Sexting as sexual stigma: The paradox of sexual self-representation in digital youth cultures

# Keywords

* Digital media culture
* focus groups
* sexting
* stigma
* youth

# Details

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## Topics

* Social mediation
* Internet usage, practices and engagement
* Content-related issues

## Sample

38 young people between 15 and 18 years old from Dutch-speaking Belgium equally divided by gender and from different education levels.

# Abstract

Drawing on focus group research (N = 39) with young people between 15 and 18 years old in Dutch-speaking Belgium, this article looks at sexting in the context of early social constructionist work on (sexual) stigma. Considering the context of digital media, which are used by young people to express themselves sexually, this contribution explores why stigma surrounds sexual self-representation in digital media and youth cultures. The findings illustrate how young people’s discourse creates a consistent ideology, defining sexting as a violation of the norm of ‘good’ online conduct, while normalizing stigmatizing responses to sexting (e.g. shaming and bullying). Perceptions of social media affordances, societal responses and surrounding cultural values to sexting were found to be crucial sources of knowledge used to make sense of sexting as stigma.

# Outcome

"All the participants strongly distanced themselves from sexting. The perceived responses indicate that they may label themselves ‘deviants’ because they have been sexting. Young people generally referred to ‘hearing about’ sexting stories through (mass) media to demonstrate how ‘stupid’ or ‘risky’ it was to sext; media are known to have created a moral panic about sexting. Moreover, it was clear to them that sexters represent a danger to good conduct in digital media contexts.
These sex-negative orientations are a response to the perceived societal responses to and cultural values surrounding sexting, which, in the specific context of Dutch-speaking Belgium, seemed to be primarily negative and orientated toward sexting abstinence.
The paradox can only be resolved by accepting that engaging in sexting is a lonely moral choice; engaging in sexting meansaccepting the consequences of your ‘abnormal passions." (De Ridder, 2019, pp. 566 - 575)