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Unsolicited Sexting and Help-Seeking Behaviours among Australian Adults: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract: Sending unsolicited sexts is increasingly recognised as harmful and, in some countries, constitutes a criminal offence. Recipients of unwanted/unexpected sexts often report compromised mental health, yet it is currently unknown how people deal with these sexting experiences. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study explored help-seeking behaviours following the receipt of unwanted sexts and barriers to reaching out for support in Australia, where the law currently does not recognise unsolicited sexting as a criminal offence. In total, 883 participants, *Mean* = 22.52 years (*SD* = 3.09), were recruited comprising 539 (61.2%) women, 325 (36.9%) men, and 17 (1.9%) other/non-binary. Overall, women were more likely to receive unsolicited sexts (389, 81%) than men (66, 26.2%), and ≥97.7% of respondents across genders never sought support in response to these experiences. Template thematic analysis revealed the receipt of unwanted sexts was often regarded “too trivial” to seek support for, which was captured under the theme of *it’s just an image*. Regarding barriers to help-seeking, three themes were generated: *it’s an awkward experience to talk about, I did not realise it was a violation, I didn’t know where to go*. Young Australian adults often did not seek support due to feelings of awkwardness and shame associated with receiving unwanted sexts, a lack of understanding of the violating nature of these experiences and young age, and minimal knowledge of supports. This study illustrates that community attitudes and the legal framework in Australia towards unsolicited sexting need to change to recognise this sexting variant as harmful and illegal.



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1. Introduction

Innovations in digital technology have created new opportunities for communication but also the abuse of others. Sexting is a popular form of communication, defined as the sending, receiving, and forwarding of explicit sexual content through texts, images, or videos via digital media (Drouin et al. 2013). Voluntary and consensual sexting is considered a normative behaviour (Burkett 2015; Döring 2014) fulfilling a positive role in sexual and relationship development (Drouin et al. 2017; Strasburger et al. 2019; Valiukas et al. 2019). However, unwanted and non-consensual sexting is problematic. It encompasses (i) the acts of sending unsolicited images of one’s genital area, also termed ‘cyberflashing’ (McGlynn and Johnson 2021), and (ii) the receipt of unsolicited sexts, conceptualised as online sexual harassment due to its sexual, unwelcome, and unwanted nature (Powell et al. 2018; Henry et al. 2020). These problematic sexting behaviours constitute some examples of a broader phenomenon, technology-facilitated abuse (TFA), incorporating a range of harmful and abusive behaviours facilitated by online and digital technologies (Flynn et al. 2021).

The receipt of unwanted sexts has gained research attention due to its prevalence and potential psychological consequences for victims, with impacts ranging from increased levels of psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and stress to feelings of discomfort, disgust, and fear (Klettke et al. 2019; Mishna et al. 2023; Valiukas et al. 2019). Given the adverse mental health outcomes associated with the receipt of such content, it is important

to investigate how people deal with, and recover from, these situations. The understanding of peoples' behaviours following the receipt of non-consensual, unexpected, and often unwelcome sexual content can assist in tailoring support services towards the needs of persons who have experienced this form of online sexual victimisation.

1.1. Unsolicited Sexting and Legal Perspectives

An Australian study revealed that 58.8% of women and 34% of men have received an unwelcome sext at least once in their lifetime (Howard et al. 2020). The fact that women are significantly more likely to receive unwanted nudes is consistent with the gendered nature of in-person sexual harassment and assault, whereby women are more likely to be victims, and men to be perpetrators of sexual violence (Bondestam and Lundqvist 2020; Sivertsen et al. 2019). A recent study by Hunehall Berndtsson (2022) conducted among Swedish adolescents revealed that unsolicited sexting is common, with girls being perceived as more vulnerable to this practice than boys. Yet, the receipt of unwanted "dick pics" and "female nudes" is also prevalent among boys, with many feeling ashamed to talk about these experiences, confused about how to respond, and unable to identify that these behaviours constitute acts of online sexual harassment (Hunehall Berndtsson 2022). Further, Klettke et al. (2019) found that receiving unsolicited sexts was associated with adverse mental health consequences for both women and men, with negative impacts being more pronounced among men compared to women, thereby challenging the predominant female-victim narrative (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2016).

While sexting is prevalent across countries and genders, the practical consequences that arise from this behaviour differ. That is, while sexting is a criminal offence in some nations, it is not in others. In the United States, for example, Texas criminalised sending unsolicited nude images to a recipient who has not provided consent, with a fine up to \$500 for this misdemeanour (Evans et al. 2022). In Singapore, "cyberflashing" constitutes a criminal offence, which can incur a fine and a jail sentence of up to one year (Penal Code 1871, Section 377BF, Singapore). In Scotland, unwanted receipt of digital sexual communication can be prosecuted under the provision of "coercing someone into looking at a sexual image", which may incur a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison (Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act (2009)). Recently, the United Kingdom introduced new offences criminalising cyberflashing, with perpetrators facing up to two years in prison (Gov.uk 2024). While the impact of these legal changes on help-seeking behaviours and well-being of victims are yet to be observed, they constitute an important step in regulating harmful online sexual behaviours and providing a legal basis for those affected to have their experiences acknowledged and remedied.

