

# LEAKED

Understanding and Addressing Self-Generated Sexual Content Involving Young People in Thailand

Insight  
Paper

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## Digital Intimacies and the Complex Motivations of Young People in Northern Thailand



Leaked is a rare opportunity to ground child digital safety policy in the lived experiences of young people in the Global South. Drawing on a survey of 1,916 young people aged 9–17 in Northern Thailand, alongside qualitative consultations, the data provides critical insight into how young people understand relationships, trust, and risk in the digital environments they inhabit.



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**Digital Intimacies  
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This paper approaches self-generated sexual content not as a singular risk or moral panic, but as a set of practices that emerge within complex social, emotional, cultural, and technological conditions. Rather than asking why young people “take risks,” it asks what social purposes these practices serve within the environments young people are navigating. Understanding why young people produce and share sexual content is central to developing responses that are proportionate, context-sensitive, and grounded in young people’s lived realities.

By focusing on motivation, this paper moves beyond notions of “risky behaviour” and instead examines the social strategies, pressures, and meanings that shape young people’s digital decision-making. In doing so, it challenges deficit-based narratives that frame young people as naïve or reckless, and instead situates their actions within broader relational and platform-driven ecosystems.

## The Socio-Cultural Ecosystem: Connectivity vs. Guidance



In Northern Thailand, the digital divide is no longer about access, but about guidance. With 91% of young people owning personal devices, they are not occasional users of technology but deeply immersed in digital spaces throughout their waking hours. The boundaries between online and offline life are increasingly blurred.

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube serve not merely as tools, but as cultural and social arenas where norms are formed, identities

crafted, relationships conducted, and visibility becomes a form of value. However, the traditional support structures such as schools and families, are struggling to keep pace with the speed and complexity of these digital environments.

The issue, most of the time, is not that young people are unaware of risk. It is that they are navigating visibility economies and peer-driven systems with limited adult guidance.

### The "Skipped-Generation" Family

Parents and caregivers often rely on their own experiences and informally acquired skills to guide young people online. At the same time, digital technologies are evolving rapidly, reshaping how young people communicate, socialize, and express intimacy.

A critical contextual factor in Northern Thailand is the prevalence of families in which parents migrate to urban centers for work, leaving children in the care of grandparents. These "skipped-generation" households frequently provide emotional stability, yet they also create a generational knowledge gap. While grandparents may offer care and protection, many lack the digital literacy required to understand platform algorithms, influencer cultures, or the social pressures embedded in gaming communities and messaging apps.

This gap can leave young people navigating complex digital interactions largely on their own.

### "Late-Stage" Digital Education

The Leaked study highlights significant gaps in formal education. An 18-year-old interviewee described digital safety education introduced in Grade 5 or 6 as "too late." By the time formal instruction begins, many young people have already developed "organic" digital habits, including norms around sharing images, managing visibility, and responding to peer pressure.

Overall, 61% of respondents reported teaching themselves how to stay safe online. Nearly half cited parents (47%) or schools (47%) as sources of information, though this guidance was often described as limited, one-off, and disconnected from young people's everyday digital lives. Rural respondents were more likely than urban peers to report being self-taught (63% compared with 58%).

### Social norm The "Eh?" Moment: Cultivating Body Awareness

Within Thai cultural contexts, saying “no” to peers or older individuals can carry social consequences. Norms of politeness and deference, often described through the concept of *kreng jai*, can make refusal feel socially risky.

This makes it especially important to support young people in recognizing early signs of discomfort. Several practitioners described the importance of cultivating body awareness, the ability to recognize the subtle “Eh?” (เอ๊ะ) moment when something feels wrong.

