



A Nuanced Account: Why Do Individuals Engage in Sexting?

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Abstract Based on a review of both quantitative and qualitative studies, this chapter aims to explore individuals' motives for engaging in sexting. The chapter outlines adolescents' and adults' various reasons for engaging in sexting, both inside and outside the context of a romantic relationship. These reasons include flirting with a date and sustaining intimacy within an already established romantic relationship. The chapter also focuses on the pressure that often accompanies sexting. Finally, the chapter discusses the potentially positive effects of exchanging sexually explicit pictures.

Keywords Sexting • Romantic relationship • Attachment • Peer pressure • Media socialization

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INTRODUCTION

Humans have always tended to create sexually explicit images, ranging from nude drawings to images created with a Polaroid camera. Smartphones make the creation of these images more convenient and accessible. Several scholars have argued that, in this light, sexting can be regarded as a digital extension of previous generations' exchanges of sexually explicit content using physical media, as in the sharing of written notes, photographs, or drawings (Chalfen, 2009; Curnutt, 2012; Livingstone & Görzig, 2012). Indeed, there are anecdotal accounts of private individuals using Polaroid cameras to create self-made sexually explicit images. Such instant cameras provided private users with an easy way to access their images without having to develop film at commercial laboratories (Edgley & Kiser, 1982). Anecdotal accounts (documented by Edgley & Kiser, 1982) have shown that couples used these self-made sexually explicit Polaroid photographs to enhance sexual intimacy within their romantic relationships. Couples also mailed such photographs to each other during times of separation (e.g., during trips or within long-distance relationships), and swinger couples used them to get in touch with each other (Edgley & Kiser, 1982). Sexting may be a modern extension of this behaviour, but it differs in that the potential consequences and audiences are vastly different. When compared to analogue photographs, digital photographs—even those that are meant to remain private—can be stored, reproduced, and disseminated across a wider audience and on a larger scale (Chalfen, 2009; Curnutt, 2012).

From early on, researchers on sexting among adolescents and adults have been fascinated with individuals' motives for exchanging self-made sexually explicit photographs. Lenhart (2009) conducted one of the earliest studies on the topic at the Pew Research Centre through focus-group interviews. The many subsequent studies have used a variety of methodologies and theoretical frameworks. This chapter aims to review adolescents' and adults' reasons for creating and sending self-made sexually explicit photographs. As our review will show, several of the motives that Edgley and Kiser (1982) described are still valid for modern sexting behaviours.

SEXTING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP

Adolescents' main motives for engaging in sexting include the pursuit of a romantic relationship and the desire to please an existing romantic partner. Qualitative studies have consistently found that adolescents share self-made

sexually explicit photographs with their dating or romantic partners. In a retrospective study, Strohmaier, Murphy, and DeMatteo (2014) asked college students about their sexting experiences as minors and found that sexting within the context of a romantic relationship and flirting with potential romantic partners were the most important factors for engaging in sexting. As Le, Temple, Peskin, Markham, and Tortolero (2014) argued, sexting can—through the technological features that provide creators with ways to craft images and responses—provide teenagers with a “more removed and disinhibiting form of flirtation” (Le et al., 2014, p. 70). During times of physical separation, such as often occur in long-distance relationships, partners can use sexting to remain sexually engaged (Walker, Sancu, & Temple-Smith, 2013). In a study of college students, Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, and Stills (2013) found that a quarter of those who engaged in sexting with romantic partners did so because their partners were far away. For others, sexting was a way to express their sexuality even when religious rules and practices prohibited them from doing so in physical ways (Lippman & Campbell, 2014).

