



Does country context matter? Investigating the predictors of teen sexting across Europe [☆]



Susanne E. Baumgartner ^{a,*}, Sindy R. Sumter ^a, Jochen Peter ^a, Patti M. Valkenburg ^a, Sonia Livingstone ^b

^a Amsterdam School of Communication Research, ASCoR, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^b London School of Economics (LSE), Department of Media and Communications, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing research interest in sexting, not much is known about individual and country differences in engaging in sexting. Therefore, the aims of this study were to investigate (a) which individual and country characteristics explain sexting and (b) whether individual predictors vary across countries. On the individual level, we investigated age, gender, sensation seeking, and internet use. On the country level, we investigated traditionalism, gross domestic product, and broadband internet penetration. The sample consisted of 14,946 adolescents (49.7% boys) aged 11–16 from 20 European countries. Data were collected as part of the EU Kids Online project. Participants were interviewed at home. Using multilevel modeling, findings indicate that on the individual level, age, sensation seeking, and frequency of internet use predicted sexting across all countries. Gender differences in sexting varied across countries. Although country characteristics (GDP, broadband internet penetration, traditional values) had no direct effect on adolescent sexting, traditionalism significantly predicted gender differences in sexting. In more traditional countries, gender differences were more pronounced than in less traditional countries, with more boys than girls engaging in sexting. In less traditional countries, gender differences were smaller.

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1. Introduction

Sexting – the sending or posting of sexual photos or messages via electronic devices – has received considerable attention from media and researchers. Although the term originally derived from sending sexual pictures via mobile phones, it has recently been used more broadly as sending or posting sexual messages via any electronic device (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2011). This is due to the increasing convergence of the internet with mobile phones (e.g. smartphones) which makes a distinction between internet and mobile phones difficult.

Studies investigating this phenomenon have mainly investigated the prevalence of this behavior, as well as age and gender as predictors of sexting. The prevalence rates of these studies differ highly, ranging from 2% to 20% (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olafsson, 2011a; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2009). Concerning the predictors of sexting, studies conclude that older adolescents are more likely to sext than younger adolescents

(Lenhart, 2009; Livingstone et al., 2011a; Mitchell et al., 2012). Findings on gender differences, however, are inconclusive. While some studies reported no gender differences in sexting (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Lenhart, 2009), other studies found that more boys than girls send sexts (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010; de Graaf, Meijer, Poelman, & Vanwesenbeeck, 2005; Dowdell, Burgess, & Flores, 2011). Some few studies also reported that more girls than boys engage in sexting (Mitchell et al., 2012; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2009).

The differences in prevalence and predictors of sexting, particularly gender differences, may partly result from characteristics of the country in which the studies have been conducted. The vast majority of studies on sexting investigated this behavior in one specific country, while cross-national comparisons are widely missing. As a result, contextual factors on the country level have often been ignored. However, taking the country context into consideration is important for at least two reasons. First, the differences in prevalence and frequency of sexting across countries may be due to specific characteristics of a country. For example, in countries with higher internet penetration, adolescents may have more opportunities to engage in this behavior. Second, predictors of sexting may vary across countries. Whereas in some countries, specific individual predictors have a strong influence on sexting due to

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 20 525 6101.

E-mail address: S.E.Baumgartner@uva.nl (S.E. Baumgartner).

characteristics that these countries share, the same factors may have no or only a weak influence in other countries where the particular characteristics are absent. Investigating contextual factors next to individual factors across different countries may thus provide a more comprehensive picture of youth sexting.

The present study employs data from the EU Kids Online II project, including 14,946 11- to 16-year-old adolescents from 20 European countries. This dataset provides a unique opportunity to study sexting from a cross-national perspective. More specifically, the aim of this study is to investigate which factors on the individual and the contextual level explain why adolescents engage in sexting. On the individual level, we investigate age, gender, and sensation seeking. On the contextual level, we investigate traditional values. Frequency of internet use, gross domestic product and broadband internet penetration are included as control variables. Moreover, the study investigates whether individual predictors vary across countries and whether this can be explained by characteristics of the country.

1.1. Individual level predictors of sexting

Although in many countries only a minority of adolescents engages in sexting (Lenhart, 2009; Livingstone & Görzig, 2012; Livingstone et al., 2011a), it is important to identify these adolescents to be able to effectively prevent this behavior. Whether an adolescent engages in sexting is at least partly determined by specific individual characteristics. To date, age and gender are the most frequently studied predictors of sexting. Studies consistently report that older adolescents (aged 16 and 17) are more likely to engage in sexting than younger adolescents (aged 12–15). This is the case in the U.S. (Lenhart, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2012; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2009) and in Europe (Livingstone et al., 2011a). For example, Lenhart (2009) showed that in a national representative sample, 8% of the 17-year olds but only 4% of the 12-year olds send sexts. The increase in sexting behaviors during this age period may be explained by the strong increase in sexual interest during this period (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002) as well as with an increased use of the internet and mobile phones (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005; Livingstone et al., 2011a). Mid- and late-adolescents (aged 14–17) are much more interested in sexuality than early adolescents (aged 12 and 13). In addition, older adolescents use the internet more and may be less supervised in their use by parents. They may thus have more opportunities to engage in sexting.