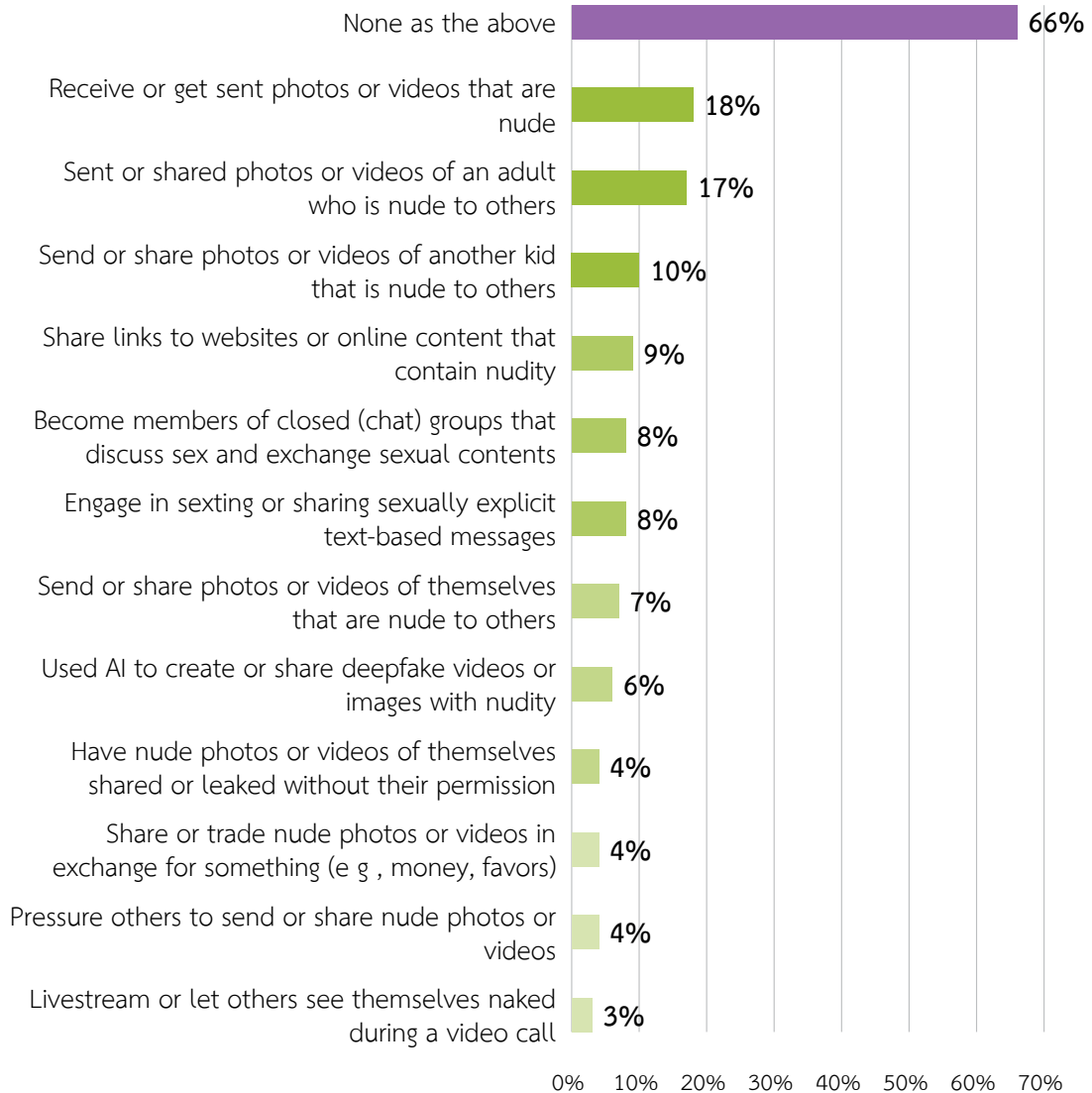
Teaching young people to notice these sensations, pause before responding, and articulate refusal without shame provides a culturally grounded safety strategy. It shifts protection from rule-following toward self-attunement. In relationally complex environments, this kind of embodied awareness can be more protective than technical instructions alone.

