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The prevalence, context and perceptions of sexting among non-heterosexual men from various generations in Belgium

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### **Abstract**

Sexting, herein defined as the sending of self-made sexually explicit images has mostly been studied within the context of heterosexual relationships and among adolescent and young adult populations. This exploratory mixed-method study aims to investigate the prevalence, context and perceptions of sexting among non-heterosexual men of various generations. The study used two datasets. A quantitative survey was conducted among 684 non-heterosexual men between 18 and 77 years old ( $M = 34.29$  years old;  $SD = 13.41$ ), and qualitative interviews were conducted with 80 non-heterosexual men ( $M = 37.41$  years old;  $SD = 15.93$ ). Overall, 66.4% of the non-heterosexual men had sent a sexting image, and 84.7% of those who sexted indicated that they were unrecognizable in their images. The qualitative interviews showed that sexting is perceived as a risky but unproblematic practice by non-heterosexual men of all generations. Few generational differences were observed. Sexting takes place within the context of online dating and is perceived as a normative behavior within dating apps. The participants were aware of the potential risks associated with sexting and they protected themselves by sending images in which they were unrecognizable, thereby ensuring their safety and anonymity in online spaces.

*Keywords:* sexting, non-heterosexual men, unsolicited sexting, online dating, LGBTQ+

## **The Prevalence, Context and Perceptions of Sexting Among Non-Heterosexual Men From Various Generations**

### **Introduction**

Sexting, the sending of self-made sexually explicit images, is a contemporary form of sexual communication (Van Ouytsel, Punyanunt-Carter, et al., 2020). A recent meta-analysis found that 47.7% of young adults of various sexual orientations between the ages of 18 and 29 years old had engaged in reciprocal sexting (Mori et al., 2020). Studies about the prevalence of sexting among adults over 29 and the general adult population are rare. One Spanish study among a convenience sample of adults found that 27% of the respondents had at least once engaged in sexting with a partner (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015), and another study among U.S. singles found that 21% of single adults had ever sent a sext (Garcia et al., 2016). Young adults mostly engage in sexting within the context of sexual, dating and romantic relationships (Walker et al., 2013). Sexting images can be exchanged to flirt, as a form of sexual foreplay and within the context of (online) dating. Within long-term romantic relationships, sexting can be used as a form of relationship maintenance and to express intimacy (Van Ouytsel, Punyanunt-Carter, et al., 2020).

Sexting has gained considerable societal attention because of the potential risks associated with the behavior. These risks mostly center around the chance that the sexts get widely distributed without consent of the creator. For example, the images can be forwarded in private groups, or they can be posted on online messaging boards (Serpe & Brown, 2021). Furthermore, victims can be extorted (i.e., sextortion) for money, sexual favors or other purposes (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018). Another risk associated with sexting, is that some individuals feel pressured to send images in order to raise the interest of (potential) romantic or sexual partners (Van Ouytsel, Punyanunt-Carter, et al., 2020). Finally, there is the risk of receiving unsolicited images (colloquially called dick pics), which can be intrusive and can make the recipient feel uncomfortable, threatened or harassed (Mandau, 2020).

Most of the sexting research has been conducted among heterosexual samples and among adolescent or young adult populations (Van Ouytsel, Punyanunt-Carter, et al., 2020). The experiences of non-heterosexual individuals or older adults over the age of 30 are understudied. The aim of our research is to go beyond these limitations by a) focusing on a sample with a wide age range that encompasses several generations, and b) more deeply exploring the prevalence, context and perceptions of sexting among non-heterosexual men. In this study, we use ‘non-heterosexual’ to refer to our research participants. However, when reviewing the relevant literature on sexting and sexual minority individuals, we adopt the terms that have been used by the authors of the respective studies.

