



Let's talk about sexting, baby: Computer-mediated sexual behaviors among young adults

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ABSTRACT

Although much media attention has been directed towards sexting (transmission of sexual material via phone or internet), little empirical work exists on the topic. Moreover, the few studies that do exist have been inconsistent in their definition of sexting and measures of sexting behavior, which makes comparisons between these studies difficult. In this study, we provide a granular, descriptive analysis of sexting behavior within a cohort of young adults, focusing on the content of sex messages, the medium used to transmit these messages, and the relationship context in which these transmissions occur. We found that sexting was fairly common across all types of romantic relationships (committed, casual sex, and cheating), text messaging was the primary medium used to send sex pictures and videos, and the prevalence, motivations, and risks associated with sexting varied by relationship context. Considering the complexity and diversity of sexting practices within this cohort, we suggest that those studying sexting and implementing initiatives with young adults use more detailed (rather than general) definitions and questions of sexting behavior, and that they delineate between these different types of content, transmission media, and relationship contexts.

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1. Introduction

During the past decade, methods of social communication have changed considerably, especially among young adults (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011; Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; Smith, 2011). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) now dominates the social landscape, and among young adults, texting and social networking prevail. Recent statistics show that young adults use text messaging much more often than voice calls (Smith, 2011), and most (approximately 80%) use a social networking service (e.g., Facebook or Twitter), often several times a day (Hampton et al., 2011). A number of researchers have begun to examine the use of these technologies within different relationship contexts (e.g., Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012), and recent research has focused on the use of these technologies within romantic relationships (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011). Within this body of research, one of the areas that has attracted much attention from media sources, school administrators, and legal authorities is the use of computer-mediated communication for transmitting sexual material (CMC-S), or “sexting”.

Few empirical studies have examined sexting, but those that have, have been rather inconsistent in the way they have defined sexting (Lounsbury, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2011). More specifically, there have been inconsistencies in the ways in which researchers have defined: (1) the *content* of messages, (2) the *medium* used to send messages, and (3) the *relationship context* within which these messages have been sent. In a recent study, Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, and Wolak (2012) helped to elucidate some of these issues using a large-scale telephone survey with children and teens (aged 10–17). Primarily, this research addressed issues that would be relevant from a legal standpoint; however, it also provided valuable information about the nature of sexting in this age group. Interestingly, despite the growing number of empirical studies with young adult samples (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Ferguson, 2011; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011) and the fact that this group is the heaviest users of texting and cell phones (Ling, 2010; Smith, 2011), researchers have yet to clearly define ‘sexting’ among young adults. However, sexting among adults merits detailed study, as according to Weiss and Samenow (2010), there has been an increase in the number of people seeking treatment for problematic online sexual behaviors. Consequently, there is a need to examine empirically the role of technology in sexuality in this group (Weiss & Samenow, 2010). Thus, the goal of the present study was to disentangle these different aspects of sexting to provide a more detailed descriptive analysis of the sexting practices of young adults. This analysis is meant to serve as a baseline for researchers

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and practitioners in their development of sexting studies and initiatives with young adults.

1.1. Content of CMC-S

At present, the greatest inconsistency in the limited sexting literature concerns the definition of the *content* of sex messages. In one of the most widely-cited, seminal studies, Lenhart (2009) defined sexting as sending “sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photos or videos of yourself” (p. 16). This was similar to the definition provided in the Sex and Tech Survey (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008) of sending a “nude or semi-nude picture/video (of yourself)” (p. 11); however, the Sex and Tech Survey also included questions about sending “sexually suggestive material,” which could include non-picture sex messages. Another widely-cited study conducted by the Associated Press and MTV (2009) used both specific and general definitions, referring to sexting as either sharing a “naked photo or video” (p. 2) or “messages with sexual words or images by text or on the internet” (p. 2). More recently, Drouin and Landgraff (2012) used general definitions that differentiated “sexually explicit text messages” from “sexually explicit picture and video messages” (p. 446) and Ferguson (2011) defined sexting as sending “erotic or nude photographs” (p. 240). Meanwhile, Weisskirch and Delevi (2011) combined these various definitions, referring to sexting as “sending or receiving sexually-laden text messages, sexually suggestive photos or videos, or partially nude or nude photos or videos via cell phone” (p. 1698), but also asked four separate questions about content: (1) sexually suggestive photo or video, (2) photo or video in underwear or lingerie, (3) nude photo or video, and (4) sexually suggestive text. Unfortunately, this inconsistency in terminology makes comparability between previous studies almost impossible (Lounsbury et al., 2011). Moreover, it creates the need for research with young adults that delineates these different types of sexual content to determine whether the prevalence statistics vary by content. This will help researchers determine whether the definition of sexting needs to be broadened or limited and will also give some guidance on the interpretation of previous findings.

