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ABSTRACT
THE AWARENESS OF SEXTING AMONG GROWING UP CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS LIVING IN A SMALL TOWN

Streszczenie: Artykuł porusza wciąż rozwijające się we współczesnym świecie zjawisko ‘sextingu’ wśród młodych ludzi mieszkających w małym mieście. Opisywane zagadnienie zostaje wyjaśnione i omówione. W kolejnej części artykułu autorka przybliża czytelnikowi terminologię związaną z ‘sextingiem’, wyjaśnione zostają następujące pojęcia: child grooming, self gendered content, child sexual abuse material – CSAM czy child sexual exploitation material - CSEM.

Następnie przeanalizowane zostają wyniki ankiety przeprowadzonej wśród 422 uczniów uczęszczających do szkoły podstawowej, klasy 7-8, i szkoły średniej w małym mieście w odniesieniu do opisanego w artykule zjawiska. Ostatnia część dotyczy wskazania na bardzo poważne wskutki konsekwencje wynikające z publikowania materiałów intymnych, których doświadcza coraz większa liczba młodych ludzi.

Słowa klucze: sexting, Internet, nastolatkowie, publikować, zdjęcia i filmy video, intymny, zajawisko.

An article entitled ‘The Awareness of Sexting among Growing up Children and Teenagers Living in a Small Town’ describes not new but constantly evolving issue of sharing intimate pictures or videos on the Internet due to the development of technological devices. Selected terminology, like, self gendered content, child grooming, child sexual abuse material – CSAM or child sexual exploitation material - CSEM, is explained. The following part is devoted to introducing the research conducted on 422 respondents from primary schools and high schools located in a small town near Radom and summarising its results. The final part presents unpleasant, for young people, consequences of irresponsible behaviour on the Internet which may lead to serious psychological disorders in their future life.

Keywords: sexting, the Internet, teenagers, publish, pictures and videos, intimate, phenomenon.
Introduction

Simultaneously with the technological development traditional ways of public lifestyle as well as private aspects of human existence became re-evaluated in the recent years (Lew-Strowicz and Skrzypulec, 2010: 17). Rapid growth in the field of digitization and the increasing importance of possessing technological gadgets by an average human being evoked irreversible social changes. Together with the time of plague which accelerated these modifications young people became encouraged to browse the Internet and use various virtual tools to sustain their social interactions in the period of isolation and lockdown. Before the pandemic of COVID-19 it was scientifically proved that an average teenager spent about 4 hours a day in front of the Internet. This data evaluated during the time of plague and according to the research conducted by NASK in 2020 teenagers spare about 10-12 hours a day online. Of course, a significant part of this time is devoted to having online lessons but spending time in front of the multimedia devices encourages young people to search for the latest content. As a result, this data may become even higher in the future due to the pandemic reality which condemned people to change personal interactions into the online ones in various areas of everyday life. What is more, present situation forced people to improve their skills related to using available on the Internet tools, to sustain social contacts, fulfil professional requirements or entertain themselves, which may lead to permanent changes in human approach to life.

1. What is sexting

There are a lot of new phenomena developing simultaneously with the improvement of social media and online apps, like Instagram, Tik Tok or Snapchat, which encourage young people to further activity in various areas. Sexting is not a new phenomenon but due to changing reality which leads to the transition of social interactions into the Internet it has become a serious threat especially for young people who often do not predict the consequences of their behaviour.

At the beginning sexting relied on sending text messages to selected receivers and the word itself was created from the combination of two other words ‘sex’ and ‘texting’. In the past sexual content was shared between two romantic partners or those who wished to be in a relationship. Nowadays this term evolved and is associated with sending intimate messages to other people in the form of pictures or short videos. Today this process is enhanced by smartphone applications, like Snapchat, which support sending sexual content to the wide audience. The character of this phenomenon is constantly changing due to rapidly developing technologies and the availability of modern online tools which encourage young users to present and share illegal content with others as well.

as create their personal and sexual image accessible to anyone with the Internet connection.