### ***Sexting among non-heterosexual individuals***

One of the gaps within prior sexting research is a focus on the experiences of sexual minority individuals. The scarce research on this topic has focused on adolescents because of the higher risks that are involved with sexting for this age group. Among adolescent samples, non-heterosexual youth have been found to be more likely to send and receive sexting images than their heterosexual peers (Rice et al., 2012; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017; Gámez-Guadix & Incera, 2021; Kim et al., 2019; Ojeda et al., 2020; Van Ouytsel et al., 2021). One potential explanation is that they need to rely more on digital media and online sources to find information about their sexuality and to connect with (potential) dating and sexual partners (Needham, 2021; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016). Non-heterosexual youth also have limited access to romantic and sexual partners in their area, and certain public spaces that heterosexual youth can access to experiment with relationship skills are not accessible for sexual minority youth. Furthermore, they may perceive it as safer to explore their sexuality online as opposed to the risks that offline contacts with others may carry (Needham, 2021; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016).

LGB youth have been found to be on average more vulnerable for sexting-related risks (Van Ouytsel et al., 2021). Recent studies have found that sexual minority youth are also more likely to become a victim of sexting-related pressures, while at the same time not being more likely to perpetrate these abusive behaviors (Van Ouytsel et al., 2021; Van Ouytsel et al., 2019). LGB youth are also more likely to have a sexually explicit image of them forwarded without consent than heterosexual youth (Pampati et al., 2020) and are at a higher risk to become a victim of sextortion (Gámez-Guadix & Incera, 2021). Sexual minority youth may be particularly vulnerable to sexting-related abuses compared to their heterosexual peers, as they may not be 'out' yet to their family and friends (Van Ouytsel et al., 2021).

While sexting among non-heterosexual youth is mostly studied from the perspective of their unique vulnerabilities in online spaces, some studies have begun to explore the role sexting may play among adult non-heterosexual individuals. Sexual minority young adults have been found to be on average more involved in sexting than heterosexual adults (Bauermeister et al., 2014; Dir et al., 2013; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015; Garcia et al., 2016; Howard et al., 2020; Morelli et al., 2016a, 2016b). Gay men were more likely to have sent a sexting image than lesbian women (Garcia et al., 2016). Another study found that gay and bisexual men reacted more positively to receiving unsolicited sexual images of male genitalia than women of all sexual orientations. They were more likely to report curiosity, arousal or feeling flattered in response to unsolicited images (Marcotte et al., 2021).

Other studies have focused on the correlates of sexting among sexual minority adults. Gay men are more likely to engage in sexting for the purpose of body image reinforcement than heterosexual men, potentially owing to the pressures of contemporary beauty ideals within broader gay culture (Bianchi et al., 2019; Currin & Hubach, 2019). Gay men who engaged in sexting reported less sleep per night than those who did not exchange sexts (Al-Ajlouni et al., 2019). Sexting among men who have sex with men has also been found to be associated with

sexual activity (Bauermeister et al., 2014) and hook-up behaviors, but no associations were found with sexual risk behavior (Currin & Hubach, 2017). Men who had sex with men who were in a committed relationship or married were less likely to engage in sexting than single men (Currin & Hubach, 2017).

Sexting has been found to be common on gay dating applications (Albury & Byron, 2014). Several studies have found that gay men frequently engage in sexualized self-presentation through online dating applications (Tziallas, 2015; Wongsomboon et al., 2021; Wu & Trottier, 2021). This includes the exchange of sexually explicit images with potential romantic or sexual partners, and the posting of sexualized images on online dating profiles to present oneself to other users (Wu & Trottier, 2021). Some non-heterosexual men choose to not show their faces in these images out of fear of being identified (Wongsomboon et al., 2021). A study among US and Chinese young adult dating app users found that LGBT young adults were more likely to report negative sexting experiences, such as pressure to engage in sexting (Qu et al., 2021).

