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Sexting: Adaptation of sexual behavior to modern technologies

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ABSTRACT

This is the first research that aim to analyze the practice of *Sexting* in Portugal. The goals of this study included comparing the differences between the *Sexting* dimensions and independent factors (gender, age, literacy qualifications, profession, residence, marital status, existence of a stable relationship, most used media, place of frequent use of the media, most commonly used technological device, security perception of communication technology, number of text messages sent per day, recipients of text messages) and corroborating the existence of correlations between the *Sexting* dimensions. The study sample consisted of 301 individuals aged between 18 and 52 years (158 adults and 143 young adults) and included both females (169) and males (132). The instruments used included a translated and adapted version of the Sex and Tech Survey, created by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, and the elaboration of 7 social and demographic questions and 6 questions about media consumption and daily technology use. The results showed that environment exposure was higher in males as well as in the group of individuals of both sexes who sent approximately 76–90 written messages per day. By contrast, positive emotions and the development of greater interest in *Sexting* were higher in women. Positive emotions were higher in young adults, students of both sexes and unemployed persons.

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1. Introduction

People use mobile phones for a variety of purposes: making calls, sending messages, and recording and sharing images, files and multimedia (Lenhart, 2009; Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). Some of this content is sexual in nature (Carvalho & Gomes, 2003). Lenhart (2009) found that mobile phones and messaging can influence the social and sexual lives of teenagers and young adults.

There is an increase in research aimed at identifying the relationship between modern technologies, romantic relationships (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011) and sexual behaviors (Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013; McDaniel & Drouin, 2015; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy – NCPTUP, 2008; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011).

The term “*Sexting*” (“sex” + “texting,” which includes sending photos) is used to denote the exchange of messages containing

sexual content via short message service (SMS). *Sexting* is limited to the dissemination of photos or videos produced by users with their phones or other technological devices without any suggestion or coercion by others (San-José et al., 2011) using the internet and or text messages as the means for the dissemination of the intended sexual (Ferguson, 2011). For NCPTUP (2008) researchers, the practice of sending and publishing nude or partially nude photos has existed for the past ten years and is becoming more frequent as teenagers become adults.

In Weisskirch and Delevi’s (2011) opinion, sexting should be understood as one step in the process of seduction for the establishment of a relationship or an enjoyable way of starting conversations in a relationship. The authors argued that sexting can be used as a strategy to preserve a romantic connection or capture the interest of a romantic partner for people with high levels of anxiety. When this type of message sharing occurs at the beginning of a relationship, it can be seen as a strategy for obtaining a response from the other person. According to Gordon-Messer et al. (2013), *sexting* can be an expression of the results of interactions between romantic partners. The practice of this sexual behavior can be explained by the fact that young people are more creative and receptive to many uses of technology (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013;

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Ostrager, 2010). This behavior might be perceived differently by both senders and receivers of the messages. In the literature different aspects are referred namely attitudes (positive versus negative) and emotional responses (positive versus negative). Another aspect is perception that this practice might increase or decrease the sexual interest of those involved.

The NCPTUP (2008) conducted a study with 1280 US citizens — 653 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19 years and 627 young adults between the ages of 20 and 26 years — and found that 20% of adolescents and 33% of young adults had sent or posted pictures or videos of themselves partially or totally nude. The authors found that sexually suggestive messages (text, mail or instant messages) were more frequent than sexually suggestive images, with 39% of adolescents and 59% of young adults having sent this type of content and 48% and 64%, respectively, having received these types of messages. It was revealed that most teens (71% of girls and 67% of boys) and young adults (83% of women and 75% of men) sent, shared or posted such sexual content with their partners. Adolescents (21% girls and 39% of boys) and young adults (21% of women and 30% of men) showed lower levels of such activity, and it was observed that a small group sent or posted such content for those whom they had met only online (15% of adolescents in general, 15% of women and 23% of men). Similar results were found in a study by Lenhart (2010), which was conducted in the United States with a sample of 2252 people, in which 31% of young adults (aged 18–29 years) and 17% of adults (aged 30–49 years) said that they had received messages with sexual content from someone they knew, but only 13% of young adults and 5% of adults reported having sent such messages.

