, the scarce reference to contextual elements and the specific nature of the imagery involved suggest that nuanced, case-specific factors are often neglected. Recognition of the complexities of adolescent sexting is evident in some policies: eight referenced coercion, and six addressed consent, thereby acknowledging the behavioural continuum. Half of the policies underscored the importance of parental involvement, affirming parents' central role and justifying their inclusion in the present study. Furthermore, law enforcement's involvement reinforces policy alignment with legal mandates and may reflect a preference for punitive approaches over rehabilitative ones.

Only half of the analysed policies permitted school discretion, which may reflect jurisdictional limitations on institutional autonomy. This lack of discretion potentially necessitates increased police involvement due to mandatory reporting obligations. Notably, prevention was mentioned in few policies, suggesting a paradigm shift from abstinence-based frameworks to harm reduction and risk mitigation. While policy alone cannot entirely prevent sexting, educational strategies and open communication can serve as preventive tools. For adolescents who engage in sexting, harm reduction is an essential strategy. The underrepresentation of gender considerations in the policies, mentioned explicitly in only

one, reflects a broader systemic challenge in addressing the gendered dynamics of digital sexual cultures (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Mori et al., 2022: 537; Ringrose et al., 2013). Furthermore, the developmental characteristics of adolescence, particularly sexual exploration and the implications of age of consent laws, are largely overlooked.

The empirical data illustrate a lack of consensus on how adolescent sexting should be addressed. Specific policies adopt a punitive, zero-tolerance approach, while others endorse discretionary responses that distinguish between consensual and coercive behaviours. Among parents, there was limited agreement on the legal and social consequences of sexting, with a dominant focus on prevention and punishment rather than on safeguarding adolescent well-being. Most experts highlighted the importance of considering image content and distinguishing between consensual and coercive sexting when managing such incidents. A critical consensus among experts emphasised the importance of sexual education tailored to the digital era. Notably, a range of contextual factors—such as the age of the individuals involved, the nature of the content, the presence of consent or coercion, and the intent behind the behaviour—were identified as central to appropriately redressing sexting incidents. These factors were subsequently integrated into the policy developed for South African schools.

The newly developed policy is designed to increase awareness of adolescent sexting and provide structured guidance on how educational institutions can respond. It aims to move away from a zero-tolerance model towards a harm reduction and risk management paradigm, as abstinence-only strategies have been criticised for perpetuating gender stereotypes, victim-blaming, and fear-based rhetoric (Döring, 2014; Hunt, 2016; Zimlich, 2017). Shame-based education often results in the disproportionate vilification of girls while conferring social capital on boys who engage in the same behaviour (Dully et al., 2023: 1099; Lippman and Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013). A reorientation that challenges sexual double standards is therefore critical.

As with most research on sexting, defining the term within the context of school policy proved to be complex. Neither experts nor parents reached consensus, reflecting widespread misinformation and conceptual ambiguity (Agustina and Gómez-Durán, 2012; Harris, Davidson, Letourneau, Paternite & Tusinsky Miofsky, 2013; Salter, Crofts & Lee, 2013). In particular, the roles of adult involvement, grooming, and the distinction between consensual and coercive interactions compound definitional challenges (Choi et al., 2016; Gassó et al., 2019).

Internationally, there is general agreement that sexting refers to self-produced content (Albury et al., 2013; Döring, 2014; Katzman, 2010); however, in South Africa, even consensual adolescent sexting is legally construed as the creation or distribution of child sexual abuse material (South African Law Reform Commission, 2019). Although legal reform is pending, the terminology itself remains contentious. The definition used in the policy aims to include diverse scenarios while remaining generalisable. It covers self-generated images, videos, and text messages but excludes conventional pornography. It applies to individuals under 18, aligning with the legal age of majority (Kruger, 2018), and avoids specifying particular platforms to accommodate technological evolution.