While receiving unwanted nudes can be upsetting, in Australia this behaviour is poorly regulated and can entail legal repercussions only in certain contexts. For instance, people who send sexual images of a person under the age of 18 years may incur criminal charges (eSafety Commissioner 2024c). It is also illegal to share or make threats to share a nude image or video without the consent of the person's depicted in such material (eSafety Commissioner 2024a). For people above the age of 18 years, sending one's own unsolicited nude photos to peers currently does not result in a criminal charge (Henry et al. 2020). Instead, there might be civil remedies. For instance, in some workplaces, sending an unsolicited nude image to a colleague could constitute a breach of a code of conduct, potentially resulting in the termination of employment (Williams 2022). In other cases, the eSafety Commissioner (2024b) recommends confronting the person who sent an unsolicited image about their behaviour, blocking them from contacting, or reporting their action to the provider through which the image was sent.

As per the discussion above, to date, only a limited number of countries have introduced laws criminalising sending of unsolicited sexts between adults. Currently, the Australian legal system does not recognise this variant of sexting as illegal, thereby limiting victims' options for redress and potentially curbing their willingness to seek support in response to such incidents. Given the complexity of the Australian context, it is vital to

find other ways to support individuals who receive non-consensual and unwanted sexts, especially as they cannot rely on the criminal justice system.

1.2. Why Is Help-Seeking Important?

Help-seeking can be defined as an adaptive form of coping whereby support is actively sought from other people (Rickwood and Thomas 2012). Support can take two forms: (1) expressive support, demonstrated by receiving reassurance and validation from friends, family, and broader social networks; or (2) instrumental support, entailing receipt of goods, money, information, and advice to address a problem and achieve a certain goal (Lin 1986). Support can be delivered via informal networks, where individuals in a helping position do not hold any official status in relation to the person they are assisting, or through formal agencies, such as police or government institutions (Cullen 1994). Informal networks, like family and friends, can also encourage a person to utilise formal support systems such as social support services or legal aid (Burnes et al. 2019), with professional interventions, like therapy, being associated with amelioration of emotional distress following exposure to various stressors (Keynejad et al. 2020).

In the context of unwanted receipt of sexts, seeking help could involve informal expressive support from friends, or more formalised instrumental support from public institutions such as the e-Safety Commissioner (in Australia) or police. Several non-government organisations, such as ReachOut (2022) or Lifeline (n.d.), also offer formal support to victim-survivors of (online) sexual harassment by providing information and confidential counselling. However, little has been done to explore what help-seeking may look like in response to the receipt of unwanted sexts and what may prevent a person from reaching out for support. To our knowledge, only one study in Australia explored responses to unwanted receipt of sexts. Klettke et al. (2019) found that 69% of young people aged 18–21 years who received unwanted sext ignored it/took no action, 38% told the sender not to do it, while 25% told a friend about the incident. As unsolicited sexting experiences have been linked to compromised mental health (Mishna et al. 2023; Valiukas et al. 2019), it is important to investigate why the recipients of this content often take no action.

1.3. Research Gaps and the Present Study

While most study participants indicated that they did not respond to unsolicited sexts (Klettke et al. 2019), it is currently unknown who is more likely to ignore these and what the reasons behind this inaction might be. For instance, women have been found to be the more likely targets of unsolicited sexting (Howard et al. 2020; Klettke et al. 2019), but we have yet to explore whether any gendered patterns to help-seeking behaviours exist. Further, research in the context of in-person sexual assault indicates that some barriers to support-seeking encompass perceptions of victimisation as trivial or not sufficiently serious (Walsh and Bruce 2014). Yet, it is currently unknown what personal or structural barriers may account for one's reluctance to seek support following online sexual victimisation among Australian adults.

To address these gaps, this study aimed to answer the following research questions. (1) To what degree do people who receive unwanted sexts engage in help-seeking behaviours and does this differ across genders? and (2) what are the potential barriers to help-seeking for victims of unwanted sext receiving?

