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 JOURNAL OF
 ADOLESCENT
 HEALTH

www.jahonline.org

Review article

Sexting and the Definition Issue

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Article history: Received October 25, 2016; Accepted May 4, 2017

Keywords: Sexting; Youths; Adolescents; Review; Definition; Characteristics

 A B S T R A C T

Sexting among youths has become a necessary topic of interest in research because of the negative consequences that this activity could create, especially when content is shared with others. Indeed, this loss of control could lead to humiliation, (cyber)bullying, or harassment. The development of new technologies, press coverage, and increase of prevalence rates could also explain the growth of interest in sexting. However, its definition is still a gray area. This review examines the different definitions of sexting used in the literature and its correlates. Several elements of the definition of sexting were assessed: actions (sending, receiving, and forwarding); media types (text, images, and videos); sexual characteristics; and transmission modes. Nine databases were searched for studies on sexting among youths up to 18 years of age. Eighteen studies published between 2012 and 2015 were included. Prevalence rates of sexting ranged between .9% and 60% partly depending on the definition. Most studies assessed sending, but when sending and receiving were measured, prevalence rates were higher for receiving. Some articles found associations with age, gender, race, sexual behavior, romantic relationships, risky behaviors, online activity, psychological difficulties, and social pressure. Finding a consensus regarding the definition is essential to assess accurately the activity and adapt prevention. Adolescents' interpretations of the activity are important as sexting could be used as a sexual behavior between two consenting persons. Prevention strategies should focus on sexting that goes wrong when it is forwarded to a third party and when it occurs in a context of pressure or harassment.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

To understand sexting and adapt prevention, there is a need to find a consensus on its definition in terms of actions (sending, receiving, and forwarding), media types (text, images, and videos), and content. This study provides a detailed review of these different dimensions to pave the way for a clearer definition of sexting.

The Internet and new technologies have become socializing tools, particularly appreciated by adolescents with the development of their communication skills [1–3]. This connected environment has changed the social context in which their relationships with others are created and perpetuated [4]. During adolescence, the construction of a personal identity also implies sexuality exploration [5]. Indeed, little by little, adolescents discover sexuality and today, new technologies with their

unlimited connection and instantaneous communication and impression of security are fully part of this process and influence interactive experiences [2,3,6]. Technology progress and development of communication and sharing means, including growth of the Smartphone market and conception of new applications, frequently lead to the creation, the evolution or the facilitation of certain behaviors [7,8] such as sexting, the contraction of sex and texting.

Regarding young people, considering sexting as a problem per se or as a risky behavior appears to be a controversial issue [4,9]. On the one hand, in a sexualization context, sexting could be considered as a harmless way to express desire and a consensual practice between two persons [10]. On the other hand, some

Conflicts of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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negative consequences could result from this activity, such as humiliation, (cyber)bullying, or harassment, especially when the content is shared with others without consent and it goes viral [3,10,11]. Legal aspects are also debated, particularly when minors are involved, to determine if it could be considered as child pornography [9]. Finally, a previous literature review on sexting emphasized the demonizing of it as results showed that most of the reviewed studies sought to associate sexting with other risk behaviors [4].

The aim of this review was to examine the existing literature on sexting among adolescents up to 18 years old. The upper age limit was determined according to the rationale that possible consequences of sexting would be different for minors in terms of crisis management and legal issues. Moreover, minors are particularly vulnerable because they might be less conscious regarding the limits of what they share of their private sphere online. We structured our research according to two questions: (1) what are the similarities and differences in the measures of sexting and questions used in the literature to determine how this activity is currently defined and (2) what are the characteristics and correlates of sexting to explore the main contexts of sexting reported up to now. Compared with previous reviews on sexting [4,12,13], this review provides additional information on three aspects. First, even if the definition aspect has been touched upon, we conducted a detailed analysis differentiating and examining each element of the definition of sexting: actions (sending, receiving, and forwarding); media types (text, images, and videos); sexual content; and transmission modes. Second, we were interested in the characteristics of sexting. In addition to an update with articles of 2015, we included a large overview of the different correlates of sexting such as gender issues, Internet outcomes, relational context, and mental health. Third, as additional information and to offer a complete synthesis, we also collected the prevalence rates of the activity.

