

## Book Review

# Emily Setty (2020) *Risk and Harm in Youth Sexting Culture: Young People's Perspectives*. London: Routledge

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The sharing and receiving of intimate sexual images and messages, otherwise known as 'sexting', has prompted significant debate and discussion across different jurisdictions, as it raises legal and ethical complexities for young people under 18 years of age (see Cooper et al. 2016; Crofts et al. 2015; Symons et al. 2018). Framing her argument through the lens of the victim, Setty's (2020) latest book shines a light directly on how this younger population needs to be protected by mandatory legal frameworks. Primarily utilising the main findings of her doctoral research in 2016, Setty adopts a rights-based approach in addressing core issues surrounding youth, sex and privacy violations within the digital space. A key notable component of the author's analysis is the 'oversexualisation' of women and girls and the gender norms that encompass the youth sexting culture that shapes young people's perceptions of risk and harm (p. 9). Further, to raise critical awareness of this contemporary and topical issue, Setty's latest publication captures the often-overlooked voices of young people and provides contextual evidence and recommendations on youth sexting, which may prove useful to professionals and practitioners and inform future policy reform.

Setty's (2020) book, entitled *Risk and Harm in Youth Sexting Culture*, is a comprehensive and insightful text that critically identifies and analyses young people's perspectives and lived experiences of 'sexting'. It also explores how smartphones and 'other internet-enabled devices' (p. 5) can be used to explore sexuality, identity and relationships (see Hasinoff, 2015). The book commences by providing a clear contextual background to youth sexting by using an emotionally-charged case study of a young woman's experience of being bullied and harassed by peers following the unlawful distribution of intimate images of her. This helpful introduction also explains the author's own motivations and reasons for pursuing this important area of research and highlights the urgent need to rethink 'individualised solutions' (Setty 2020, p. 6) to the 'problem' of youth sexual and bodily expression in the digital space (see Bailey and Steeves 2013; Dobson 2012; Hasinoff 2015).

The book (Setty 2020) comprises eight core chapters. In the first chapter, Setty provides a nuanced and succinct discussion of the qualitative methodological approaches employed to collect empirical data on risk and harm in youth sexting through one-on-one and group interviews (i.e., focus groups). The remaining seven chapters are thematically structured according to the key



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findings that emerged from the interviews with the young teenagers, including their attitudes towards victim blaming (p. 31), bullying and social shaming by peers (p. 63) and finally, sexting education and support when addressing risk and harm within youth sexting cultures (p. 83).

Setty (2020) draws on a number of other important themes, including the blurred boundaries between public and private digital spaces (p. 10), which are significant in explorations of the legal and educational responses to youth sexting. For example, the issue of ‘child pornography’ raised considerable concerns predominantly among the male participants and showed that girls tend to be constructed as more ‘vulnerable’ and are more likely to claim ‘victim’ status in this context (p. 105). In the second chapter, the author discusses what is colloquially referred to as ‘revenge porn’ (p. 27) and asserts that girls are also subject to harmful objectifying and social shaming processes, such as the unauthorised distribution of intimate or sexual images. Conversely, boys encounter fewer risks and are less likely to be harmed by these practices. By examining young people’s online experiences, the author highlights the transparent lack of awareness of the potential legal consequences of sexting among young people and in doing so, successfully addresses the overall aims and scope of the research; that is, the ‘ethics’ of sexting (p. 12).

It is clear that the author is a strong advocate of diversionary practices and additional educational approaches that seek to inform young people of the risks and harms associated with sexting to discourage their engagement in sexting (Setty 2020 p. 23). In a bid to change the wider culture within which sexting occurs (p. 126), Setty asserts that a framework should be implemented that encourages police officers to adopt a ‘context-dependent approach’ (p. 26) and assess whether the incident can be dealt with informally or if appropriate law enforcement is required. However, the author also critically analyses the moral and ethical implications of these measures and raises the question: Does the state ultimately have the authority to regulate private behaviour?

In assessing these boundaries, Setty (2020) also highlights the importance of privacy for young people, who may lack control and the space to share and connect with others, which in turn may curtail their opportunities for intimacy, growth and autonomy (see Nissenbaum 2010). It is clear from the language and literature used in the text, that there are ultimately ‘competing impulses’ (Setty 2020, p. 28) between a young person’s right to be protected from harm and their rights to free sexual expression and privacy. In this case, the author suggests a ‘rights-based’ conceptualisation of youth sexting (p. 14). This conceptualisation is helpful for readers, as there appears to be a lack of critical understanding and awareness of young people’s right to protection from risk and harm in the digital sphere.

Chapter Five raises the key point that young people do not define sexting as inherently non-consensual; rather, they characterise sexual encounters as ambiguous in nature in terms of what is and is not wanted (Setty 2020 p. 86). This research suggests that girls are obligated to manage and fulfil the desires of boys and have experiences of unwanted sexting to please and maintain the interest of boys. Conversely, sexting for boys is more about obtaining images of girls and the value that such images provide (p. 93), which raises the concern that sexist motives are ultimately embedded within youth sexting culture.

Another insightful example that emerged from Setty’s (2020) interview data was that the girl participants emphasised that sexting can in fact be pleasurable due to the positive reinforcement and feedback experienced by the recipients (p. 88). This finding represents a progressive step towards encouraging and redefining bodily and sexual expression, which can be facilitated in numerous ways; for example, through *Instagram* fitness accounts of girls losing weight (p. 127). Setty theorises that this may not only (re)legitimise girls’ sexuality, but that this could also prevent the objectification of women, the denial of human rights and violations of privacy and consent in digital sexual image-sharing among young people. Towards the end of her book, Setty illustrates to her readers that young people’s perspectives on sexting are characterised by multiple discourses in which risk, responsibility and regret combine with moral and ethical constructs about approved choices and practices (p. 164).

*Risk and Harm in Youth Sexting Culture* (Setty 2020) makes a valuable and insightful contribution to the field of youth sexting culture and adds to the existing body of research and academic literature on the privacy and rights of young people within the public and private digital sphere. The author’s call for meaningful legal change is evident in her push for a restorative rather than a punitive approach that is deemed to be more effective in the long term (p. 174). Taking into account the voices and perspectives of teenage young people, it is evident that they require more advice, practical support and meaningful and honest education about sexting. The book is both timely and relevant and will thus be of interest to practitioners, stakeholders, academics and students and also appeal to a wider readership. It may also help to replace ‘anti-sexting’ approaches with ‘anti-harm’ and ‘anti-ethical’ approaches (p. 173).

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