2. Methods

Participants

Participant eligibility for this study was restricted to young adults aged 18–30 years old, as this demographic group engages in sexting most frequently and consequently is more likely to have experienced non-consensual sexting (Powell and Henry 2019; Mori et al. 2020). Further, participation was limited to Australian residents for consistency in cultural influences and legal frameworks surrounding sexting behaviours, as these vary across different countries (Clancy et al. 2021; Evans et al. 2022). In total, 883 participants

aged between 18 and 30 years ($M = 22.52$, $SD = 3.09$) were recruited, including 539 (61.2%) women, 325 (36.9%) men, 17 (1.9%) other/non-binary, and two who did not disclose their gender. In total, 534 participants (60.7%) identified as Australian (non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander), followed by 146 (14.4%) Asian, 110 (12.5%) British or European, with the remaining 90 (12.4%) respondents identifying as a range of ethnic backgrounds, and 3 participants not disclosing that information. A total of 638 (72.5%) participants were heterosexual, followed by 164 (18.6%) bisexual, 34 (3.9%) lesbian/gay, and 27 (3.1%) uncertain. Seventeen participants (1.9%) selected a range of options from “uncertain” about their sexual orientation to “preferring not to answer” this question, while 3 participants did not indicate any of the response options. A total of 437 (49.9%) were in a committed relationship, 369 were single (42.1%), 64 (7.3%) were in a casual relationship, 6 (0.7%) preferred not to say, and 7 participants did not disclose that information.

3. Materials

3.1. Sexting Behaviours

Sexting was described to the participants as “sexually explicit images [sent/received] via text messages or mobile apps” in line with prior research on sexting behaviours (Clancy et al. 2019, 2020). Participants were asked whether they “have ever sent an image-based sext of yourself” or “have you ever received an image-based sext sent via text message or mobile app” and scored on a dichotomous *yes* = 1 versus *no* = 0 scale. Participants were then asked about whether “they have ever received an image-based sext that was unwanted/unwelcome”, with response options being *yes* = 1 versus *no* = 0. These questions, adapted from prior surveys, have established construct and face validity, positively correlating with other theoretically relevant constructs such as sexual activity status or sexual risk-taking (Howard et al. 2020, 2021).

3.2. Help-Seeking Behaviours

Questions pertaining to help-seeking behaviours following experiences of receiving unwanted/unwelcome sexts were developed by the research team for the purpose of the study. Participants who reported *ever* receiving unwanted/unwelcome sexts ($n = 466$) were asked an additional question: “Did you seek support or help in relation to this experience?” recorded dichotomously on a *yes* = 1 versus *no* = 0 scale. Participants who indicated that they had not sought help were asked a follow-up open-ended question about the reasons as to why support was not sought: “Please outline why you did not seek support or help in relation to this experience”.

3.3. Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from Deakin University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, reference 2018-168. Participants were recruited via a convenience sampling method, with promotional posters advertised broadly on social media profiles such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook (Australian university groups), between June and July 2021. Prolific (an online recruitment platform) was also used to recruit more male participants as previous research on sexting behaviours suggested that survey responders are more likely to be women, frequently with a ratio of 70% women to 30% men (Howard et al. 2021; Klettke et al. 2019). Only Prolific participants received an incentive for participation (£2 token payment for completing the survey). Individuals interested in participating were required to click on the link to the study, which opened with a Plain Language Statement outlining research objectives, method, and opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point of the survey. After providing consent, respondents were redirected to the online questionnaire which took approximately 15 min to complete.

3.4. Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses

To address the first research question investigating gender differences in help-seeking behaviours following the receipt of unwanted sexts, we used univariate descriptive and

inferential analyses. We first tabulated responses to receiving unwanted sexts (as well as sending and receiving sexts) and support-seeking across men, women, and non-binary respondents. Then, we conducted a chi-square analysis on help-seeking behaviours across gender categories. This inferential analysis tested the null hypothesis of no differences in help-seeking behaviours following unwanted receipt of sexts across genders (men, women, non-binary).

To address our second research question exploring the barriers to help-seeking for victims of unwanted sext receiving, we adopted a qualitative methodology. The qualitative analyses were conducted on a sub-sample of the entire dataset, which consisted of participants who received an unwanted sext, did not seek help in response to these experiences, and provided a written response to the open-ended question inquiring into the reasons for why they did not seek support ($N = 389$; 56 (14.4%) men, 324 (83.5%) women, and 8 (2.1%) non-binary). For full demographic details of this sub-sample, please see Appendix A.

For our qualitative analyses, we utilised the epistemological position of contextualism, which stipulates that knowledge of reality is dependent on the social context from which the data are obtained (Braun and Clarke 2013). This aligns with the current study, as data were gathered from the participants residing in Australia to understand how help-seeking behaviour looks within this unique social context. As such, generated knowledge can only be understood in the context of Australia (the Australian culture, legal system, and accessible or local sources of support available to participants). We also adopted a descriptive theoretical framework to analyse and interpret the qualitative data. Descriptive frameworks aim to stay close to the surface of the data and the reality conveyed through the words of the study participants (Sandelowski 2000). This approach is therefore considered appropriate for descriptions of largely unresearched phenomena and analyses of shallow data gathered via open-ended qualitative questions (Evans et al. 2021; Sandelowski 2000). Shallow data are data where written responses are short but meaningful, which in our study ranged from 1 to 52 words ($M = 9.56$, $SD = 7.44$). Finally, we did not have a pre-determined sample size for the qualitative size. However, we did utilise the concept of informational power, which stipulates a larger number of responses is required when the research question is not theoretically driven, and the participant responses are not in-depth (Malterud et al. 2015). Additionally, Braun et al. (2021) observed that for online surveys, over 200 participants are sufficient to obtain informational power.