Ferguson (2011) conducted an investigation on sexting with 207 primarily Hispanic college students aged 16–25 years. The results showed that 20.5% of the participants had sent erotic content or completely nude images of themselves at least once, whereas 34.5% of the participants stated that they had received erotic photos from other people at least once. It was found that most participants use sexting as a mutually consenting activity and perceive sexting to be an exciting part of their sex lives; sexting behaviors were also related positively to sexual satisfaction and positive attitudes about sex. In the authors' opinion, sexting was more common among women who enjoyed an open or uncomplicated practice of sexual behavior.

To explain how texting and sexting practices were related to the establishment of romantic relationships, Drouin and Landgraff (2012) studied a sample of 744 North American college students (233 males and 511 females aged 18–36 years). The results showed that 67% of the participants sent sexually explicit text messages to their romantic partners and that 54% of the participants sent sexually explicit images or videos. Although most individuals often sent ordinary text messages to their partners, one-third of the sample participants reported at least occasionally exchanging sexual messages with their mates. According to the authors, factors such as age and relationship duration may contribute to the messaging frequency, verifying that older couples and people with longer relationships experience a lower message exchange frequency.

To assess compliance in a young adult population (18–24 years), Gordon-Messer et al. (2013) surveyed 3447 young American adults. The results showed that 57% of participants did not practice sexting, 28.2% sent and received sexually explicit content, 12.6% only received sexually explicit content and 2% only sent sexually explicit content. The authors found that men were more likely than women to only receive such messages. The authors also found that those who only received sexual content in messages were 3 times more likely to initiate sexual activity and individuals who sent and received these messages were 14 times more likely to engage in

sexual activity than those who did not participate in sexting. They found that sexting is a reciprocal behavior, with 66% of sample reporting having sent and received messages with sexual content. Similar results were obtained by Weisskirch and Delevi (2011), who concluded that individuals in a romantic relationship are more likely to send and receive sexual content and initiate sexual activity than those who were not in a relationship.

These investigations show that sexting is perceived to be a type of common sexual behavior between young adults and adults in a romantic relationship. However, Levine (2013) underlines that more research on this topic is required and that it is important to consider certain legal issues including those regarding legal age and the consent of all people involved. Other studies (Ferguson, 2011; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013) seek to assess the relationship between sexting and risk behaviors and found that there is no association between these two variables.

Technology updates and the continuous use of mobile media may have facilitated a continuous connection between people. The technical capabilities of individuals is important in generating new sexual behaviors such as sexting, especially among younger people because they have a greater tendency to use modern technology and devices; this tendency also depends on the creativity levels of individuals.

In this research, it is theorized that a large percentage of young adults engage in sexting similarly to young adults of other countries (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Ferguson, 2011; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Lenhart, 2010; NCPTUP, 2008; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011).

The main goal of this study is to describe the practice of sexting in Portugal; previous studies have been performed outside Portugal, but there are no studies in Portugal on this subject. Thus, this study is the first of its kind in Portugal, as it examines a new sexual behavior associated with the use of modern technology. The specific goals of this study consist of a comparison of statistically significant differences between sexting dimensions with respect to i) sex, ii) age, iii) qualifications, iv) job, v) residence, vi) civil status, vii) the existence of a stable romantic relationship, viii) most commonly used media, ix) location of frequent use of media, x) most commonly used technological device, xi) security perceptions in communication technology, xii) number of text messages sent per day, and xiii) text message destination, as well as a verification of correlations between the sexting dimensions.

2. Method

This research is an exploratory pilot study with a quantitative, nonothetic (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005, p32) character and a cross-sectional design.

The sample was collected via the Internet through an online questionnaire. This questionnaire included a brief and clear explanation of the main subject of the study. Following the recommendations of Drouin and Landgraff (2012); Gordon-Messer et al. (2013), NCPTUP (2008), Weisskirch and Delevi (2011) the questionnaires were available for a period of two months. Researchers had no direct impact on the recruitment of subjects. In this case, samples tend to be constructed on the basis on the suggestions that eventually friends made or based on large dissemination that tends to occur due to the posting on social networks.

2.1. Participants

Table 1 shows the descriptive data from the sample.

This study used 13 independent variables (sex – male and female; age – young adults and adults; qualifications – high school and higher education; work status; iii) residence; iv) marital status; v) most commonly used media; vi) place where the media is most

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