It can be presumed that the phenomenon of sexting, which appeared on the Internet, is the consequence of cultural changes which are observed in the contemporary reality. When analysing the language and the visual input of simple commercials it can be observed that nakedness is commonly used to advertise all kinds of products, even those of everyday need. Television exposes young people to erotism through films, video clips, reality shows what may fan teenagers’ emotions to imitate similar behaviours. Consequently, they often build their image based on body-worship and one-dimensional beauty related to physical attractiveness to become noticed in the virtual world. They push the boundaries of intimacy to the limits to gain attention and popularity, but they often achieve these means by using provocation and risky behaviours without realising the consequences of them. It must be stated that the Internet creates perfect circumstances for young people to copy, frequently, shocking attitude of their favourite celebrities giving teenagers the impression that they can be equally popular in the local environment. Sexuality has always been one of the most attention catching factors which was, is and will be interesting for people, but the widespread access to the virtual content made it easily available for all kinds of viewers. Unfortunately, the research conducted by the Empowering Children Foundation in 2017 on 3,943 11 – 18-year-old students proved that 43% of young people had, at least once, contact with pornographic and sexual content whence 92% on the Internet. It is worth mentioning that 79% of the researched teenagers found this content on their smartphones and 31% looked for it on purpose (Makarut et al., 2017). The conclusions from the research show clearly that young people who watch pornography receive three times more often such content on their smartphones and send, five times more often, their naked pictures to other people. What is more, they often initiate sexual acts before finishing fifteen years old and they preserve many sexual stereotypes, which among others, lead to treating women in an objectified way (ibid.).

2. Children as the authors and co-authors of the sexual content

The interest in sexuality among teenagers is a natural phenomenon. When young people grow up, they pay more attention to their physical appearance and become focused on corporeality. Rough development evoked by accelerated work of hormones stimulates young people to concentrate their attention on the physical fitness and sexual aspects of human life. Despite biological pressure the most considerable influence on the development of teenage sexuality has the peer group which is often in opposition to the view expressed by parents or public institutions like, schools (Lew-Starowicz and Skrzypulec, 2010: 86). As a result, teenagers start searching for various information in this area on the Internet because this way is easier and more convenient than asking caretakers or teachers about certain issues. Unfortunately, virtual reality is full of materials containing
nakedness and sexuality presented in an unsuitable for young people manner. These are often videos and pictures which promote pornography and sexual violence. Consequently, the message they communicate is often vulgar and harmful for young recipients.

Recently, the phenomenon of creating and sharing personal sexual content has become extremely popular due to the general trends around the world, for example, in show business which promote nakedness and body cult more explicitly. As a result, young people became encouraged to produce and popularize certain content about themselves imitating the behaviour of well-known and influential celebrities. Consequently, the term called *self gendered content* appeared which describes the phenomenon related to imitating and duplicating certain sexual behaviours by teenagers and publishing them on the Internet in a form of a picture or a film. This is a conscious process in which a young person takes the role of an author, initiator, or director, when in a film, who supervises the process of creating and producing a particular piece of content. Such materials present children naked or in underwear only, in sexual or erotic postures or while imitating various sexual actions. The issue described above, according to Anna Kwaśnik (2021: 13), is extremely popular on streaming channels where various films are available in a form of online transmission or videoconference. Producing sexual materials by teenagers can be caused by numerous reasons but one phenomenon deserves closer attention because it is extremely dangerous and difficult to detect. It is called *child grooming* (ibid., p. 15) and describes the situation in which a child is seduced in the virtual reality by an adult. The result of this process, usually the act of sexual violence, often takes place in the real world. The whole procedure starts innocently when a child meets ‘a friend’ on the Internet who supports his/her ideas, writes positive posts and gains trust. Then ‘a friend’ makes sure whether the child informs other people, especially parents, about their relation and begins isolating a victim from friends and relatives. The next stage is devoted to building strong relationship with a young person and smuggling sexual materials for her/him to watch. Then ‘a friend’ encourages the child to produce and facilitate similar content which finally leads to taking control over the victim and abusing the child on the Internet or in the real world (Fenik, 2008). There are certain symptoms which, over time, may indicate experiencing problems caused by *child grooming* like:

- spending a lot of time online, chatting with strangers whom parents and close friends do not know or recognize,
- avoiding confrontation with parents and explanation who they constantly chat with,
- limiting contacts with old friends,
- possessing new digital gadgets, expensive cosmetics, or trendy items of clothing,
– being withdrawn and isolated, behaving in an unfamiliar way,
– using the language characteristic for adults and being interested in pornographic content (Kwaśnik 2021: 16).