Methods

Search strategy

On November 4, 2015, MEDLINE (PubMed/OVID), Embase, PsycINFO, Web of Science, BDSP (database in Public Health), SAPHIR, Library Network of Western Switzerland, and ScienceDirect databases were scanned. Participants' age was limited to 18 years and younger. For this limit, we used the following terms in the search: adolescent, adolescence, child, teen, teenager, youth, young adult, and young people. Whenever possible, we used database-specific indexing terms: adolescent, young adult (MeSH terms); juvenile, adolescent, child (Embase); child, pre-adolescent, adolescent, young adult, student (including pupil and apprentice; BDSP). Even if we limited the age to 18 years and younger, we decided to include terms like young adult and young people in the search strategy to make sure that age range and definitions were properly used as they could vary. For example, the World Health Organization gave overlapping definitions with adolescents defined as people from 10 to 19 years, youth from 15 to 24 years, and young people from 10 to 24 years [14]. To not miss an article, we therefore preferred to check all the articles that were identified with this search strategy and excluded them after having confirmed the age range used. For the concept of sexting, we used specific terms such as sexting, sex-texting, sexual messaging, and sexto, and only one database (Embase) had the term sexting as an indexing term. We also combined

terms related to social media and the Internet (cyberbullying, bullying, the Internet, social media, cell phones, cellular phone, text messaging, and online social networks) with sexual terms (sex, sexual, and psychosexual behavior). These terms were searched in all possible fields, regardless of their place in the article (title, abstract, keywords, main text, and so on). No limits were given for geographic areas, year of publication, and method used. For language, we restrained the search to English. All types of articles were included in the search strategy (book chapters, peer-reviewed journal articles, abstracts, and so on). Overall, 428 records were identified, and 205 duplicate results were excluded.

Inclusion criteria

The 223 remaining records were assessed for eligibility on the basis of the abstract, and in case of doubt, the full-text was read. The first inclusion criterion was that sexting had to be the main focus of the article. If it was used as a secondary outcome, we considered the article as out of subject.

Regarding the age limit of 18 years, some articles were not clear about the age. One of them mentioned 18 years for the upper age limit, but the category 18 years or older was presented in the tables [11]. Another article only used the high school term without any age indication [15], and three others only gave means or medians with standard deviation as the only information on age [9,16,17]. We contacted the authors of these articles and three of them confirmed that the upper age limit was over 18 years [11,15,17], whereas one confirmed that participants were under the age of 18 years [9]. Another author did not confirm but presumed that it might comprise a few older than 18-year-old adolescents because some pupils tend to repeat 1 or 2 years during their school careers because they underperform at school (grade retention) [16]. Thus, we decided to exclude this article. A longitudinal article was based on the second and third waves of a study and indicated an age range of 14–18 years for the second wave [18,19]. Even if the article used data from participants aged more than 18 years in the third wave, we decided to include it because we considered that data were initially based on the first wave with an age range of 13–17 years.

Next, we decided to exclude articles that did not present the results of a study per se (editorials, commentaries, letters to the editor, position statements, erratum, reports, books for general public, or case reports). We did not include abstracts or conference proceedings either because some information was lacking. Reviews were also excluded, but we went through their reference lists to check if we missed any article. Our final sample consisted of 18 articles (Figure 1).

Results

Overview

The articles included in this review were in English and were published between 2012 and 2015. The majority presented results from the USA ($n = 10$) followed by two articles on data from the United Kingdom, two others on multiple European countries, one from Belgium, one from the Slovak Republic, one from the Czech Republic, and one from Peru. Respondents' age range from 10 to 18 years. Most used methods were quantitative ($n = 15$), only one article used longitudinal data [18], two used a qualitative approach [20,21], and one used mixed methods [22]. We decided to combine the results of the two qualitative articles because they

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