However, although sexting can be a consensual form of intimate communication within romantic relationships, individuals can also be pressured to engage in sexting. A study of US adolescents found that female teenagers who experienced sexual coercion were more likely to engage in sexting. More particularly, offline sexual coercion was positively associated with being asked for sexually explicit images, actually sending those images, and receiving unsolicited sexting messages (Choi, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2016). Therefore, some forms of sexting could be part of a broader range of sexual coercion. The intimate pictures, once sent can be used to further threaten or blackmail the victim. The Choi et al. (2016) study confirms what scholars have observed in other qualitative studies among adolescents: that some girls engage in sexting due to pressure. In both the US and the UK, researchers have observed the gender dynamics involved in the coercion of girls related to sexting (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Walker et al., 2013). Girls can be simultaneously pressured into sexting and criticized if they do engage in such behaviour. This indicates a double standard in relation to sexting. Which means that girls and boys are judged differently for the same behaviour (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Although girls are pressured to engage in sexting, boys are pressured (typically by male peers) to share the explicit images that they receive from girls. Some boys experience criticism if they do not participate in the behaviour; for instance, some

boys have been called “gay” for not collecting or for refusing to view or share girls’ sexting images (Walker et al., 2013).

Another study (Englander, 2015), this one among undergraduates (18- and 19-year-olds), found that, of those who engaged in sexting, almost one third (30%) said that they did so only because they wanted to and that they were by no means pressured into it. However, one in ten participants (12%) declared that they always felt coerced when engaging in sexting. The remainder of the surveyed adolescents (58%) sometimes felt pressure to send sexually explicit pictures; in sum, 70% said that they felt some kind of pressure. Moreover, gender differences were found: Half of the male respondents but only one fourth of the female respondents declared that they always engaged in sexting voluntarily. Further, Englander (2015) found that, among subjects who reported having never engaged in voluntary sexting, that act most likely occurred in response to serious threats or intense fear. Finally, those who reported having always sexted under pressure started sexting at a younger age than did those whose sexting was totally voluntarily. This may indicate that sexting at a young age is, for at least some individuals, associated with pressure.

Regarding the sources of pressure, Englander (2015) found that those who voluntarily engaged in sexting were mostly taking pictures to send to their romantic partners. By contrast, those who reported having been pressured to engage in sexting were mostly sending pictures to *potential* partners; mostly girls experienced this situation. Sexting somebody who is not a romantic partner could augment the risks of sexting exposure. Nevertheless, most of those who had voluntarily engaged in sexting reported no negative outcomes. For instance, three fourths of those who engaged in sexting reported that, to their knowledge, the recipients had kept their pictures confidential. For the remaining one fourth of those who engaged in sexting, however, peers and/or adults saw their sexually explicit pictures.

SEXTING AS A BRIDGE TO ACTUAL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Sexting can also be a way for people, especially adolescents, to experiment with their sexuality; in this way, it can function as a first step toward the initiation of offline sexual behaviours (Drouin et al., 2013). Multiple researchers have identified sexting as being cross-sectionally associated with sexual behaviour and sexually risky behaviour (such as having sex without protection and having sex after using alcohol or drugs) among

adolescents (Houck et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2012; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, Ponnet, & Heirman, 2015; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Using a longitudinal design, which allows for behaviour to be studied for a longer period of time and for assumptions based on causality to be tested, Temple and Choi (2014) found that youths who had engaged in sexting were more likely than those who had not, to be sexually active a year later. This indicates that some youths may engage in sexting to signal to their partners that they are willing to engage in sexual behaviour or be more intimate (Temple & Choi, 2014). Houck et al. (2014) found, using a sample of at-risk early adolescents, that those who engaged in sexting had greater intention to engage in sexual activity than those who did not. Sexting therefore seems to be a first step towards actual sexual behaviour for some youth (Lenhart, 2009). From this perspective, sexting can be understood as a form of sexual exploration and experimentation as part of the development of sexual identity; these are hallmarks of the adolescent developmental period (Livingstone & Görzig, 2012). Technology could provide either a driving or a supporting role within sexual experimentation (Draper, 2011). Although there is little evidence that sexting is used in lieu of actual sexual contact, some scholars have argued that some adolescents use it as a way to practice safe sex (e.g., to avoid getting pregnant or contracting a sexually transmitted infection) or because they are not allowed to engage in physical sexual behaviours due to religious restrictions (Chalfen, 2009).