### ***The present study***

When reviewing the literature on sexting among non-heterosexual populations, we have noticed two major limitations. First, while sexting appears to be common among non-heterosexual adults, very few studies have focused on more deeply understanding their sexting experiences. Most prior work does not go beyond establishing prevalence, examining the correlates, and treating sexual orientation as a control variable. The lived experiences of non-heterosexual individuals are not sufficiently understood. A second limitation consists of the narrow age ranges within prior sexting research. Most samples comprise of adolescents or young adults. Research that includes a broad age range and includes older adults is lacking.

Our exploratory mixed-method study aims to address some of these gaps in our understanding of sexting by presenting quantitative and qualitative findings on the sexting experiences of non-heterosexual men. The main aim of this study is to explore the prevalence, context and perceptions of sexting among non-heterosexual men of various generations. Our study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we go beyond prior literature by focusing non-heterosexual men, as opposed to straight people who are the key focus of existing research. Second, we move beyond most studies on the sexting practices of non-heterosexual individuals by not only quantitatively studying the prevalence of sexting behavior, but also qualitatively exploring the context and their perceptions of sexting. Third, we extend prior work by including men of different ages, also (older) adults who are part of different generations in terms of sexuality and media use, as opposed to prior research that mainly focused on adolescents and young adults. When comparing sexting experiences of individuals from different age groups, we are guided by the theoretical notion of ‘generations’ (Mannheim, 1952), which comprises of age groups who experienced similar historical and social occurrences at the same time, which results in similar experiences. For example, ‘media generations’ exist, as different new media technologies became available within the life time of several age cohorts (Bolin, 2017). This theoretical distinction between several generations may be particularly useful when exploring differences in sexting experiences and perceptions, as sexting is a novel behavior that is connected to internet use and smartphone ownership (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, et al., 2020).

## **Methods**

### *Sample and recruitment*

#### *Quantitative study*

The datasets used for this article are part of the [name removed for the purpose of peer-review] project. The sample was recruited through an online survey which ran from 2 to 23 October 2020. The survey focused on generational differences in media use and sexual

orientation among non-heterosexual men. Given the focus of the project we only recruited men for this study. The respondents were recruited through e-mail, sponsored posts on Facebook and Instagram, unpaid social media posts, and through LGBTQ organizations. The study was open to all non-straight men (i.e., bisexual, gay or other sexual orientations) in the Dutch-speaking provinces of Belgium.

The final quantitative sample consisted of 684 respondents between 18 and 77 years old ( $M = 34.29$  years old;  $SD = 13.41$ ). Based on their birth year, we classified the respondents in four generations following Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019): Baby Boomers, born between 1949 and 1964 ( $n = 71$ ; 10.5%); Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980 ( $n = 125$ ; 18.4%); Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996 ( $n = 315$ ; 46.4%); Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012 (i.e., 2002 as only respondents over 18 years old were able to participate) ( $n = 168$ ; 24.7%).

The respondents were asked to describe their sexual orientations: *gay*, *bisexual*, *queer*, *pansexual*, *asexual*, *heterosexual*, *prefer not to say*, *I prefer to describe myself as...* The respondents were able to indicate multiple response options. Some of the demographic characteristics of the respondents are displayed in Table 1.

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

### *Qualitative study*

Survey respondents could indicate if they wanted to participate in in-depth interviews, which 187 did. These were systematically contacted, and the final sample consisted of 80 participants, divided across four generations, following the same characteristics as Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019): 16 Baby Boomer, 18 Generation X, 24 Millennial, 22 Generation Z (the youngest born in 2001). The average age of the participants was 37 years old



( $M = 37.41$  years old;  $SD = 15.93$ ). The second author conducted in-depth interviews through Zoom. The open interviews aimed to offer a bottom-up perspective on the role of media use within the participants' identity formation. The interviews took place from mid-October 2020 to January 2021.

For both the quantitative and qualitative study, the participants provided informed consent. They were informed that their responses would remain confidential and that they could withdraw their participation at any time. Both studies were approved by the Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of (blinded for review).