### The Culture of Silence and the "Squirrel's Hole"

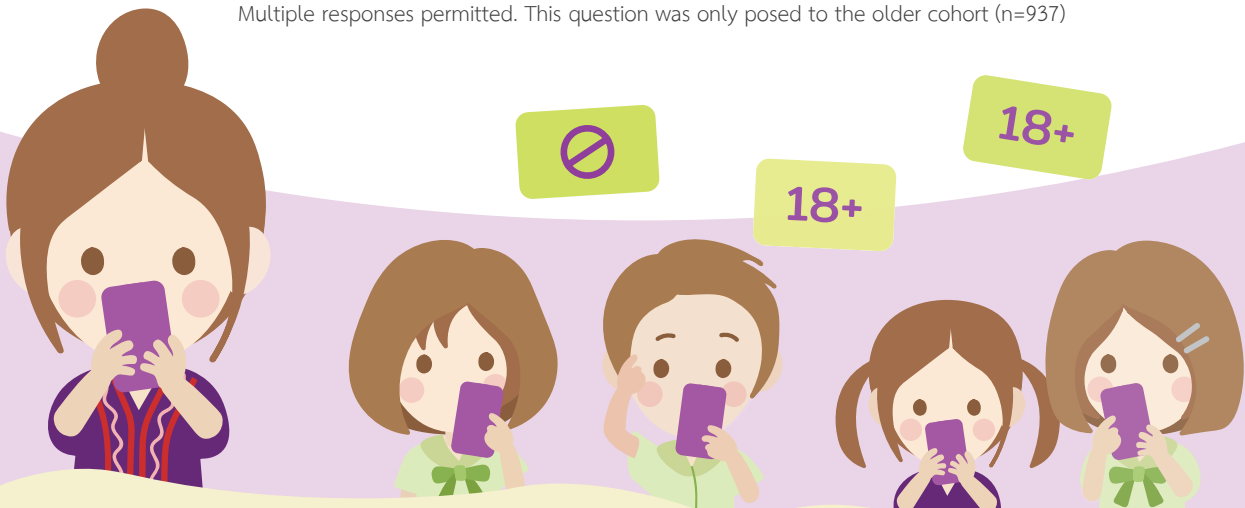
The Thai proverb “อย่าชี้โพรงให้กระรอก” (Don’t point out the hole to the squirrel) encapsulates the fear that talking about sex encourages it. This mindset has created a “Safety Vacuum.” When young people encounter harm, they don’t seek help because they fear being blamed rather than supported.

When 44% of respondents reported doing nothing after receiving sexual content, this should not be read as indifference or complicity. Rather, it often reflects desensitization, fear of blame, or a desire to avoid social fallout. In highly saturated digital environments where sexual content is algorithmically normalized, doing nothing can function as a coping strategy rather than a moral stance.

## Knowledge of Peers Sharing Sexual Content



Multiple responses permitted. This question was only posed to the older cohort (n=937)



## Digital Skills Beyond Risk Avoidance

Many existing digital education efforts focus on identifying risks and avoiding strangers. While important, these approaches often fail to reflect the realities young people face, where pressure and ambiguity arise within friendships, romantic relationships, and peer groups rather than from unknown outsiders.

Young people require skills that support moment-to-moment decision-making: recognizing discomfort, setting boundaries, refusing pressure, and disengaging safely. A counselling psychologist in Northern Thailand

emphasized the importance of teaching young people to pause, listen to bodily cues, and understand the longer-term implications of online actions, including the permanence of digital footprints (K-0904-11).

These challenges are further shaped by platform design. Social media environments reward visibility, popularity, and engagement, intensifying comparison and encouraging performance. Decisions about sharing content are therefore rarely individual or impulsive; they are made within emotionally charged and commercially driven systems.

### Beyond “Hard Skills”: The Absence of Digital Soft Skills

Digital safety initiatives in Thailand have traditionally prioritized “hard skills,” such as how to block users, report content, or set passwords. While necessary, the Leaked data suggests that many of

the most significant risks arise from the absence of “soft skills”, the emotional and relational competencies required to navigate pressure, consent, and ambiguity in digital spaces.

## Exposure and Normalization

Exposure to sexual content involving peers is common. Thirty-six percent (36%) of respondents said they knew someone at their school who had shared or received sexual content in the past month. This closely mirrors self-reported exposure levels and suggests that sexual content often circulates within tight peer networks.

When asked how they responded after receiving sexual content involving someone under 18:

- 44% said they blocked the sender
- 44% said they did nothing
- 22% reported the content to the platform
- 14% told a friend or sibling
- 10% saved the content
- 8% reshared it

The fact that nearly half of respondents reported doing nothing is revealing. Inaction does not necessarily indicate approval; it may reflect desensitization, uncertainty, fear of repercussions, or a perception that intervention is futile. In this context, inaction can be understood as a response to shifting digital norms, where sexual content has become commonplace and ignoring it feels more practical than engaging.

## The Nuance of Motivation: Why Young People Share Sexual Content

Motivations for sharing sexual content are shaped by the broader socio-cultural and digital contexts described above. Among the 323 respondents who knew someone at their school who had shared sexual content, six recurring drivers emerged: being seen, earning rewards, feeling validated, showing trust, experiencing pressure or deception, and following peer norms.

These motivations reflect social strategy rather than recklessness. For young people, sharing sexual content is rarely perceived as “risk-taking”; it is a response to immediate relational, emotional, and social conditions, within platform-mediated environments.