Template thematic analysis was employed as a method to analyse and interpret the data, as it enables the generation of common 'categories' or themes across the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2006). This method was deemed suitable as our second research question focused on exploring the common reasons as to why individuals did not seek help following unwanted receipt of sexts. We also adopted an inductive (data-driven) approach to coding as we were not guided by any pre-existing theoretical framework pertaining to help-seeking behaviours when developing and generating our codes and themes. The analysis was based on the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In step 1, the authors (DH and SR) familiarised themselves with the data and, in step 2, generated an open coding scheme to capture all the answers provided by the participants. Data were coded in Microsoft Excel, with 95% agreement on how participant responses should be coded and any discrepancies were settled through discussions between coders. In step 3, higher order codes and patterns were identified to create themes. These steps were engaged in iteratively, as re-reading the data can reveal multiple interpretations. A final review of overarching themes in step 4 revealed similarities pertaining to help-seeking barriers among participants who experienced unwanted receipt of sexts. These themes were collapsed into higher-order themes and subthemes were identified underneath them—some themes were similar, with others revealing characteristic differences across sexting experiences. Definitions and the names of themes and subthemes were generated in step 5 before reporting the results in step 6.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Descriptives and Quantitative Analyses

Sending and receiving sexts was common among all eligible participants ($N = 883$). In total, 570 participants (70.8%) sent an image-based sext of themselves, 747 (84.6%) received such content, and 466 (62.3%) received an image-based sext that was unwanted or unwelcome. For the breakdown across genders, see Table 1 below.

Table 1. Frequency of sexting behaviours and help-seeking across the full sample.

Variable	Men		Women		Non-Binary	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Sent sext	188 (62)	115 (38)	371 (76.5)	114 (23.5)	10 (66.7)	5 (33.3)
Received sext	252 (77.8)	72 (22.2)	480 (89.2)	58 (10.8)	15 (88.2)	2 (11.8)
Received unwanted	66 (26.2)	186 (73.8)	389 (81)	91 (19)	10 (66.7)	5 (33.3)
Sought help	1 (1.5)	64 (98.5)	8 (2.1)	373 (97.9)	0 (0)	10 (100)

To address the first research question (to what degree do people who receive unwanted sexts engage in help-seeking behaviours and does this differ across genders?), we examined frequencies of help-seeking across gender. As indicated in Table 1, 98.5% of men, 97.9% of women and 100% of non-binary individuals did not seek support in relation to their experiences. In total, only nine individuals, with the greater majority being women, reached out for support. Chi-square analysis revealed no differences in help-seeking patterns across genders $\chi^2 = 0.296$, $p = 0.862$. Overall, these results contrast with prior research by Klettke et al. (2019), whereby 25% of the sample told their friends about their experience. This may be because the sample in Klettke's research was younger (18–21 years) and individuals felt more comfortable debriefing about these incidents with their peers. In the current study, the participant age range was broader (18–30 years), potentially making some respondents feel better-equipped to deal with these incidents on their own due to greater life experience. Alternatively, participants experienced specific barriers, unique to their circumstances, that prevented them from reaching out for support. These are explored below.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis

To address the second research question (what are the potential barriers to help-seeking for victims of unwanted sext receiving?), a qualitative approach was utilised. We analysed responses to the question "Please outline why you did not seek support or help in relation to this experience" and generated the following four themes: (1) *it's "just" an image*, (2) *it's an awkward experience to talk about*, (3) *I did not realise it was a violation*, and (4) *I didn't know where to go*. The themes are discussed in detail below, followed by a summary Table 2 outlining common responses and the number of participants who provided these responses. Respondents were quoted verbatim and small grammatical amendments were applied (indicated in square brackets), if needed, to improve readability. This is a common process in qualitative analysis referred to as 'cleaning the data' (Braun and Clarke 2013). Given the size of the sample, pseudonyms were not used. Instead, quotes were followed with a bracketed code consisting of the letter "P" for participant, a unique participant number, and an "F", "M", "NB" for female, male, and non-binary respondents, respectively.

Table 2. Summary of the themes and common responses to the receipt of unsolicited sexts.

Theme	Responses	Count (<i>n</i>)			
		Total	M	W	NB/ND
It's just an image	Ignored it	36	8	27	1
	Moved on	17	3	14	-
	Had no (emotional) impact	96	24	69	2/1
	It's just an image/not a big deal/not necessary to seek support for	105	15	86	3/1
	Common experience/used to it	47	2	44	1
It's an awkward experience to talk about	Negative emotions (embarrassment, stigma, fear of judgement)	40	5	34	1
	Not being taken seriously/nobody would care	13	1	12	-
I did not realise it was a violation	Young	8	-	8	-
	Unaware the receipt of unwanted sexts was a violation	12	-	12	-
I didn't know where to go	Unaware of support options—where to go and who to talk to	32	1	31	-
	Not much can be done about the incident/it is too much hassle	22	1	21	-
	The receipt of unsolicited sexts was a one-off, would warrant help-seeking if it was a recurrent issue	6	2	4	-

Notes: M = male respondent, F = female respondent, NB = non-binary respondent, ND = gender not disclosed, and *n*—number of respondents.