Drouin et al. (2013) found that, among college students, sexting is often used to initiate sex, especially with casual sex partners or when cheating on a relationship partner. Perkins, Becker, Tehee, and Mackelprang (2013) found that college students who engaged in sexting initiated sex at earlier ages and had more sexual partners over their lifetimes than those who did not. Sexting has also been found to be a partial mediator between problematic alcohol use and casual sexual encounters (Dir, Cyders, & Coskunpinar, 2013). Dir et al. (2013) found that alcohol use increases the likelihood that college students will engage in sexting, as it lowers inhibitions, which can lead to actual sexual behaviour.

Adults have also been found to use sexting to cheat on romantic partners (Drouin et al., 2013; Wysocki & Childers, 2011). Researchers in one study found that about half of the surveyed users of the affair website AshleyMadison.com to send nude photos of themselves over e-mail or a cell phone (Wysocki & Childers, 2011).

SEXTING AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

Individuals can feel pressure to engage in sexting from not just a romantic partner but also friends. Especially among adolescents, peer-group social norms are becoming increasingly important (Steinberg, 2011). Research has consistently found that teenagers who perceive the social norms regarding sexting as being positive are more likely to engage in that behaviour. Youths who engage in sexting may assume that it is normative among their peers (Rice et al., 2012). Houck et al. (2014) found, in a sample of at-risk early adolescents, that youths who had sent self-made sexually explicit text messages or photographs were more likely to perceive that their peers, the media, and their parents approved of that behaviour. Lee, Moak, and Walker (2016) found that youths who perceived higher peer pressure to engage in sexting were more likely to create and send self-made sexually explicit pictures or videos of themselves and of others.

When studying sexting from the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Walrave, Heirman, and Hallam (2014) found that the perceived peer norms regarding sexting significantly predicted adolescents' intentions to send self-made sexually explicit photographs or text messages. However, the social influences on individuals' sexting behaviours can be very subtle and can extend beyond significant others' approval or disapproval of sexting. One study observed that when adolescents hold a more positive image of peers who send sexually explicit photographs, they relate more to the characteristics of such individuals and have a higher willingness to engage in sexting (Walrave et al., 2015). In other words, both significant others' opinions and the perceived image of peers who send sexting images can pressure individuals into engaging in sexting. More specifically, some researchers found that 54% of respondents in a sample knew someone who had sent a sexually explicit picture or text message via a cell phone (Rice et al., 2012). Youth who engaged in sexting were also more likely than those who did not to have peers who also engaged in the behaviours (Rice et al., 2012). Youths who associate with deviant peers (i.e., those who engage in a variety of deviant behaviours, ranging from logging into someone's e-mail or social media accounts without their permission to illegally copying music, videos, or software) have also been found to be more likely to have sent naked pictures of themselves via cell phones (Ricketts, Maloney, Marcum, & Higgins, 2015).

SEXTING AND MEDIA SOCIALIZATION

Sexting can also be understood from a media socialization perspective. Several scholars have hypothesized that, within the media landscape, sexualized media, such as sexually explicit music videos and pornography, are very prevalent and that such media could be an influential factor in adolescents' engagement in sexting (Chalfen, 2009, 2010; Curnutt, 2012). Similarly, celebrities are posting sexually explicit photographs on social media (e.g., Twitter or Instagram) accounts (Curnutt, 2012). However, exposure to others' sexual self-presentation (e.g., images on social networking sites that portray others with a sexual gaze or with a sexual or scantily dressed appearance) has not been found to directly influence adolescents' engagement in sexting behaviour (van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2017; Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, Walrave, & d'Haenens, 2017). These self-presentations on social media could have an indirect impact by influencing the social norms surrounding sexting (van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2017). Further research is needed to substantiate this hypothesis, however.

Researchers have found associations between pornography and sending sexually explicit images among both boys and girls (Romito & Beltramini, 2015; Stanley et al., 2016; Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2014). Van Ouytsel et al. (2014) found that watching music videos (which often feature sexually explicit themes) was linked with both requests for and receipt of sexting images among boys only. Van Ouytsel et al. hypothesized that this relationship between sexting and music-video consumption among boys, but not among girls, could be explained by the idea that music videos are more likely to propagate sexually active roles for males and submissive roles for females. Young people might be affected by these sexual scripts, which might be reflected in their sexting behaviours. Although the associations between sexting, highly sexualized media, and consumer culture are found in empirical studies, there is no causal evidence regarding this relationship. Because of the cross-sectional nature of these studies, the associations between sexting and media use may be symptomatic of a lifestyle in which young people who frequently consume sexualized media content are more likely than those who do not to also engage in sexting behaviours.

THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF SEXTING

Although the majority of research on sexting and on participants' motivations has been focused on the potential risks of this behaviour and on its ties to abusive relationships (Choi et al., 2016; Drouin, Ross, & Tobin,

2015), some researchers have begun to look into the potentially positive effects of sexting behaviour. The evidence for the potentially positive effects on romantic relationships is mixed. The researchers in one study of adults found that sexting was cross-sectionally associated with higher perceptions of consensus within romantic relationships; this association between sexting and a component of relationship satisfaction suggests that sexting could be a part of a satisfying relationship or that it could even strengthen romantic relationships (Parker, Blackburn, Perry, & Hawks, 2012).

Moreover, qualitative research has shown that some people experience sexting as a way to communicate and facilitate sexual desires and pleasure or as a way to maintain intimacy within a romantic relationship (Burkett, 2015). Researchers have also found that consensual sexting among young adults was associated with positive relational consequences for half of the surveyed participants and negative consequences for the other half. Furthermore, the latter group experienced feelings of regret, discomfort, and even trauma following the sexting. These consequences differed by gender, relationship type, and attachment. Women, especially those in casual relationships, were more inclined to report negative consequences than positive ones. Within committed relationships, these gender differences did not appear. In general, individuals with low attachment avoidance (i.e., individuals who did not have a tendency to keep their distance from their partners) experienced more positive (relational) outcomes and fewer negative consequences when sexting (Drouin, Coupe, & Temple, 2017). Some scholars have found that sexting is only related to relationship satisfaction among men and that only women with an anxious attachment style (i.e., being afraid of losing one's partner) reported that sexting had positive outcomes on relationship satisfaction (McDaniel & Drouin, 2015). These contrasting results highlight the importance of investigating sexting within various relational contexts (e.g., committed versus casual relationships) and attachment styles. In sum, differences between couples may exist in terms of sexting expectations and attachment styles, and these differences may translate to other relational tensions. As most negative consequences have been observed in non-committed relationships, awareness of the possible negative consequences of sexting with casual partners may need to be increased (Drouin et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

The scientific literature on sexting includes a diverse range of reasons as to why individuals exchange sexually explicit pictures of themselves. Most sexting occurs within the context of a romantic relationship and can be considered a positive experience. In the context of these romantic relationships, sexting can be used to show romantic interest, to flirt, or to sustain intimacy. In general, sexting can be a way to engage in sexual experimentation and can be associated with sexual behaviour. Based on longitudinal research, there is also evidence that sexting precedes physical sexual behaviour.

However, sexting can also occur within the context of abusive relationships and can be caused by peer pressure. Especially among adolescents, peer norms are important. Teenagers who perceived that positive peer-based social norms regarding sexting were more likely to engage in that practice. Moreover, young people are growing up in a media-centric culture. Although young people's exposure to sexual celebrity photos has not been found to directly impact adolescents' sexting, it might influence young people's social norms concerning that practice. Some scholars have linked watching pornography or music videos to sexting behaviour. Still, further research is needed to investigate these associations.

More research is also warranted regarding the potentially positive impact of sexting within romantic relationships, as the current results are mixed. Some researchers have found sexting to be related to higher perceptions of consensus between romantic partners. Moreover, sexting has been found to be a way to communicate sexual desire and to maintain intimacy. However, researchers have also found negative relational consequences for sexting participants. Therefore, it remains unclear when sexting has a positive impact on relationship quality. More research is warranted regarding sexting's impact on romantic relationships; regardless of the media through which sexting messages are exchanged, sexting behaviour is here to stay, as it reflects humans' desire to engage in the creation of sexually explicit messages and imagery.

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