## *Measures*

### *Quantitative measures*

#### *Sexting*

Three questions related to sexting were asked. 1) *Sending of sexting images*. Sexting was measured by asking the respondents if they had sent a sexually explicit nude image or nude video of themselves to someone else in the past year (*yes/no/prefer not to answer*).

2) *Being recognizable in the images*. Respondents who indicated that they had engaged in sexting were asked if they were mostly recognizable or unrecognizable in the images that they had sent. The response options were 1) *recognizable*, 2) *unrecognizable* and 3) *prefer not to say*.

3) *Sexting partner*. Respondents who indicated that they had engaged in sexting were asked to whom they had sent the sext the last time that they had engaged in sexting. The response options included: 1) *Romantic partner*, 2) *Someone I am dating and that I have already met in real life*, 3) *A friend*, 4) *Someone I only know through a dating app (Tinder, Grindr) and*

*never met in real life, 5) Someone I know through the Internet and social media (Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook), but never met in real life, 6) Someone else (please specify), 7) Prefer not to say.*

### *Qualitative measures*

The qualitative interviews focused on the media use of the non-heterosexual participants. Within the qualitative interviews, the participants were asked to discuss their experiences with and perceptions of sexting. We used a recent, widely reported, incident in which the sexting content of three male celebrities in Belgium was leaked as a segue into the conversation. All conversations were transcribed verbatim. The quotes are literal translations from Dutch by the authors. Participant names were replaced by an alias of their own choice.

### *Data analysis*

Data were analyzed using SPSS v 27.0 (IBM, Armonk, NY). We used chi-square tests to compare the differences between the different generations of survey respondents. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded and analyzed using NVivo v1.4 (QSR International).

## **Results**

### *Quantitative results*

Overall, 66.4% of our respondents ( $n = 451$ ) have engaged in sexting in the past year. The results were stratified among generations. These are summarized in Table 2. There were significant differences between the generations ( $\chi^2(3) = 27.09, p = 0.00$ ). When running separate 2x2 chi-square tests, we found that Generation X ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.607, p = 0.032$ ), Millennials ( $\chi^2(1) = 22.41, p = 0.000$ ), and Generation Z ( $\chi^2(1) = 16.78, p = 0.000$ ) were significantly more

involved in sexting compared to Baby Boomers. Millennials ( $\chi^2(1) = 7.421, p = 0.006$ ) and Generations Z ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.709, p = 0.030$ ) were significantly more likely to engage in sexting than Generation X. There were no generational differences between Millennials and Generation Z ( $\chi^2(1) = .078, p = 0.779$ ). The results indicate that younger generations are more likely to engage in sexting than older generations.

We also asked whether the respondents were recognizable or unrecognizable in their pictures. Overall, the majority of respondents who had sexted indicated that they were unrecognizable ( $n = 377, 84.7\%$ ). The results were stratified among generations. These are summarized in Table 2. Overall, there were no significant differences between the generations ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.448, p = 0.217$ ).

We further asked to whom the respondents had last sent a sext. The results are displayed in Table 3 and are stratified per generation. Across generations, most sexting images were sent to someone they met on a dating app but never met in real life ( $n = 191; 42.8\%$ ). Other recipients included a committed partner ( $n = 82; 18.4\%$ ), someone that the respondents know from the Internet and social media but never met in real life ( $n = 61; 13.7\%$ ), someone the respondents were dating and already met ( $n = 59; 13.2\%$ ), and a friend ( $n = 31; 7.0\%$ ).

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 2 AND TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

### *Qualitative results*

In September 2020, intimate sexting pictures and videos of three male Flemish celebrities were widely shared on social media, prompting a public debate about sexting and catfishing, as it later turned out a gay man had lured them into sharing these pictures by contacting them under a false name. This controversy was used as a prompt to discuss sexting behaviors in the interviews with 80 non-heterosexual men from October 2020.