### To be seen

Nearly half of the respondents (48%) believe that sexual content is shared to gain likes or followers. Visibility functions as a form of social recognition and belonging. Frontline workers noted that young people who experience neglect or limited affirmation offline may see their bodies as one of the few available ways to receive attention, validation, or connection.

“Young people want to be accepted on social media. If you have a lot of followers, you can make money and get to review products online. Many are influenced by the idea that having lots of followers means you’re important” (K-1706-19). This perspective highlights the importance of understanding the deeper psychosocial and emotional drivers behind young people’s behavior, particularly in contexts where financial independence is tied to self-worth and identity.

### To earn

One of the most striking findings is that 45% cited money, gifts, phone credits, or in-game perks as motivations for sharing self-generated sexual content. This is not “commercial exploitation” in the traditional sense, but a gamified negotiation. In gaming and influencer cultures, intimate images can operate as currency, enabling participation, progression, or status. Practitioners described this motivation as rooted in pride, achievement, and control rather than greed.

The connection between the pursuit of social media popularity and the desire to earn income was highlighted by an 18-year-old informant. As she explained,

### To Feel Good or Be Validated

Forty percent believed sharing sexual content was linked to emotional affirmation, while 24% specifically cited compliments or validation. However, there was a clear gap between recognizing this motivation in others and endorsing it personally. Eighty-eight percent of girls disagreed that sending sexual images would boost their self-esteem, describing it instead as exposing or socially risky.

This suggests that while attention-seeking narratives are common, they do not necessarily reflect young people’s internal experiences. Social media environments that promote idealized images of beauty, wealth, and success may intensify insecurity rather than alleviate it.

### Because of Pressure or Deception

Thirty-four percent said they knew peers who had been tricked into sharing sexual content, and 25% knew peers who had been pressured. Pressure often took subtle forms: repeated requests, emotional manipulation, fake profiles, or framing requests as jokes, dares, or tests of trust.

Notably, only 8% of respondents agreed that it is “normal” to be pressured to share sexual content, indicating strong awareness that such pressure is inappropriate, even when it remains widespread.

### To Show Trust or Closeness

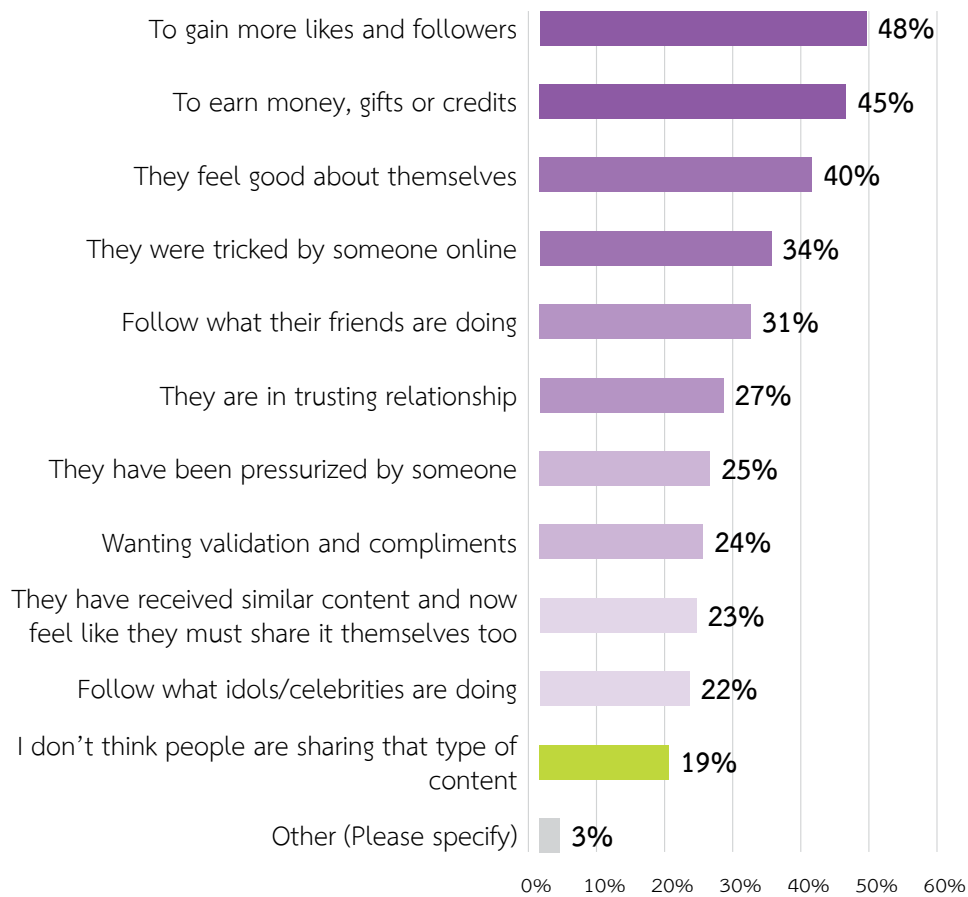
Twenty-seven percent believed others shared sexual content to express trust or intimacy in relationships. However, only 4% agreed that this motivation applied to themselves, while 81% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Girls were more likely to reject this framing (86%), though most boys (75%) also disagreed.