4.3. “It’s Just an Image”

This theme represents participants’ experiences of unwanted receipt of sexts as trivial, non-consequential, and even humorous at times. While this theme does not capture actual “barriers” to help-seeking, it reflects respondents’ perceptions of this form of image-based abuse as not impactful, common, and normalised. Many study participants reported that after receiving unsolicited sexts, they “just ignored it” (P166F, P176F, 267F; P33M) and “moved on” (P1M, P11M), which aligns with prior quantitative research from Australia whereby 69% of respondents ignored the receipt of unwanted sexts (Klettke et al. 2019).

In the current study, both male and female respondents indicated that they did not seek any support in response to unwanted/unwelcome image-based sexting because these occurrences were considered non-significant. Several male, non-binary, and female participants observed that obtaining these images did not exert any emotional impact on them. Specifically, respondents said these experiences “didn’t affect” (P20M, P463NB, P468NB) or “bother [them]” (P153F, P256F) “personally or in a bad way” (P309F), or that they “didn’t care that much [...] and were not threatened by them” (P17M, P45M). As such, they “shrugged it off” (P74M), and “moved on” (P256F).

When looking at possible gender differences in this theme, it appeared that men were more likely to share responses whereby they minimised the experience, often suggesting “it is just an image” (P2M) or “it’s a dick, [so] get over it” (P9M), while women often commented support “was not needed” (P109F, P232F) or “necessary” (P93F, P128F, 203F). Women were more likely to find the receipt of unwanted/unwelcome image-based sexts as “humorous at the time” (P147F) and “funny” (P127F, P240F, P313F). Female respondents also observed that the receipt of unsolicited sexts is “too common” (P225F, P238F, P255F) and constitutes “just something that happens” (P84F) “to women” (P137F). As such, many women have become “used to it” (P111F, P164F, P194F, P417F, P437F) and accepted these experiences as a part of their everyday experiences, whereby at times “it was easier to just not reply and move on” (P257F). Female participants also thought “it was pretty normal to receive unwanted images” (P206F) and “those kinds of messages/videos” (P265F). One participant noted these occurrences have become “now an embedded societal norm” (P86F). As “it happens so often” (P393F) “to a lot of girls” (P378F), and “to a lot of people [...], it did not feel necessary to seek support” (P145F) as “it no longer felt like a big deal”

(P259F). The concerning aspect of this finding is that a vast proportion of study participants, particularly women, accepted unsolicited receipt of sexts as a norm. This attitude may not be conducive to initiating a societal change, whereby the perpetrators of non-consensual sexual behaviours are called out to account for their actions. It is also possible that the frequency and the extent to which participants receive unwanted sexts lead to feelings of resignation among victims, or the need to dismiss the potential impacts of these occurrences on their well-being.

The fact that the receipt of sexts is perceived as common by our research respondents—both women and men—aligns with the findings of a meta-analytic review, whereby two in five emerging adults reported receiving sexual texts, images, or videos via electronic devices (Mori et al. 2020). Although Mori et al. (2020) did not discern between received sexts that were expected versus unsolicited, they did report that rates of receiving sexts were higher in samples with a greater proportion of males, illustrating that sexting is deeply embedded into societal norms. Regarding unsolicited sexting more specifically, research has shown that women tend to receive unwanted sexts significantly more often compared to men (between three to four times more) (Howard et al. 2020; Klettke et al. 2019). This trend was also observed in the current study, whereby 389 women versus 66 men received unwanted sexts. These findings may suggest that women are indeed a common target of online sexual harassment, or that young men may fail to self-identify as victims of this form of abuse (Hunehäll Berndtsson 2022).

4.4. *“It’s an Awkward Experience to Talk About”*

This theme encapsulates participants’ negative emotions following the receipt of unwanted or unwelcome image-based sexts, which often served as an emotional barrier to help-seeking behaviours, predominantly among female participants. These emotions were negatively valenced, entailing embarrassment and discomfort associated with having to tell someone about the experience, fear of judgement, and not being taken seriously by others. Specifically, female respondents often described the receipt of unwanted sexts as “annoying/gross” (P82F), “uncomfortable” (P421F, P232F), “embarrassing” (P379F, P387F), and often identified this “embarrassment for having to admit to having those pictures sent to me” (P178F) as a barrier to telling others about it. One woman noted that “ignoring the message seemed easier and less embarrassing” (P421F), while others reported that they “felt awkward and uncomfortable telling someone” (P184F). Men also raised feelings of “embarrassment” (P62M) and “stigma” (P59M) as barriers to help-seeking. However, negative emotions were expressed more frequently by women. The latter also felt “scared” (P181F) and “afraid of how people would respond” (P445F) and noted that “fear of judgement” (P294F) prevented them from reaching out for support. One woman said that “upon receiving it [unwanted sext], it was definitely gross, and I didn’t seek out to anyone because of the stigma it holds” (P330F), while another noted she did not discuss her experience because she was “young and afraid of getting in trouble or judged” (P367F).