The *Baby Boomers* were born before 1965, so they were at least 30 when first getting access to the internet and over 40 when mobile phones started to become widely available in Belgium. The 16 Baby Boomers interviewed for this project were quick to adopt digital media, in particular for online chatting and dating. When asked if they shared intimate pictures this way, more than half (9) answered positively, although most emphasized that they were careful. For instance, Frederick (1954) would not share images with people he does not know, stating: ‘A bit of common sense gets you a long way.’ Peter (1958) frequently got requests for nude pictures from international contacts on social media, but he did not send any: ‘Because I realized, if you do so, you never know if they are going to abuse those to blackmail you.’ At the same time, he did not object to sexting, and thought the whole celebrity scandal was blown out of proportion: ‘Is that such a problem, to see the full monty?’ Jonathan (1962) discussed the learning process involved: ‘I’ve been nude on-screen with people I know, but then thought afterwards: if he had recorded it, it could have circulated. Now we learn to deal with that and we know: you can share your head, or you can share your body, but never the twain shall meet.’

While most Baby Boomers were careful to share identifiable pictures, it was striking how normalized sexting still was among this group, as part of online dating. Being mature and out of the closet, they were secure in their sexuality and not overly worried about possible repercussions. For instance, Tom (1963) frequently sexted and never experienced any problems, adding: ‘It’s also the idea of: what the hell could they do to me anyway?’ Paul (1958) stated that so many intimate pictures circulate on dating apps that there is a limited risk of pictures being used against the people who made them. Some of the Baby Boomers who did not sext were worried about the potential consequences, but for others it was also a matter of lack of technological savviness or because they were not dating anymore – keeping in mind that these participants were over 55 at the time of the interview.

*Generation X* participants first got internet access approximately between the ages of 15 and 30 and smartphone access from their late twenties, at the earliest. Most had already started dating offline, which partly explains why some did not sext, as it was not part of their initial dating experiences and they did not trust the process. Nevertheless, even these participants were very familiar with sexting, which they all came across on dating platforms. For instance, Robin (1979) never sexted, but he did not mind that other people did so: 'I think it's OK if people feel good about it, they should do it.' Roeland (1980) was more critical, as he observed a pressure to share nudes: 'In the gay scene, nude pictures are easily shared and it seems to be normalized. And that creates a kind of social pressure to also do it, I think.'

Most *Generation X* interviewees did sext, but they remained careful, mostly by not sharing their face in nude pictures. Oskar (1980): 'You will never see my head and my genitals on the same picture.' At the same time, like the Baby Boomers, they were not overly worried about possible consequences of shared pictures. For instance, Alik (1975) said: 'Maybe I'm naive, but in fact I don't really see it as a problem. If my nudes appear in public tomorrow, so be it. Then people will know Alik has sex, so what?' Like many other participants, Oskar (1980) was not shocked by the celebrity sexting as such but by the public scandal it provoked: 'Unfortunately, we live in a society that is very prude in that respect.'

If anything, *Generation X* participants were more bothered by the normalization of sexting in gay dating. Wout (1979) complained that nudes are easily asked in the online dating process: 'Recently, I was testing something on Tinder and I had indicated 'just chat and friends'. And bam, you receive a like. Nice, and then in the chat, after two minutes of chatting: Do you have a dick pic?' Vincent (1980) connected this to the hook-up process, where people look for men who sexually appeal to them: 'So at that time, you're really searching very deliberately. And I'm sorry to say, but it's really a meat inspection.' To Bert (1976), the wide spread of nudes

has the advantage that they have become banal and lost their power to hurt: 'In a bullying situation your weapon should be able to hurt someone, right?'

*Millennials* were the first generation to grow up with internet access, and smartphones became available when they were between about 12 to 27. Most started dating online, which was often also how they first got in touch with sexting. Some (6 out of 24) did not sext, for instance, because they were in a monogamous relationship, but all were familiar with the practice. Jonas (1992): 'It's part of the game. When you install or open Grindr, you know that the first three messages will be dick pics.' Pjotr (1993) remarked that Grindr added a feature where you can indicate if you want to receive explicit pictures: 'I don't know if people respect that, but I think it's a funny feature to have in an app, because it says a lot about its use.' He also had some ethical concerns: 'Maybe that's what I think is less ethically correct, that this whole environment stimulates it as if it was the most logical thing in the world.'