It is crucial not to neglect signs of strange attitude which can be observed by people from the closest surrounding of a child and react to them fast. The phenomenon of child grooming is extremely dangerous because parents are usually unaware of this process happening under their roof. A caretaker does not realise that a child who is sitting in the room, at home, is at risk of becoming a victim of a serious crime which can lead, in the final stage, to the act of physical violence on the child in a real world or production of child sexual abuse material on the Internet – CSAM which presents the act of violence on the child and is illegal (Glaser D. and Frosh S., 1995: 19) or child sexual exploitation material – CSEM which presents the child in a sexual context. The creation of such materials is often supervised by the groomer, but like in other European countries, is not a crime in Poland (Kwaśnik 2021: 12). The most terrifying fact is that parents do not predict the unpleasant consequences of ’relaxing’ in front of the computer screen which might lead to serious mental and physical disorders for a child. They are usually not conscious of such treats existing on the Internet especially when they are convinced that a child is safe and taken care of when spending time at home.

3. The research

The research was conducted on a group of 211 teenagers attending two secondary schools and 211 students attending the 7th and 8th grade of two primary schools in a small town up to 20,000 inhabitants. The main criterion, related to the number of citizens living in this area, was taken into consideration due to the assumption that in small towns and villages people often choose a modest lifestyle. They show high morale and behave in a way which is expected after a good person. They are not anonymous in their hometown and usually keep up appearances of being well-behaved and humble. What is more, a chosen town is in the central part of Poland, Mazovian voivodeship, where there is no industry empowering the local economy to develop faster, what in consequence does not enable people to live in prosperity. There are only few private businesses which allow most families to sustain an average standard of life. People who inhabit this area and their children lead very normal lives which are not interfered by any shocking scandals or high rate of crime. In connection to theses typical characteristics the author’s intention was to investigate how a dynamically evolving phenomenon of sexting appeals to teenagers living in such area.

In May and June 2021 all the respondents were given a questionnaire related to the phenomenon of sexting to fulfill. This document contained ten questions related to students’ knowledge about the issue and their virtual activity in this field. The last question left a little space for the teenagers to write about
the consequences connected with publishing sexual content on the Internet which they have heard of or experienced themselves. The main purpose of the research was to investigate whether the phenomenon of sexting is familiar to young people and what its factual scale in a small town might be. The author wanted to explore if the age of students in combination with growing maturity has influence on teenagers’ activity in watching as well as producing sexual content. It was a basic query whether secondary school teenagers understand the unpleasant consequences of certain behaviours better than younger children and whether this knowledge prevents them from publishing sexual content. What is more, the author’s purpose was to investigate what negative, if any, experiences teenagers have had due to sexual publications.

The research was anonymous to encourage teenagers to answer the questions honestly, especially that the subject might have been very delicate for them. There were one hundred girls and one hundred and eleven boys who attended secondary school, and one hundred and twenty-five girls as well as eighty-six boys who represented primary school. It was extremely difficult to conduct the research on a group of teenagers, not only because of the pandemic time but also because the issue might have been regarded as embarrassing for teenage recipients. What is more, school principals, when asked for cooperation, did not react to the topic with great enthusiasm. It could have been assumed that they preferred to treat this subject as a kind of taboo and leave it untouched. They were afraid to get an insight into the field of sexting because of being judged by the local community. For the author it was substantial to deepen knowledge related to the motives of such behaviour and students’ feelings accompanying watching or sharing sexual content. The final goal was devoted to eliciting information about various consequences that students experienced or heard of in relation to sexting.

3.1. Findings

![Figure 1. Do you know what sexting is?](Image)

Source: author
Based on the research, it can be concluded that both teenagers attending primary as well as secondary school do not know what sexting is. They associate this issue with more general concept related to sexuality but are not familiar with the root of this matter. They do not recognise this term and cannot give its definition which should lead to the assumption that neither school environment nor the home one explains this kind of terminology to young people. Teenagers are also not educated about serious threats lurking in the virtual reality which may lead, like sexting, to serious and unpleasant mental disorders.