1.2. Medium used for CMC-S

Another inconsistency relates to the medium the person uses to transmit the sexual information. Some researchers have asked participants about their sending of sex messages over cell phones specifically (Lenhart, 2009; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011), whereas others did not limit their questions about sexting to cell phones only (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008). Drouin and Landgraff (2012) and Ferguson (2011) did not specify a context, and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (2008) and Associated Press and MTV (2009) asked questions about sex messages sent either by cell phone or the internet, but they did not delineate these two media types in their analyses. This is a potentially serious methodological issue because, as Lounsbury et al. (2011) suggest, cell phones are not the only medium through which sexually explicit material could be shared. In fact, prominent media sources gave great attention to a recent scandal involving a US congressman who sent sexually suggestive photos online via Twitter and Facebook (Canning & Hopper, 2011), which suggests that social networking sites are also being used to transmit sexual content. Therefore, a logical next step in this area of research is to determine the prevalence with which sexting occurs within different types of media (e.g., texting, Facebook, Twitter, email) so that researchers will have a guide for developing relevant sexting medium questions. This has already

been done with a child sample (Mitchell et al., 2012); these researchers found that text messaging was the most popular way to send photos of oneself, while instant messaging and social networking sites were used quite rarely to transmit sexual images. In our young adult sample, we expected similar trends, based on extremely high usage statistics for text messaging among young adults (Smith, 2011) as well as previous research that limited sexting questions to cell phones only but still found a fairly high incidence of sex messages (Lenhart, 2009; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011).

1.3. Relationship contexts for CMC-S: Motivations, risks, and prevalence

Finally, there is also much inconsistency surrounding the relationship context in which the sexting interactions occur. Some researchers have presented prevalence statistics for different types of relationships, such as ‘significant others’, ‘romantic interests’, and people whom are known only in an online forum (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008). However, the more recent studies on the topic (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Ferguson, 2011; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011) did not differentiate between these various relationship types in their analyses. Although two of these studies examined attachment variables related to sexting, Drouin and Landgraff (2012) focused only on committed relationships, whereas Weisskirch and Delevi (2011) did not have participants specify a relationship context. According to the limited data presented on this topic in earlier survey studies (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008) and the recent, more comprehensive study with children (Mitchell et al., 2012), relationship type may influence both prevalence and motivations for sexting. Consequently, researchers moving forward in this field should consider differences in sexting practices within the vast array of relationship types that exist in the population being studied.

In terms of the relationship types that are common among college students, recent studies have shown that committed relationships are still very popular; in fact, approximately 85% of Drouin and Landgraff’s (2012) sample reported having had one. They also showed that sexting is a popular means of sexual communication within these committed relationships: the majority of participants had sent sexually explicit texts (67%) or sexually explicit pictures or videos (54%) to their committed partners (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). However, casual sexual relationships are also common among college students (Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Regan & Dreyer, 1999), as are cheating relationships (Grello et al., 2006). Approximately half of the sexually active college students in the Grello et al. (2006) and Regan and Dreyer (1999) samples had engaged in casual sex, and one-fifth of those who engaged in casual sex relationships had another romantic partner at the time of the encounter (Grello et al., 2006). Although sexting could provide an arena for initiating or sustaining sexual contact for casual sexual relationships, there is no known research that has examined the prevalence or motivations for sexting within this context. Presumably, there are different motivations and risks associated with sexting within different relationship contexts. For example, college students in committed relationships might engage in sexting to sustain intimacy with long-term partners who are physically absent (in military or at another university), whereas those in casual sex relationships—where the relationship is based on sex—might engage in sexting to initiate sex. Additionally, some key features of committed relationships—trust and intimacy—are often absent in casual sex or cheating relationships, which makes them somewhat ‘riskier’ in terms of the possibility that sex messages will be forwarded. Therefore, examining the prevalence, motivations, and risks associated with sexting in different relationship contexts

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