Clearly, sending and receiving nudes has become a normalized part of the online dating process, which all Millennial participants had to negotiate. Most participants did sext, but they generally remained cautious, for instance by not sharing their face and genitals in the same picture, but also by getting to know the person better before sharing pictures or by asking for reciprocity during live webcam contacts. Nelson (1984): 'It's not that I was consciously thinking about cutting off my head from pictures. But I do know that during live cam, both had to be on camera or nothing happened. Or, in all digital contacts, I first talk to people, to know who they are.' Like several participants, Nelson talked about the creation of mutual trust on dating apps: 'We're all here and we all do it and we're careful.'

Hardly any Millennial participants had bad experiences with sexting, although some reported on people sharing pictures of others and pretending they were theirs. Many also discussed the learning and negotiation process involved in the use of dating sites and the expectation to share nudes. Matthijs (1994): 'In the beginning I really thought: that's to find

friends, and to look for a relationship. But if you don't send pictures, it just stops.' Like many others, Matthijs started to take sexting for granted: 'In the beginning I really took care, I was so worried that those pictures would be spread. But through the years I evolved to: why should I care if the pictures are leaked? It's just anatomy.' Despite being normalized, some participants did object to unsolicited dick pics, for instance Nick (1994) who sometimes felt 'raped online' when receiving dick pics on Instagram: 'Perhaps it's put strongly, but I actually think it's important to use that word because sometimes I would wake up with three different boys sending me unsolicited nudes.' Nick also addressed the pressure to respond, feeling guilty if he didn't: 'Because then you think: not responding equals rejection, or that you judge someone on their looks... You almost can't do that.' Emile (1994) called the culture on dating app Grindr, where unsolicited dick pics are widely shared, 'toxic': 'We have decided, as Grindr users, that we should think that's OK but actually it shows a certain degree of disrespect.' At the same time, the participants were generally very sex positive and did not have any objections to the sharing of nudes with mutual consent.

The *Generation Z* interviewees all grew up with full mobile online access. Even more so than for the Millennials, for them online dating was the norm and sexting was part and parcel of the dating experience. At the time of the interview, they were between 18 and 23 years old and quite a few were still exploring their sexual identity. As a consequence, not all were at ease with the heavily sexualized dating culture on apps like Grindr, which most did try out. Matthias (1997): 'I can accept Tinder but Grindr was really... next level, I wasn't comfortable with that.' Like the older generations, but at a younger age, they had to learn to deal with receiving and being asked for nudes. Steve (1998): 'I think I followed my own tempo rather well. You can easily block people. I mean, if someone asks you something you're not happy about, you just don't answer.' Like the older generations, but more quickly, they became aware of the risks. Dries (1997): 'You just have to realise that everything you send can end up on the internet and

always stay there. If that's a picture without a face, I don't mind that much, but if it's a picture with a face than that's bad.' Brent (1997) consciously assessed the risks: 'For, me, it depended whom I was chatting or sharing intimate things with. If I knew that person a bit, if I knew them personally, how I knew them, how long, those were all parameters.'

As for the older generations, but even more so, the sharing of sexual content was so normal for Generation Z participants that they didn't understand the celebrity sexting controversy. Brent (1997): 'Many act as if this was abnormal while many young people do it. I think it's the norm rather than the exception.' Sexting seems to be particularly accepted in gay culture, according to Joris (1997): 'Is it so bad that my natural body can be seen? That's so culturally determined, perhaps gay culture attaches less importance to that.' Burak (2000) also observed a generational dimension: 'As a child they always told you: you can't take pictures because they will jeopardize your career, but I think that will mostly hurt your career if the people at the top are of another generation. Now that's just your body, that's you. The perspective changed and people don't really think about that anymore I think.' Again, as with older generations, the main objections to sexting among the Generation Z participants concerned the heavily sexualized dating culture. For instance, Axel (1998) used to chat on Snapchat but was annoyed by people always asking for nudes: 'The longer I was on that platform, the more I was treated like an object and not as a person.' Rather than bad consequences, sexting lead to bad feelings for Axel, as it did for several other Generation Z interviewees, who often felt pressured to share nudes.