### Because Others Were Doing It

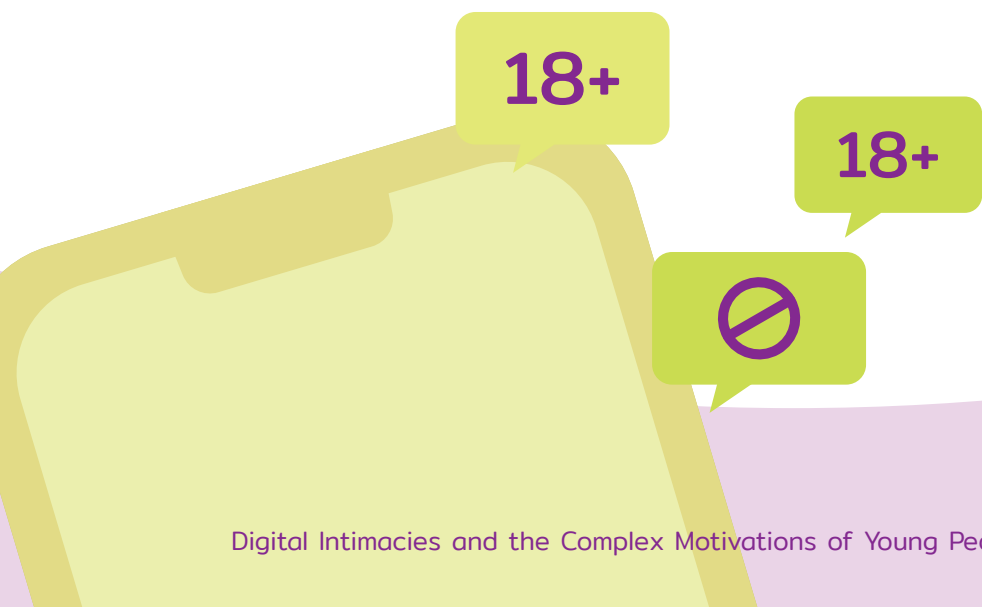
Peer influence emerged as a significant factor. Thirty-one percent believed young people shared sexual content to follow friends’ behaviour; 23% linked sharing to having received similar content; and 22% cited the influence of celebrities, influencers, or algorithmically promoted content. These findings point to a broader ecosystem of influence, where peer norms, platform design, and popular culture interact to shape young people’s decisions.



## Reasons for Sharing Sexual Content



Multiple responses permitted. This question was only posed to older respondents who have had exposure to the sharing of sexual content (n=323)





## Recommendations

The Leaked data does not reveal a generation engaged in reckless risk-taking. It reveals young people navigating visibility economies, peer hierarchies, cultural norms, and guidance gaps.

If 61% are self-teaching digital safety, the policy question is not why they are irresponsible, but why they are navigating alone.

Reframing self-generated sexual content as socially embedded practice allows for more proportionate responses in the Global South — responses that:

- Introduce digital education earlier and iteratively
- Integrate soft skills alongside hard skills
- Support family digital literacy in skipped-generation households
- Address relational pressure rather than focusing only on strangers
- Reduce shame-based messaging that reinforces silence

Digital safety must reflect the environments young people are already inhabiting. Moving beyond moral panic toward social analysis creates space for prevention strategies that are grounded, culturally attuned, and aligned with young people's lived realities.



### Evidence to Action:

- **Strengthen soft digital skills**  
Prioritize education that supports boundary-setting, refusal, reflection, and recovery, alongside awareness of risks.
- **Foster open, supportive environments**  
Support caregivers and schools to respond with empathy, creating spaces where young people feel safe to speak without fear of blame.
- **Respond constructively to mistakes**  
Treat harmful situations as opportunities for learning and support, recognizing that navigating digital life is part of growing up.



