



Brief report

Association between sexting and sexual coercion among female adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate whether experiences of offline sexual coercion are associated with adolescent females' involvement in different types of sexting behaviors. It draws on data from 450 ethnically diverse female adolescents with an average age of 19.02 years ($SD = 0.74$) who were originally recruited in southeast Texas. The participants were asked about their experiences with sexual coercion, and their engagement in sexting behavior (i.e., sending, requesting, and being asked for a sext, and receiving a sext without giving permission). Logistic regressions were used to analyze these relationships, while controlling for age, ethnicity, education level, living situation, and sexting behaviors in the year prior of the study. Offline sexual coercion was significantly associated with sending and being asked for a naked image, as well as receiving a naked image without giving permission. The results suggest that sexting could function as an online extension of offline forms of sexual coercion.

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Introduction

Sexting can be broadly defined as the sending of sexually explicit text messages or images via the Internet or mobile phone (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013; Houck et al., 2014). In line with previous research, we focus on the sending or sharing of self-made sexually explicit images (Temple et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Use of a more narrow definition of sexting allows us to better assess the associations of this specific type of sexting, as opposed to using a composite score or broad conceptualization which mixes different types of behaviors (messages and pictures). While research findings linking sexting and risk behaviors (Houck et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2014), and sexting and health (Temple et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014) have been equivocal, studies demonstrating an association between sexting and actual sexual behavior is consistent and robust (Rice et al., 2012; Temple & Choi, 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). When done willingly, sexting may be considered a 21st century form of courting and dating. However, sexting does not always occur within a positive context (Englander, 2015). Indeed, sexting has been shown to predict digital dating violence (Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2016), and research has consistently found that females are often repeatedly asked, pressured, or coerced by others to send self-made sexually explicit pictures (Englander, 2015; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, &

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Harvey, 2012; Walker, Sancı, & Temple-Smith, 2013). Females report feeling compelled to comply with requests for sexting images, for fear of losing their romantic partner or concern about the potential for negative social consequences (e.g., ridiculed, name calling, ostracized) (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker et al., 2013). Similarly, a qualitative study by Ringrose et al. (2012) indicated that engagement in sexting was an extension of offline forms of physical harassment often experienced by teenage girls, such as being touched or groped without consent. In a study among male and female college students, Englander (2015) found that 70% of those who had engaged in sexting felt at least sometimes pressured or coerced to send a self-made sexually explicit photograph, both within and outside of a romantic relationship. When focusing on sexting coercion within the context of romantic relationships, Drouin and Tobin (2014) found that 55% of female college students in a romantic relationship sent a self-made sexually explicit text message, photograph, or video of themselves despite a lack of willingness. Using a more narrow definition of sexting Reed, Tolman, and Ward (2016: 9) found that 21% of females in their collegiate sample had been pressured by their partner “to take a sexually suggestive/nude photo or video.”

Although studies suggest concurrence between sexting and offline forms of sexual coercion, the extent of this relationship is not fully understood. Our study builds on qualitative data (Ringrose et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2013), and on prior quantitative studies (Drouin, Ross, & Tobin, 2015) by using a large ethnically diverse community-based sample and by including multiple forms of sexting behaviors. Specifically, we investigate the extent to which sexual coercion is linked to different types of sexting behaviors among adolescent females. Given the knowledge that the line between offline and online behaviors is becoming increasingly blurred (Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2012), we expect that offline sexual coercion will be linked to sending, requesting, and being asked for a sext, as well as receiving a sext without giving permission.

Methods

Procedure and participants

Data are from Waves 5 and 6 of *Dating it Safe* (Temple, Shorey, Tortolero, Wolfe, & Stuart, 2013), an ongoing longitudinal cohort study of adolescent risky behaviors. Participants ($n = 1042$) were originally recruited from mandated classes in 7 public high schools in southeast Texas (response rate: 62%). Of the 583 females who participated at baseline (spring 2010), 460 (retention rate: 79% of original participants) participated in Wave 6 (spring 2015). We excluded 10 females who reported as “completely homosexual” as prior research (Rice et al., 2012) has shown that sexting behaviors may manifest differently in same sex relationships. The average age of participants ($n = 450$) was 19.02 ($SD = 0.74$). Additional sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. The study was approved by the last author's IRB.

Measurement

Sexting in the past year (Waves 5 & 6)

Based on previous studies (Temple & Choi, 2014), female participants reported four sexting behaviors in the past year with a yes/no response format: 1) Being asked: “have you been asked to send naked pictures of yourself through text, email, or things like SnapChat?” 2) Requesting: “have you asked someone to send naked pictures of them to you?”, 3) Sending: “have you sent naked pictures of yourself to another through text, email, or SnapChat?” and 4) Receiving without one's permission, “has anyone sent you a naked picture without you asking?”

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

	N (%)
Ethnicity	
Hispanic	150 (33.4%)
White	122 (27.1%)
African American	123 (27.3%)
Others	55 (12.2%)
Attending college	
Public/Private University	171 (38.2%)
Community College/Technical school	151 (33.7%)
Not in college (e.g., working)	126 (28.1%)
Living with...	
Family	227 (50.7%)
Friend(s)/Roommate(s)	96 (21.4%)
Girlfriend/Wife or Boyfriend/Husband	89 (19.9%)
Alone	36 (8.0%)
Sexual activity	
Virgin	67 (14.9%)
Non-virgin	383 (85.1%)
Length of relationship	
≤1 year	281 (62.4%)
>1 year	169 (37.6%)

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