### **Discussion**

This mixed-method study explored the context and perceptions of sexting among non-heterosexual men of various generations. The results indicate that sexting is a normal form of digital sexual communication for a sizeable amount of non-heterosexual adult men across all generations. Overall, 66% of non-heterosexual men in our sample had sent a sext in the past



year. The prevalence rates ranged from 42.9% among the generation of Baby Boomers to 72.3% and 71.1% among Millennials and Generation Z, respectively. The prevalence rates for each generation of non-heterosexual men in our sample are higher than the 27% (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015) and 21% (Garcia et al., 2016) that were found in prior literature on sexting among the general adult population (which included both heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants). Unsurprisingly, the sexting prevalence is the highest among Millennials and Generation Z. Similar patterns were found in research among the general adult population in which engagement in sexting was also more frequent among younger generations than older generations (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015). The generational differences in prevalence may result from the fact that younger generations grew up with digital media, smartphone access, and online dating applications, and that individuals of younger generations may be more involved with online dating. Surprisingly, we found few generational differences with regard to our participants' perceptions of sexting in our qualitative interviews. Sexting seemed to be perceived as relatively unproblematic and normative by our respondents across generations, especially within the context of online dating. Most objections towards sexting focused on perceived pressure to engage in sexting within the dating app culture and instances of unsolicited sexting.

Our respondents, regardless of generation, most commonly engaged in sexting with online partners through dating apps or social media, as 56.5% of the images were sent with someone that the respondents had never met offline. This substantiates our qualitative findings in which our respondents stated that sexting is a normative and expected behavior on dating applications for non-heterosexual men. The findings are also in line with previous findings that exchanging sexts is common within dating apps for non-heterosexual men (Al-Ajlouni et al., 2019; Currin & Hubach, 2017; Wu & Trottier, 2021). While we are not aware of comparable statistics among heterosexual adults, the rates of sexting through dating applications and social

media are higher among our sample than among previous research among LGB youth, in which 23.5% had sent their last sexting image to someone through a dating application or social media (Van Ouytsel et al., 2021). Around 31.6% of non-heterosexual adults in our sample had engaged in sexting with a dating partner or within the context of a committed relationship. The results are somewhat different from prior research among predominantly heterosexual samples of young adults which established that the majority of sexting images are exchanged within the context of an established dating or romantic relationship (Brodie et al., 2019; Perkins et al., 2013).

A majority of respondents (83.9%) have sent sexually explicit images, in which they were unrecognizable. We also found in our interviews that the participants used safety precautions, as some indicated that they preferred to send pictures that do not include their head, that they only exchanged images after getting to know the person better, and that they demanded reciprocity when engaging in sexting or cybersex. The results of our study echo findings among sexual minority youth, in which sexual minority youth were found to be more likely to send anonymous images than their heterosexual peers (Van Ouytsel et al., 2021). The high prevalence of sending unrecognizable images may be explained by the fear of being identified and concerns surrounding stigma associated to engaging in online sexual behaviors that some non-heterosexual men may experience. Sending an unrecognizable sext may help non-heterosexual men to retain a sense of anonymity and safety with their online sexual and dating partners, similar to how some men choose to remain anonymous in their self-presentation on online dating profiles (Anderson et al., 2018; Wongsomboon et al., 2021; Wu & Trottier, 2021).