![Figure 2. Do you encounter sharing sexual content regularly?](image)

**Figure 2. Do you encounter sharing sexual content regularly?**
Source: author

![Figure 3. If YES did you ...?](image)

**Figure 3. If YES did you ...?**
Source: author

Although young respondents do not recognise the term, the statistics show clearly that both age groups experience exposure to intimate content regularly, primary school students – 60,5% while secondary school students – 98,5%. As it can be observed, teenagers from high school, girls as well as boys, answered this question explicitly, confirming their everyday involvement in watching materials with sexual undertone on the Internet. The tendency to look for such
content online increases commensurably with age, and it can be concluded that boys are more interested in selecting such materials because, at the age of 14-18 years old, males are fascinated with erotism and sexuality in general. It is worth mentioning that most researched students get sexual materials from close friends but surprisingly girls receive them more often than boys. From the psychological perspective girls are often strict judges for other women who notice every detail in the picture or video. They are interested in how girls, whom they know, look like, how their appearance changes, what style they prefer, who likes them and writes posts under their photos. As a result, young girls share pictures and videos of their female friends more eagerly and they stay very enthusiastic about expressing individual opinions in this field.

![Figure 4. Is fit and sporty body the prior criterium which you use to judge other people?](image)

Source: author

The research also shows some social and cultural changes in relation to regarding human body as the superior value for teenagers. As it is presented both teenage boys and girls treat physical appearance as a crucial factor which strongly attracts them to other people. Being athletic and sporty is a powerful lure which determines teenagers’ choices in the area of feelings and friendship. Physical attractiveness and beauty become highly valued features by these groups of respondents which may lead to the assumption that young people are directed by quite shallow impulses when investing feelings in various relationships.
When asked about their opinions related to sharing intimate content on the Internet it can be observed that younger students, from primary school, believe that it is quite wrong. They would feel ashamed when caught on such activity by their parents or close relatives. What is more, they do not build strong relationships with the other sex, because they are still quite immature and treat first love as an adventure not as a serious commitment. On the other hand, secondary school teenagers admit (70.5%) that it is neither right nor wrong to publish nude photos or videos and 22% thinks it is quite right to behave this way. The research shows that teenagers justify their behaviour because they actively participate in the procedure of sharing intimate materials online, they get daily exposure to this kind of content produced by other friends or schoolmates and after some time they treat this phenomenon as normal and acceptable. This tendency presents quite worrying trend which proves general attitude of treating the body as a good on the market.
The next research question was related to privacy and a number of teenagers, about 89.5% from primary school and 87% from secondary school, agreed that it is important to protect it. This result may be surprising when compared to data analysed in question seven but in the author’s opinion it only proves that teenagers do not realise the fact that once published online content stays there forever and widespreads in microseconds. What is more, they believe that sending a naked photo to, for example, a boyfriend is only for this person’s usage. Unfortunately, the moment of sharing certain material is the moment of losing control over this content.

As the research shows girls are more eager to publish pictures or videos in which they present their physical attributes in various contexts. This tendency increases with age among children but regardless to this aspect females are much more active in this area than young males. It can be caused by the cultural background in which they grow up representing woman’s body as the ideal of beauty and sensuality. Women are the symbol of sexuality and desire, and their bodies are used to advertise leisure activities, expensive items of clothing or luxurious products. They have inspired photographers, sculptors, painters, fashion designers and other artists to create unique works of art for many years. People are used to admiring woman’s attributes in social and mass media. As a result, young girls expose their bodies to the public to gain attention, build their confidence and feel attractive. When they grow up, they become more daring to publish provocative content to sustain their followers’ attention and they move further in the ideas for such materials.
It is not a surprise that on the basis of the research it can be concluded that young teenagers from primary school, who are yet not the most active group in publishing naked or half-naked pictures on the Internet, believe other people do it mainly for popularity – 60.5%, but when analysing older teenagers from secondary school it is observed that they fold under the pressure of behaving in a similar way as other mates from their age group. By admitting that other friends do the same, they justify their choices related to publishing materials with sexual undertone in social media. All respondents valued highly gaining popularity as the main reason for promoting their sexy appearance in the virtual world because, as they admitted during the survey, it is the fastest way for them to become recognisable not only in the local environment.

Data gained based on students’ answers proves the tendency to change students’ point of view oversharinsexual materials when they grow up. Young girls from primary school regard this issue negatively – 47%, while young boys are divided into two main groups which express either negative opinion about people who share such content – 34% or neutral one – 46%. For secondary school girls and boys people publishing pictures and videos with sexual content do not do anything
wrong, over 60% when asked, expressed positive opinion about this kind of attitude. Being so enthusiastic in this field may be quite surprising especially when the results related to the last question of the research are analysed.

Figure 10. Have you heard of (experienced) any negative consequences that your friends (you) faced after publishing intimate pictures/videos? What were they?