The current study so far has illustrated that some participants perceived the receipt of unwanted sexts as trivial and as of no consequence to their well-being (see “it’s just an image” theme). These observations were shared by men and women in the current study. At the same time, many respondents revealed that receiving unwanted sexts can be a deeply upsetting experience (“it’s an awkward experience to talk about” theme). Interestingly, the distressing nature of receiving unwanted sexts was predominantly raised by women in this study, suggesting the latter may be particularly prone to the negative impacts of unsolicited sexting.

One of the explanations for why women in this study might have found the unwanted sexting experiences particularly distressing are sexual double standards, whereby different social norms for sexual behaviours apply to women and men (Endendijk et al. 2020). Such double standards are typically rooted in cultural attributes of hegemonic masculinity (Smith et al. 2015) and reflect broader heteronormative, hierarchical, and sexist attitudes and norms (Grave et al. 2020). For instance, frequent sexual activity, engagement in casual sex, and

early sexual debut is typically expected and more positively appraised in men than women (Endendijk et al. 2020). At the same time, moral scrutiny and gendered judgements of women's sexual behaviours are evidenced in the online world and sexting (Salter 2016). Research has found that girls who sent sexts were perceived as "sluts" (Lippman and Campbell 2014). Further, women and girls, relative to men and boys, were more likely to be criticised and blamed for their sexting experiences, even if their 'engagement' was non-consensual, passive and entailed receipt of sexts as opposed to active sending of such material (Krieger 2017; Salter 2016).

Such criticism reflects victim-blaming attitudes whereby women are judged for their online and offline sexual experiences when it is the actions of the perpetrator or the abuser that should invite widespread criticism. In the current study, the negative emotions associated with the unwanted receipt of sexting and the prospect of reaching out for support may stem from sexual double standards and the internalisation of societal attitudes blaming girls and women for their sexual experiences. Sexual double standards could be responsible for feelings of embarrassment around being sexualised in this way. Similarly, guilt could be attributed to a felt sense, however unfounded, that the woman's actions had in some way established a level of assumed consent or willingness to accept these images, and that thereby she was responsible for the sender's behaviour, hence the articulated concerns around fears of being judged, stigmatised or other negative consequences. These attitudes prove dangerous as they may constitute a roadblock to reaching out for support among female victims who experienced online sexual victimisation.

In addition to fear of judgement by others and stigma, "not being taken seriously" (P269F) constituted another barrier to help-seeking behaviours following the receipt of unwanted sexts that was predominantly expressed by female respondents. One woman described a situation whereby she confided in her friends about the experience, but they subsequently dismissed it as a joke: "It felt embarrassing to tell anyone other than my friends about it, but they just laughed like it's a joke" (P275F). Another respondent noted that she dealt with the situation herself by "blocking the people straight away any time it happens. It's not taken seriously otherwise." (P234F). One woman said that she "did not feel my feelings would be valid and, if anything, I should be 'proud' I'm getting sent unsolicited genital pics" (P438F), suggesting that her concerns and reaching out for help would most likely be dismissed. Several female respondents reported that they would not seek support for the unwanted receipt of sexts because they "did not feel that [they] would get a sincere and supportive reaction out of anyone" (P250F), they "wouldn't be believed" (P41F), "taken seriously" (P269F, 303F, 336F), and that "nobody would care" (P291F). Interestingly, only one man noted that "if he raised this [the receipt of unwanted sexts] as a major drama, he did not think he would be believed" (P41M).

Overall, the concerns expressed by the study respondents are like those raised by female victims of in-person sexual assault, who often did not report their experiences to the authorities or people close to them due to fear of judgement, victim-blaming attitudes, and not being believed (Spencer et al. 2017). The current study illustrates that the experiences of victims of online sexual abuse mirror those of people who survived an in-person sexual assault. As such, sending of sexts to recipients without obtaining their prior consent should be recognised as intrusive and harmful. Changes to the Australian legal framework recognising sending of unsolicited sexts as a criminal offence could constitute the first step towards this acknowledgement. Regulation of this variant of sexting could also initiate a broader shift in social attitudes towards non-consensual sexting, legitimising victims' experiences and potentially encouraging the latter to reach out for support without fear of judgement and stigma.

