



Adolescent sexting from a social learning perspective



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze which components of the social learning theory are associated with adolescents' engagement in sexting among a sample of 357 respondents. Additionally, we distinguish between two types of online sexual self-disclosure: sexting within and outside of a romantic relationship. The results indicate that the extent to which adolescents hold positive attitudes towards the behavior and the extent to which they perceive that their peers approve of sexting, are associated with their engagement in sexting both within and outside of a romantic relationship, when controlling for age, gender, school track and internet use. Sexting outside of a romantic relationship was also influenced by the thrill that young people get out of engaging in this behavior. The discussion addresses the implications of these findings for prevention programs, practice and future research, such as the necessity for future studies to ask with whom participants have engaged in sexting.

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1. Introduction

Sexting can be broadly defined as “sexually explicit content communicated via text messages, smart phones, or visual and web 2.0 activities such as social networking sites” (Ringrose et al., 2012: p. 9). The behavior has recently gained considerable research interest among practitioners and researchers because of the legal, health and social consequences that are associated with it (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014b). In the United States, for example, laws regarding sexting differ in each state and in some states sexting falls under child pornography laws (Hinduja and Patchin, 2013).

From a health perspective, multiple studies have found that adolescents' engagement in sexting is associated with sexual (risk) behaviors and substance use (Dake et al., 2012; Houck et al., 2014; Temple and Choi, 2014; Temple et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2012). Furthermore, sexting has been linked with conduct problems such as delinquency (Lee et al., 2013). It has been tied to different psychological and emotional states among adolescents, such as depression (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014a), feeling afraid (Mitchell et al., 2012), feeling sad or hopeless (Dake et al., 2012) or contemplating suicide (Dake et al., 2012).

Engagement in sexting can also negatively affect adolescents in a social way. Several studies reported that girls sometimes felt put under pressure by their peers or romantic partner to engage in sexting (Ringrose et al., 2013; Walker

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et al., 2013). The main risk of engaging in sexting, is the possibility that the messages or images might be passed on by the recipient (Englander, 2015; Kopecký, 2015). This can be due to different motives, for example out of revenge after a romantic relationship went sour, to gain respect among peers or just for fun (Albury and Crawford, 2012; Bond, 2011; Lippman and Campbell, 2014). According to a study conducted by the Associated Press and MTV among a nationally representative sample of US youth, 17% of the respondents reported that they had forwarded the images to someone else. More than half of the respondents reported as reason the “assumption that others would want to see them”, 35% quoted a “desire to show off” and 26% did so out of “boredom” (Associated Press and MTV, 2009: p. 3). When a sexting message or image spreads to an unintended audience, it can negatively affect the reputation of the sender and subsequently cause bullying and harassment (Ringrose et al., 2013; Wachs and Wolf, 2015; Walker et al., 2013). When this happens within the school community, adolescents’ engagement in sexting might be detrimental to the school climate and can negatively affect the school safety (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014b).

Sexting can play a role in adolescent development as it can help young people to explore their sexuality and develop their sexual identity (Walrave et al., 2015). Several scholars have argued that sexting can be studied as a form of deviant behavior (Reyns et al., 2014; Ricketts et al., 2014; Wolfe et al., 2016) because sexting “is not generally accepted social behavior by the larger public” (Reyns et al., 2014: p.275), and because of the severity of the risks and consequences that are associated with sexting (e.g., the risks of unauthorized distribution or the emotional and psychological consequences associated with the behavior) (Ricketts et al., 2014). Moreover, several studies found that most adolescents do not engage in the behavior (Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014a). Therefore, it might be useful to study sexting through the prism of a variety of criminological theories such as social learning theories (Lee et al., 2013; Reyns et al., 2014; Ricketts et al., 2014; Wolfe et al., 2016). Studying sexting through a social learning perspective and thus testing a new framework of thought from which to understand the issue can help practitioners and policy makers to gain insight into the motives and consequences of sexting in a more profound way, which could in turn inspire their prevention and intervention practices (Campbell and Park, 2014).

The fact that sexting is studied as a deviant behavior in the current study does not mean that it does not play a legitimate role within adolescent development. Previous research on other forms of adolescent risk behavior, such as alcohol use, has found that these risky behaviors can play for some teenagers a constructive role within adolescent development and can help them to fulfill certain developmental tasks, such as using alcohol or cigarettes to establish contact or to bond with people of the opposite sex (Silbereisen and Noack, 1989). In this way engagement in sexting could help certain adolescents to experiment with relationships, help them express romantic feelings and their sexual identity (Šmahel and Subrahmanyam, 2014; Walrave et al., 2015), especially for adolescents who do not have the opportunity to be intimate with their partner in offline contexts for instance because of their religion (Lippman and Campbell, 2014).

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between adolescents’ engagement in sexting and concepts of the social learning theory (Akers and Jennings, 2009). A better insight in how the social context shapes adolescents’ sexting behavior, will better inform sexual education and prevention initiatives and provide a deeper understanding of how it can be addressed by policy and practice. Until now, most studies on adolescent sexting did not inquire with whom the respondent engaged in sexting (Van Ouytsel et al., 2015). Our study goes beyond previous research by taking the context of sexting behavior into account, namely engagement in sexting within or outside of a romantic relationship. This study uses a broad definition of sexting and defines the practice as sending sexually explicit texts or sexually explicit pictures/videos in which the sender is depicted. These messages are sent through the internet or the mobile phone. Moreover, using a webcam in underwear or showing one’s private parts during a webcam conversation, was also defined as sexting. The definition of sexting in our study is more restrictive than the one by Ringrose et al. (2012) in that it excludes sexting communication in which the sender was not depicted (i.e., the forwarding of pornography or the unauthorized distribution of someone else’s sexting images falls outside of the scope of our study).

2. The social learning theory and sexting behavior

Akers’ social learning theory is a framework of thought, through which deviant behavior can be explained. The theory was founded in the differential association theory of Sutherland (1947) and cognitive learning theories (Akers and Jennings, 2009). The social learning theory states that deviant behavior is learned through interaction with and imitation of role models, such as parents and peers (Akers and Jennings, 2009). The concepts of the social learning theory were found useful in explaining a variety of deviant behaviors, such as adolescent alcohol and drug use (Akers et al., 1979; Hwang and Akers, 2006; Lee et al., 2004) or adolescent smoking (Krohn et al., 1985).

According to the social learning theory there is a positive linear relationship between engaging in deviant behavior when individuals: (1) believe that a certain deviant act is favorable or justified (i.e., definitions), (2) associate with others who commit deviant acts or hold favorable opinions towards it (i.e., differential association), (3) anticipate a reward for the behavior that outweighs potential punishments (i.e., differential reinforcement), and (4) are more exposed to deviant behavior (i.e., imitation) (Akers and Jennings, 2009). In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the different components of the social learning theory and how they relate to adolescent sexting.

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