



Sexting among undergraduate students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine (a) the relationship between sexual attitudes (i.e., permissive vs. conservative) and the practice of sexting; and (b) whether men had more positive attitudes toward sexting than women. Results revealed that students with permissive sexual attitudes were more likely to engage in sexting practices than those who had conservative attitudes. The main finding of the present study was that relationship status is more important than gender. When relationship status was incorporated into the analysis, the differences between males and females on some of the components extracted from principal components analysis disappeared, but females were still more likely to have higher ratings on the components labeled *Control and Prevention* and *Negative Consequences*.

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1. Introduction

On July 3, 2008, Jesse Logan committed suicide at age 18 by hanging herself in her bedroom (Barkacs & Barkacs, 2010). Jesse had sent her boyfriend some of her nude photos, and after she broke up with him, he sent Jesse's photos to her friends. Her friends bullied her, and called her a "slut" and a "whore." In response, Jesse ended her life by hanging herself in the bedroom. This incident happened as a result of "sexting."

The term sexting has been defined as sending erotic or sexy messages, such as text, pictures, or videos, over a cellphone (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011). Sexting includes sending and/or receiving sex-related text messages, pictures, or videos. Although sexting is a new phenomenon, it is practiced by many teenagers and adults. In 2009, the word sexting was the number one buzzword in Time Magazine (Stephey, 2009).

According to Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin (2005), 45% of teenagers exchanged text messages at least once a day. They observed that, based on telephone interviews of 1100 parent–child pairs, teenagers between ages 12 and 17 spent 7.8 h talking with a friend via text messaging. In their study, Lenhart et al. also observed that people are in fact desperate for friendship and closeness. In addition, studies have shown people prefer text messaging because this practice has some advantages (e.g., it is cost effective; Grinter & Eldridge, 2002; Madell & Muncer, 2007).

There have been several surveys conducted on this topic that show the prevalence of sexting among minors, teenagers, and

adults. In 2008, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy surveyed 635 teens (ages 13–19) and 627 young adults (ages 20–26) ("Sex and Tech," 2008). Eighty-seven percent of the respondents used cellphones to send sexually suggestive pictures, videos, and written text. Of those 87%, 19% of teens (age 13–19 years) and 32% of young adults (age 20–26 years) had sent a nude or a semi-nude pictures or videos of himself/herself to friends ("Sex and Tech," 2008). Of those 32%, 36% of young adult women and 31% of young adult men had sent nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves. According to a very recent peer reviewed survey, 7.1% of 1560 participants had received nude or nearly nude images of their friends (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012).

One of few studies that examined the psychological aspect of sexting was conducted by Weisskirch and Delevi (2011). They studied the relationship between the practice of sexting and adult romantic attachment styles and found no statistically significant relationship between the practice of sexting and age, gender, and ethnicity. However, there was a significant correlation between sexting and relationship status ($p < .05$). Participants who claimed to be in a relationship at the time of data collection were more likely to engage in sexting than those who were single. Propositioning sexual activity was one of the purposes of sexting when in a relationship ($p < .05$). In a very recent study by Temple et al. (2012) it was found that participants who practiced sexting were more likely to be in a relationship or were more likely to be dating someone. Therefore, sexting is more likely to "occur within the context of dating" (Temple et al., 2012, p. 830).

Weisskirch and Delevi (2011) also looked at the relationship between relationship status and the practice of sexting. They found that participants who claimed that they were in a relationship

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were more likely to engage in sexting than those who were single. For people who were in a relationship, sexting was used to initiate an intimate, sexual relationship. One of the limitations of this study is that their sample consisted mostly of women ($n = 106$) and only 22 males.

To gain an understanding of the sexting phenomenon, Chalfen (2009) asserted that one has to understand why teenagers send sexy photos of themselves. He believed that pictures can communicate things that words cannot. Interestingly, people do not need to send a picture of any sexual activities. In fact, most people do not even show their faces or their heads (Chalfen, 2009). For instance, some girls only wear their underwear, a bathing suit, or just a bra. It is not important what the person is wearing or what they are doing as long as it is sexually arousing.

Unlike Weisskirch and Delevi (2011), who did not find any significant differences by gender, studies show that females participate in sexting more than males (Wysocki & Childers, 2011). Females were more likely to claim that they have arranged to have sex with their partners through text messaging. In addition, some of the female participants claimed that they engage in such practices because it is “a tease of what they [the men] could have or what they should have” (p. 230).