4.5. "I Did Not Realise It Was a Violation"

This theme encompasses two barriers to help-seeking behaviours solely expressed by female participants: being young and not realising that the receipt of unwanted sexts constituted a problematic experience. A few women noted that they experienced the receipt

of unwanted/unwelcome sexts when they were “young” (P177F, P192F, P367F) and “unable to recognise how wrong the incident was” (P338F). One participant observed that she “was quite young when it happened, 15. I was just disgusted and embarrassed. Later on, I laughed it off to cope but now I am disgusted it ever happened” (P337F), while another one said, “I was 14 at the time and didn’t know what he did was wrong even though it did make me uncomfortable” (P299F). Some women specifically mentioned they often did not have an awareness that the receipt of unwanted sexts was problematic, that they “didn’t realise that it was a violation” (P108F) and were “never told that it was a bad thing until recently” (P136F). One woman also said that when she received an unwelcome/unwanted sext, she was “young, unaware of where to go, [and] didn’t have a relationship with parents that would be open to the conversation.” The fact that some participants were not able to recognise their experiences as abusive is congruent with the prior literature, whereby recipients of unwanted nudes reported shock and discomfort, but were not able to categorise these incidents as acts of sexual harassment (Bonilla et al. 2021; Salter 2016).

Respondents’ reflections suggest that for women, especially when they were young teenagers, a lack of knowledge and understanding of problematic sexting behaviours constituted a barrier to help-seeking. A safe relationship with the primary caregivers in teens’ lives and adequate, respectful relationship education in adolescence may potentially facilitate help-seeking among young persons. Research conducted among teenagers revealed that the latter often refrained from discussing their upsetting sexting experiences with adults (teachers, parents, authorities) due to the fear of consequences, including managing their parents’ negative emotions in response to sexting incidents, intrusive monitoring of technology use, and blaming the young persons for what occurred (Hunehäll Berndtsson 2022). This constitutes a missed opportunity for adults to educate their children and teenagers about the nature of consensual and non-consensual online sexual interactions. It also illustrates the need for parents, caregivers, and teachers to respond appropriately to younger persons’ disclosures by offering support to navigate relationships rather than imposing punishment, judgment, or criticism.

4.6. “I Didn’t Know Where to Go”

This theme identified the lack of knowledge about potential supports, feeling at a loss as to how to proceed following the receipt of unwanted sexts, and low confidence in the effectiveness of help-seeking efforts, expressed predominantly by women. Female respondents often mentioned they “didn’t know who to go” (P275F, P350F), “where to go” (P174F, P419F), “where to find support” (P139F, P442F), or “who would actually help” (P227F, P419F). Only one man observed he “didn’t know where to go” (P13M). Women also were of the opinion “there is no help” (P298F), “no services available to receive help from” (P340F), or that they were not aware they “could do anything” (P272F). Some also reflected being at a loss as to how to ask for help, with one woman saying she did not reach out for help as “she did not know how” (P303F), was “unsure of how to handle the situation” (P411F), and what “[they were] supposed to do” (P275F).

Low confidence in the effectiveness of potential supports was also commonly expressed. One woman doubted “whether anything could realistically be done” (P139F) about the situation, whereas others were convinced that “nothing could be done” (P104F, P133F, P314F), and hence “it felt pointless” (P73M) or they “didn’t see the point” (P285F, P322F) in seeking support. Specifically, one participant elaborated that “there’s no point in reporting everyone who does it [as] it’s a waste of time because there’d be way too many people to charge” (P384F) and “because no one can do nothing about unwanted sexual images from men” (P347F). Further, many observed that reporting such behaviours would be “too much hassle” (P133F; P283F), “too much effort and don’t think it would achieve anything” (P161F), and “because it’s not worth it, [as] no one will actually do anything” (P213F). Interestingly, some participants mentioned that they did not seek support because the receipt of unwanted sexts was a single event (P449F, P49M) that “only happened the one time” (P453F). However, these participants observed that “had it become a recurring

thing” (P143F) and “if the messages or images were continually being sent from different accounts or numbers after blocking” (P82F), they would seek support.

The feelings surrounding the lack of available support are understandable, given Australia does not have any specific legislation regulating unwanted receipt of sexts and victims are advised to confront their perpetrators telling them “you are not cool with it” (eSafety Commissioner 2024b). Further, participants’ reflections suggest that most women, and to some degree men as well, would potentially reach out to others, if they had known how to proceed in such situations and to whom they could safely confide in. In the absence of instrumental supports, raising awareness among people residing in Australia that unsolicited sexting is harmful and, for some, a deeply uncomfortable situation could lead to an attitude change towards unsolicited sexting. As part of raising this awareness, efforts should be made to educate the public on how to respond to such disclosures in a sensitive and helpful manner. These approaches could potentially result in victims being more inclined to reach out to their family and friends to obtain expressive support (Lin 1986) in the form of validation and empathy, which could alleviate the distress associated with harmful sexting experiences.