Gender differences in sexting are less conclusive. Although typically more boys than girls use the Internet to satisfy their sexual interests (e.g. by using sexually explicit internet material) (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011), the results on gender differences in sexting are mixed. In the US, Mitchell et al. (2012) reported that more girls than boys send sexts (Mitchell et al., 2012). Several other studies reported no gender differences (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Lenhart, 2009). In a qualitative study, Ringrose, Gille, Livingstone, and Harvey (2012) examined the meanings of sexting for boys and girls. They found that in the case of sexting as with many types of sexual behavior a strong double-standard prevailed. Boys frequently pressured girls into sending sexual pictures, but for girls sending these sexual messages was not approved of by other girls and boys. In contrast, it was perceived as normal for boys to produce and show off with these images of themselves (Ringrose et al., 2012).

In addition to age and gender, psychological characteristics of youth may determine their sexting behavior. One of the most consistent predictors of adolescents' online and offline sexual behavior is sensation seeking. Individuals with high levels of sensation seeking typically report higher numbers of sexual partners (Bancroft et al., 2004; Donohew et al., 2000), are more likely to engage in

casual sex (Seto, Lalumiere, & Quinsey, 1995), and to have unprotected sex (Kalichman, Heckman, & Kelly, 1996). Sensation seeking has also been related to online sexual behaviors, such as compulsive sexual online behaviors (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000), usage of online pornography (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006), and engagement in online sexual risk behavior (Baumgartner, Sumter, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2012). Adolescents with high levels of sensation seeking typically search for stimulations in their lives. They may be willing to send sexting messages because they value the excitement and are not easily scared by potential negative consequences.

1.2. Bringing context in: country differences in sexting

Most studies on the predictors of adolescents' online behavior, and their sexting behavior in particular, solely considered individual characteristics. Although individual factors are important in explaining behavior, there is evidence that also broader contextual variables may influence adolescents' online behavior. In many theories of adolescent development, the social and cultural context in which children grow up has been considered an important determinant of their behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Igra & Irwin, 1996). However, empirical studies taking the broader context into consideration are largely missing (Kotchick, Shaffer, & Forehand, 2001). To investigate the influence of country characteristics for teen sexting, it is necessary to compare different countries with each other. Comparing sexting across countries provides the opportunity to not only compare prevalence rates across countries but also to explain these country differences with specific country characteristics. Taking country characteristics into consideration thus helps to explain why sexting is more likely to occur in specific countries and less likely to occur in others.

One of the most important country characteristics that may influence sexting behavior are the cultural values that are prevailing in a society. Cultural values shape the daily practices, attitudes, and behaviors of a society (Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). Values are supported and fortified by institutions, such as schools, families, and media and thereby influence the attitudes and behaviors of individuals within a society (DeLamater, 1981; Sprecher, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova, & Levitskaya, 1994). In this study, we focus on one specific value, namely traditionalism. According to Schwartz' theory of basic human values, traditionalism is defined as "respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide" (Schwartz, 1994, p. 22).

Traditional countries are characterized by conservative worldviews, unequal gender roles and restrictive sexual attitudes (Boehnke, 2011; Wood & Eagly, 2010). Previous research has shown that risk taking is less prominent in traditional countries (Arnett & Balle-Jensen, 1993; Kloep, Gueney, Cok, & Simsek, 2009). This may be due to the restrictive upbringing of children in traditional cultures (Alwin & Felson, 2010). In particular, in terms of sexuality, traditional countries may strongly restrict adolescents' behavior (Sharabany, Eshel, & Hakim, 2008; Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1998).

Despite the homogeneity of European countries in many aspects, differences in cultural values still persist across these countries (Widmer et al., 1998). In particular, the north-western European countries, such as Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, are characterized by more sexual permissive attitudes (Arnett & Balle-Jensen, 1993; Weinberg, Lottes, & Shaver, 1995) than southern European countries, such as Italy, and some Eastern European countries, such as Poland (Widmer et al., 1998). These value differences are, for example, displayed in different sex education programs at schools (Parker, Wellings, & Lazarus, 2009). Adolescents in traditional countries may thus be less likely to engage in sexual behaviors. It may, therefore, be assumed that sexting is less prevalent in traditional countries.

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