Despite the fact that most images were unrecognizable, the qualitative data show that non-heterosexual men of all generations generally do not frame the behavior from a deviance perspective, but see it as a normal part of modern-day dating behaviors. The participants in our qualitative interviews were remarkably sex positive. They acknowledged the potential risks of

sexting behaviors and took certain safety precautions, but they did not seem overly worried about the potential risks. These findings are in contrast with research among gay adolescent boys who report, next to some benefits for their well-being, difficulties coping with the social and legal repercussions of their engagement in sexting (Needham, 2021). For non-heterosexual adults sexting and its related risks, appear to be less of concern as they are no longer reliant on school and their parents, their sexual orientation is known by family and friends, and because they may have different emotional maturity to cope with sexting related issues. These findings highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of sexting among non-heterosexual individuals as the context and consequences may be very different across various phases within the life span and may be dependent on levels of outness and independence.

Our study opens up several questions for future research. First, future comparative studies among heterosexual and non-heterosexual samples are warranted, as they would allow us to accurately compare differences in prevalence rates and experiences between heterosexual and non-heterosexual individuals. For example, the motives for remaining unrecognizable and using safety precautions when sexting may be very different for heterosexual as opposed to non-heterosexual men. Second, while the respondents in our qualitative study had limited experiences with the risks associated with sexting, prior research found that non-heterosexual youth are often at the receiving end of image-based sexual abuse (Van Ouytsel et al., 2021). Future research should use a life-span perspective to investigate at which point sexting among non-heterosexual individuals becomes less associated with risk and the extent to which the susceptibility for sexting-related risks is influenced by external factors (such as ‘outness’, dependency on school and family, living situation). Given that for many older adults the benefits of engaging in sexting seem to outweigh the risks, future work could also focus on the positive outcomes of sexting for non-heterosexual adults, and how sexting may contribute to positive online experiences of identity, community and intimacy. Third, some of our

participants reported experiences with unsolicited sexting and perceived pressure to engage in sexting within contemporary dating culture. We were unable to capture the potential psychological effects of these pressures. Future work could more deeply investigate whether these risks may lead to harm for non-heterosexual men and the extent to which they are capable of coping with these stressors. As several of the respondents mentioned that soliciting and exchanging sexual images is normative on gay dating applications, it would be interesting to apply theoretical frameworks such as social learning theory (Akers & Jennings, 2009) or sexual scripting theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) to more deeply investigate how social processes and perceived social norms shape the behavioral expectations for sexting among male non-heterosexual dating app users.

Although our mixed-methods study addresses the lack of prior work on sexting behaviors among non-heterosexual men belonging to several generations, certain limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the results of our study. First, the sample recruitment was limited to a convenience sample of non-heterosexual men who self-selected for our study. Second, because of space restrictions in the quantitative survey, we only captured a limited range of demographic variables and sexting behaviors. We therefore could not assess the correlations with demographic characteristics. Future work should use more elaborate measures that capture a broader range of sexting behaviors, which would also allow us to identify whether the participants are experiencing sexting-related risks and pressures. Third, because of the cross-sectional nature of our study, we were unable to identify any causal relationships. Future longitudinal work should capture sexting behaviors over an extended period. Fourth, we conducted our study during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, during which lockdowns and social distancing measures made face-to-face interactions difficult. Although our respondents reported on experiences from both before as well as during the pandemic, it is possible that the pandemic and loss of offline social outlets may have affected our participants' engagement in

sexting and other digital forms of remote sex (Brennan et al., 2020). Finally, our study was limited to the experiences of non-heterosexual men in Belgium. Future work could use a cross-national perspective and should focus on the experiences of individuals of diverse genders.

### **Conclusion**

Our study found that sexting is relatively common among non-heterosexual adult men of all generations and that most regard the practice as unproblematic. Sexting appears to be a normative form of sexual communication within non-heterosexual men's dating and sexual relationships and most sexting occurs within an online dating context. It appears that the participants were aware of the potential risks associated with sexting and that the respondents protected themselves by sending images in which they were unrecognizable, thereby ensuring their safety and anonymity in online spaces.

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