5. Implications

The aim of the current study was to explore the patterns of help-seeking and barriers to reaching out for support among young Australians aged 18 to 30 years who received an unwanted image-based sext. Using a mixed methods approach, we sought to answer the following research questions: (1) To what degree do people who receive unwanted sexts engage in help-seeking behaviours and does this differ across genders? and (2) what are the potential barriers to help-seeking for victims of unwanted sext receiving? The overall quantitative findings of the current study revealed that the receipt of unwanted sexts was common and that women were the predominant victims of this form of online sexual harassment. The study revealed that victims rarely sought support, potentially due to a lack of understanding of sexting behaviours as nuanced, i.e., appropriate when consensual and problematic when non-consensual. The qualitative inquiry revealed that many respondents who received unsolicited sexts failed to identify these instances as sexual harassment and dismissed the perceived severity of their experiences.

As a response to the current findings that reveal embarrassment, discomfort and fear, social campaigns should challenge current norms around sexting as ‘not a big deal’ and educate the wider society that sending unwanted nudes can negatively affect the recipients of such content. This could be achieved through education among adolescents and emerging adults in schools and higher education, vocational, and work settings through tailored learning modules on online sexual behaviours and broader social campaigns. A shift in attitudes towards non-consensual sexting experiences, like the receipt of unwanted sexts, may legitimise the experiences of victims, making the latter feel less afraid and awkward to talk about their experiences with friends or family.

Additionally, parents, educators, and other professionals caring for or working with adolescents should recognise that in some instances, sexting is developmentally appropriate (Bianchi et al. 2021), while in others, it is abusive and harmful. Adults should hold open conversations about sexting with young people, refraining from judgement and punitive attitudes around sexting practices as they constituted barriers to help-seeking behaviours among our respondents. Instead, young persons should be educated about the different variants of sexting and encouraged to reach out to a trusted adult when they have questions, experience difficulties navigating sexting, or when something simply ‘does not feel right’.

Finally, the receipt of unwanted sexts is increasingly recognised as a crime in several nations, violating the victims’ autonomy and negatively impacting their mental health. As such, the Australian legal framework should introduce the unsolicited sending of sexts among adults as a criminal offence, thereby protecting the victims from the potential harms associated with this experience. This step could provide victims with opportunities to seek formal support and make them feel less afraid and embarrassed to talk about their

experiences with others. Additionally, available resources for these victims should be targeted and easier to engage with as this study revealed a high number of respondents were unaware of the support options they may access.

6. Limitations

Our study presents important findings, yet some limitations should be noted. Although age is unlikely to have affected the study since all participants were young adults, a purposive sample could have been used to include a greater representation of minority groups. While we had a good representation of diversity in sexual preference, purposive sampling could be used to target members of the transgender and gender diverse communities, Indigenous Australians and non-English speakers, all of whom tend to be more frequent targets of image-based abuse (Henry et al. 2019). Further, this study explored barriers to help-seeking behaviours following unsolicited sexting without exploring the context of these experiences. For instance, the relationship between the sender and the recipient (stranger versus romantic partner) and the frequency of these messages might have influenced help-seeking behaviours. Specifically, more frequent messaging from a stranger could have been more terrifying or annoying for the recipient, relative to those sent by a current partner, and potentially entice more action on the part of the recipient. Unsolicited sexting used to coerce one's partner into reciprocating with sexting or in-person sexual activities may be more difficult to report due to fear of repercussions from the partner or fear of losing a relationship. As such, future research should explore the patterns of help-seeking behaviours in relation to these factors and further investigate the mental health outcomes among those who did and did not reach out for support.

7. Conclusions

The current study illustrated that 466 (62.3%) of study respondents received at least one unwanted or unwelcome image-based sext, with women being more than three times as likely to be the recipients of these. The vast majority, i.e., over 97% of the respondents, did not seek support in response to these experiences. The reasons encompassing this lack of action included dismissive and often minimising attitudes towards this harmful sexting behaviour, but also the embarrassing nature of the experience, the lack of understanding of the violating nature of this experience, and the lack of knowledge of how to proceed in such instances and where to seek support from. A shift in norms around non-consensual sexting is needed to recognise that unsolicited sexting constitutes an act of online sexual harassment that may negatively impact some of the recipients of such content. The current study also illustrates that for Australia, it may be timely to follow the example of other countries and criminalise this type of behaviour. This step would help to recognise and validate the experiences of the victims and potentially encourage support-seeking, both expressive and instrumental.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Demographic details of participants included in the qualitative study.

Variable	Count	Statistic
Age	389	$M = 21.83$, $SD = 2.84$, Range 18–30 years
Gender		
Men	56	14.4%
Woman	324	83.8%
Non-binary	8	2.1%
Ethnicity		
Australian	278	71.8%
British/European	39	10.1%
Asian	33	8.5%
Other ethnic groups	41	9.6%
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	241	62.3%
Bisexual	106	27.4%
Lesbian/gay	19	4.9%
Uncertain	13	3.4%
Other	8	2.1%
Relationship status		53.2%
In a committed relationship	206	53.2%
Single	143	37%
In a casual relationship	34	8.8%
Preferred not to say	4	1%

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