The developed policy incorporates elements of harm reduction while recognising adolescence as a developmental stage characterised by sexual curiosity, vulnerability, and agency. The policy outlines risks such as adverse mental health outcomes, reputational harm, and school exclusion—elements identified in the literature as part of the "deviance discourse" (Gassó et al., 2019). Legal implications are addressed separately to ensure clarity.

Expert interviews revealed divergent views on the criminalisation of adolescent sexting. While some experts endorsed punitive measures consistent with the deviance discourse, others advocated for the normalisation of consensual sexting as part of sexual development (Choi et al., 2016; Levick & Moon, 2010). There was, however, consensus that coercive behaviours—such as blackmail, sextortion, and grooming—must be treated as criminal, regardless of the

perpetrator's age. Ultimately, the policy had to conform to national legislation, which in South Africa mandates that all sexting incidents involving minors be reported to law enforcement, in accordance with the Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act (32 of 2007) and the Films and Publications Amendment Act (3 of 2009).

The complexity of distinguishing consensual from coercive sexting is also acknowledged. In some cases, coercion may be explicit, while in others, particularly within relationships, it may go unrecognised by the individuals involved. The non-consensual redistribution of initially consensual content further complicates matters. Some scholars argue that consensual sexting may constitute normative sexual expression among adolescents (Choi et al., 2016; Levick & Moon, 2010; Ojeda et al., 2020: 11). As such, a universal, standardised response is likely to be ineffective. To that end, the developed policy includes evaluative questions to assess age, consent, coercion, motivation, and the impact of the sexting incident. It incorporates visual tools such as infographics to differentiate between experimental and aggravated sexting and illustrative case studies to guide school responses.

Age was also identified as a critical consideration. Sexting by children under 12 years old is particularly concerning, as it may suggest inappropriate exposure to sexual content and is incompatible with legal definitions of consent (Essack and Toohey, 2018). The policy's incident response section integrates procedures for recording and reporting, including the viewing and deletion of content, device management, and containment measures.

Finally, a major conclusion drawn from the policy analysis and expert interviews is the need to shift the focus from prohibition to prevention through harm reduction. Adolescent sexuality, particularly in digital contexts, cannot be addressed through blanket bans (Hunt, 2016; Zimlich, 2017). Sexting is now a common form of digital intimacy and should be understood as such. Therefore, the policy emphasises proactive, educational interventions that reflect the realities of adolescent experiences (Dully et al., 2023: 1099), taking into account their developmental stage and psychosocial context. Schools are encouraged to adopt a safeguarding posture that prioritises the best interests of adolescents. To support this, the policy includes a curated list of resources for learners, educators, and parents.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, managing adolescent sexting remains a contested issue shaped by divergent discourses and social norms. Gendered dynamics must be central to any intervention strategy that seeks to challenge harmful stereotypes and promote equitable approaches to minimise the risk and reduce the potential harm of adolescent sexting. The value of school-based policy lies in legal compliance and in providing pastoral care and guidance to schools regarding their duty of care beyond the standard academic curriculum. Parental education on digital sexual cultures and communication is critical, and the inclusion of adolescents in policy discourse is paramount. Ultimately, open and informed dialogue with young people is essential for developing practical, empathetic, and responsive policy interventions.

ENDNOTE

[1] Upskirting, also referred to as video voyeurism, is the practice of using video cameras to record underneath women's clothing. The advent of smartphones increased opportunities for public voyeurism, such as upskirting, particularly because videos can be recorded on a smaller device and have improved recording quality (McCann, Pedneault, Stohr & Hemmens, 2018: 399). The use of smartphones to upskirt also brings with it ease of distribution. In essence, upskirting is a form of non-consensual sexting, in which the victim may not even know she has been victimised (McCann et al., 2018: 399). The phenomenon of upskirting, and by extension, the non-consensual third-party distribution of images or videos, speaks to the toxic masculinity discourse, which objectifies female bodies (Davis, 2018: 2).

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