Sexting give people the opportunity to explore sexuality and be more exposed to explicit material (Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaita, & Rullo, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to understand the relationship between sexual attitude and the practice of sexting. The present study looks at the practice of sexting and how it is related to sexual attitudes regarding sex and sexuality in general. This study specifically looks at permissive and conservative attitudes and the practice of sexting. No published study has considered the relationship between these to date. One of the hypotheses was that students with permissive sexual attitudes sext more than students with conservative sexual attitudes. According to previous studies, people with permissive sexual attitudes are more likely to engage in sexual activities than those with conservative sexual attitudes (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). The second hypothesis was that males hold more positive attitudes toward sexting practices than females. According to Geer and Robertson (2005), although females hold more permissive attitudes toward sex and sexuality in general than years ago, they still have more conservative sexual attitudes than males; thus, it is expected that females hold more negative attitudes toward the practice of sexting. Because Weisskirch and Delevi (2011) observed that participants who are in a relationship sext more than those who are single, the third hypothesis of this study was that students who report being in a relationship are more likely to also report engaging in sexting practices than those who report being single.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study received ethics approval from the researchers' home university located in Western Canada. Participants were enrolled in one or more psychology courses, and they received bonus credit for their participation.

Of the resulting 525 participants, 262 (49.9%) of the participants were female, while the remaining 263 (50.1%) were male (see Appendix A, Table 1). Ages ranged from 18 to 50. Of this pool, 329 (62.7%) were between the ages of 18 and 20, and 152 (29.0%) were between 21 and 23. In terms of sexual orientation, the majority of participants, 500 (95.2%), identified as heterosexual, 15 (2.9%) identified as homosexual, and 10 (1.9%) as bisexual.

In terms of relationship status, of the 525 participants, 274 (52.2%) indicated being single without any commitments, 52

(9.9%) indicated being single but were dating someone, and 199 (37.9%) indicated being in a relationship (i.e., married, long-term relationship, or friends with benefits) (see Appendix A, Table 2). In terms of the duration of relationship, 104 (19.8%) of the participants indicated being in a relationship for 1 year or less (including those who were dating), 136 (25.9%) were in a relationship for more than 1 year (including those who were dating), 16 (3.0%) were married or partnered, and 269 (51.2%) were single (i.e., had no commitments, and were not dating anyone).

2.2. Materials and procedure

The survey consisted of three parts. The first part included nine biographical questions. The second part included 47 questions. The first 17 questions were from Weisskirch and Delevi (2011), another 30 questions were designed for this study, followed by the 25 questions of the Sexual Attitude Scale (SAS; Hudson, Murphy, & Nurius, 1983).

The 47 potential sexting outcomes or behaviors questions were answered on an 8-point Likert scale (1 = *Totally Disagree* to 7 = *Totally Agree*, 8 = *Not Applicable*) (see Appendix B). The “Not Applicable” option was added to the scale because some questions would not apply to those without sexting experience. (e.g., “I share the sexts I receive with my friends”).

The SAS contains 25 questions and participants are asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*).

Questions 21 and 22 are worded negatively so they are reverse-coded. Scores range from 0 to 100, where lower scores indicate more permissive or liberal attitudes, and higher scores indicate conservative sexual attitudes. According to Hudson et al. (1983), the creators of the scale, 50 is the cutoff; thus scores above 50 indicate greater degrees of conservatism toward human sexual expression, but scores below 50 point to the existence of liberal sexual attitudes. This scale can be used with all English speaking populations, aged 12 or older. This scale was used in this study because the reliability of this is scale is very high ($\alpha = .94$) (Hudson et al., 1983), and it could be filled out in a very short period of time because of its brevity.

The questions were answered online, thereby providing maximum anonymity. Participants were first given a short description of the study (e.g., purpose, requirements for participation, and the definition of sexting). Next, they were provided the questionnaires. Lastly, participants were provided a written debriefing form.

3. Results

Of the 525 participants, 60.8% ($n = 319$) claimed that they are currently engaging in the practice of sexting or have engaged in this practice in the past. Of the 319 participants who practice sexting 62.4% ($n = 164$) were male, and 59.2% ($n = 155$) were female (see Appendix A, Table 1).

In order to test the differences between men and women in the practice of sexting, the data were analyzed using a 2×2 chi-square contingency analysis. The analysis did not reveal a significant difference between men and women, $\chi^2(1) = 0.56$, $p = .453$. Therefore, men and women in the current study engage in sexting practices equally (see Appendix A, Table 1).

The analysis did not reveal any significant differences between people with various sexual orientations, religions, and citizenship, $\chi^2(2) = 1.42$, $p = .492$, $\chi^2(11) = 10.91$, $p = .451$, $\chi^2(6) = 5.96$, $p = .428$, respectively. Thus, participants with various sexual orientations, religions, and citizenship statuses engage in practice of sexting equally.

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