

Rethinking risk in adults' engagement with sexual digital imagery

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Background:

Modern sexuality education and sexual health promotion inevitably must engage with online safety, particularly in relation to self-created sexual imagery ('sexting', production of amateur pornography/'sex tapes' and so forth). This paper reports on a qualitative study about Australian adults' use of digital sexual imagery in their sex lives. The study explored participants' experiences of digital sexual self-image creation and sharing, and the ways perceptions of risk and safety shaped these experiences.

Methods:

In-depth interviews were conducted with 23 Australian adults aged between 25 and 75 years. Participants were asked to speak about their experiences creating, sharing and/or receiving amateur sexual imagery, their relationships with people with whom they shared images, the settings, spaces and social contexts in which they created/shared images, their perception and awareness of potential risks and how they responded to these. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis.

Results:

Participants tended to view the creation and exchange of sexual images as a form of sexual play that built intimacy, sexual tension and eroticism and expanded their intimate experiences in positive ways. Participants were aware that sending sexual or nude images left them vulnerable to potential harm or unwanted sexual exposure. However, they were often more concerned that they would be viewed as foolish or irresponsible for creating/sharing sexual images given the known risks. As a result, participants were often secretive about their experiences and had not spoken to many people about their online practices.

Conclusion:

We know that sexual health messaging that is fear-based, and emphasises risk without acknowledging pleasure, can evoke a sense of shame that undermines open conversation about sexual health. This is also true for digital sexual safety. Sex-positive approaches to digital safety education is important to ensure engagement of people who use these technologies in their sex life.

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