At the beginning, it is worth mentioning that scientists identified certain unpleasant consequences of being exposed to erotic content as well as producing one with sexual undertone and sharing it publicly. In the view of A. Kwaśnik (2021: 10-11), Zbigniew Lech-Starowicz and Violetta Skrzypulec (2010: 241-247) negative results of such behaviour can be as follows:

- being addicted to sex and pornographic content,
- the need to look for increasingly extreme stimuli,
- irreversible changes of the brain, way of judging and understanding reality,
- problems experienced in sexual functioning which often leads to the crisis in relationships or serious difficulties in building relations with the other sex,
- using sexual abasement in private life,
- having problems with self-acceptance,
- experiencing long-lasting trauma,
- presenting negative attitude towards the representatives of the other sex,
- being involved in multi-sexual relationships simultaneously,

What is more, according to scientists, young people can experience serious mental and physical disorders because of being a victim of sexual abasement, among which one can distinguish:

- being extorted and forced to further sexual activity,
- being the victim of using the content produced by the child to promote pornography, advertise, and promote sex on the Internet,
- becoming withdrawn from normal life, separating from the group of friends and family,
- experiencing sleeplessness and frequent mood changes,
becoming introverted, mysterious, depressed, and isolated,
- making attempts to harm themselves or in extreme circumstances commit
  suicide,
- feeling shame and fear of being judged by, for example, the closest relatives,
- being absent from school and getting poor grades, experiencing difficulties
  in learning,
- becoming addicted to alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs

Answers gained in the survey show that a number of secondary school students
heard of unpleasant consequences of sexting which other people from their closest
surrounding experienced. They often enumerate being derided by other schoolmates
(25%), loosing friends, and feeling isolated (17%), being left by a partner because
of sharing intimate content with other Internet viewers (27%), being bullied by older
boys and girls who live in the same area (11%) or becoming a victim
of cyber-bulling (hate 31%) as the most frequent consequences of sexting.
Despite them, unfortunately, teenagers do not draw conclusions or behave
more reasonably in the virtual world to avoid similar problems in the future.
They are triggered by the number of various materials and the message they
convey, and they believe that the Internet is a safe place for various activities.

4. Summary

The research has shown that a surprisingly high percentage of primary (92.5%) and
secondary (80%) school students is not able to explain what the definition of
sexting is. With age the rising awareness, about the issue, can be observed but when
compared with students’ engagement in producing and sharing sexual content this
consciousness is still extremely low and unsatisfactory. It must be noticed that the
scale of the problem, as for a small town is wide, because young people facilitate
materials with sexual undertone, to one another with great enthusiasm and this
phenomenon appears to become a regular practice, about 79.5% of teenage
respondents declared to do it as a routine.

When answering the research question related to the influence of age
of respondents on the regularity and frequency of producing such content it can
be concluded that older teenagers are more active in promoting their naked
or half-naked pictures on the Internet. Although they become more mature
and responsible in life, the criterium of age does not determine their activeness
on the Net in more expected and reserved direction when analysing the promotion
of their bodies and physical appearance. One could notice that the tendency
is completely opposite. With age they begin losing the right view over
the appropriate use of social media. The results of the survey confirm that
teenagers often do not realize that once published picture or video is not their
personal matter anymore. When sending the content to a friend or publishing

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it on video sharing platforms or social media sites children naively believe that only closest friends have access to it. Unfortunately, they do not predict consequences of sharing intimate pictures with the wide audience, what leads to the conclusion that there is a deep need to educate teenagers more intensively in potential danger it might bring.

The motives directing young people to further activity in promoting their sexuality online are related to becoming more popular and recognizable by other mates. They also justify their growing interest in publishing such materials by the fact that other friends do the same. When they grow up, they get used to the lifestyle in which social actions are transferred into the virtual reality where certain norms or rules are often neglected.

As far as the negative consequences of publishing content with sexual undertone are considered young people admit that they experience them more frequently than in the past. It is a natural implication of being more active on the Internet and more daring to produce explicit videos or pictures. The consequences which they enumerate are related to losing a girlfriend or a boyfriend because of publishing erotic materials as well as feeling isolated or being rejected by a group of friends. They are often victims of hate in the virtual reality which, as they admit, leads some of the respondents to self-mutilation (especially hands and wrist areas), depression and two students confirmed that they have already tried to commit a suicide because of bullying.

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