

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jado

Girls' and boys' experience with teen sexting in early and late adolescence



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 6 July 2016

Keywords:

Sexual messages
Risk behavior
Online sexual activity
Psychosexual development
Online risk

ABSTRACT

This study explored the extent to which sexting represents a problematic behavior in early and late adolescence. Using data from the EU Kids Online II project (17,016 participants aged 11–16 from 25 European countries, 49.7% boys), multilevel logistic regression analyses were conducted separately for four groups: younger girls, older girls, younger boys, and older boys. Irrespective of age and gender, sexting was associated with emotional problems and alcohol use. Its effect decreased in older adolescents, except for emotional difficulties, which remained relatively high in older boys. Vaginal sex was associated with sexting in both younger and older boys while, in girls, the association was observed only in the older group. Younger boys with higher self-efficacy were more likely to send sexts than those with lower self-efficacy. Although sexting is associated with psychological challenges and other types of risk behavior, sexting in some younger boys may not necessarily represent problematic behavior.

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Introduction

Teen sexting is a new phenomenon which has received a large amount of attention. Sexting refers to the electronic exchange of sexually suggestive messages (i.e., sexts), mainly pictures depicting their authors in nude or semi-nude positions (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013).

Literature on teen sexting indicates that this behavior may occur in various contexts and may be driven by numerous factors. On one hand, there is a large proportion of studies that show that sexting is part of the communication between teenagers in romantic relationships (Kerstens & Stol, 2014; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; Walker, Sancı, & Temple-Smith, 2013; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2012) and that it is more likely to occur in older adolescents (Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, Valkenburg, & Livingstone, 2014; Kerstens & Stol, 2014; Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). The evidence indicates that sexting represents a new sexual activity through which adolescents express their sexuality and which is a key developmental task for this age group. On the other hand, teen sexting has been found to be an indicator of risk behavior rather than a marker of healthy psychosexual development (for review, see Van Ouytsel, Walrave, Ponnet, & Heirman, 2015). Health-related risks associated with sexting range from depressive symptomatology (including contemplating or attempting suicide) to early sexual debut, sexual-risk behavior, substance use, and cyberbullying victimization (Kerstens & Stol, 2014; Temple et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Ponnet, &

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jadolescence.2016.06.007>

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Walrave, 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). This complex picture shows that sexting may be linked to healthy sexual maturation for some adolescents and may also be associated with a constellation of mental problems and risk behavior in other adolescents. This study aims at the greater understanding of the role of this new behavior in adolescent psychosexual development.

There is an indication that age and gender may play a crucial role in what extent sexting is a marker of poorer mental health. Temple et al. (2014) found that, after adjusting for socio-demographic characteristics and prior sexual experience, sexting was no longer associated with mental problems, such as depression and anxiety symptoms. To understand this finding, it might be relevant to consider the age at which an adolescent engages in sexting. Sexting in early adolescence may be carried out under qualitatively different conditions than sexting in late adolescents. Drawing on Brown (1999) developmental-contextual model of (romantic) adolescent relationships, where sexting may occur during adolescence, dating behavior in younger adolescents is much more influenced by peers. Their friends and classmates provide the norms for romantic relationships and establish the value for the romantic relationships and the extent to which they enhance the individual's social status. Sexting, then, might be more common in psychologically vulnerable adolescents who have difficulties to handle peer pressure and deal with peer norms. In contrast, romantic relationships in older adolescents are less tied to group values and are more focused on the expression of affectionate needs. For them, sexting could have the function of maintaining intimacy. Sharing intimate photos may represent one of the possible ways they voluntarily express their sexuality.

However, the sexual double standard may influence the meaning of sexting in early and late adolescence. Therefore, the role of gender must be considered as well. Few (mainly qualitative) research studies show that the judgment of sexting in girls is extreme. Even if they refuse to sext, girls seem to face more criticism than boys (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker et al., 2013). Boys are positively valued for participation in this behavior and have higher peer status and popularity than those who do not engage in sexting (Ringrose et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013).

Engaging in sexual behavior, including sexting, for not purely sexual reasons is especially true for younger adolescent boys to whom same-sex groups are salient (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). By demonstrating sexual activity or access to sex, young boys generally show masculinity and strengthen their peer status and reputation in same-sex groups; in the literature this is referred to as “homosocial masculine culture” (Flood, 2008; Gagnon & Simon, 2011). Girls' younger adolescent peer groups accentuate issues different from sexual performance – mainly due to a double standard which makes them less motivated to engage in sexually related activities (for review see Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Gagnon & Simon, 2011; Kreager & Staff, 2009). If some girls are involved, factors that contribute to sexual behavior are mostly related to a variety of psychosocial problems (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008).

The present study

The aim of this study is to take a look at the profiles of younger female and younger male adolescent sexters, and at the profiles of older female and older male adolescent sexters to understand the extent to which sexting represents a problematic behavior in early and late adolescence. This has not been sufficiently examined and the role of gender socialization in psychosexual development has often been overlooked. Several markers of mental health and psychosocial development are taken into account – namely, emotional problems, alcohol use, and vaginal sex – because they have been found to be associated with sexting (Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). These markers are crucial because the strength of their associations with sexting within the studied groups may show for whom sexting is an indicator of healthy sexual maturation (e.g. vaginal sex with consent that takes place within a romantic relationship) or a marker for mental problems (e.g. emotional problems). As for alcohol use, this risky behavior, if manifested at a young age, is primarily associated with underlying psychopathology (e.g. depression) in both boys and girls such that this behavioral problem may be treated as an indirect indicator of poor mental health (King, Iacono, & McGue, 2004). Alcohol use was associated with sexting in both younger and older adolescents; however, the effect of alcohol use was stronger in the group of younger adolescents (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014).

Based on these findings it is expected that:

H1: Irrespective of gender, alcohol use will be associated with sexting in all adolescents with an increased effect on younger adolescents.

Prior research found that emotional problems measured with the use of SDQ was gender invariant in school-aged adolescents (Koskelainen, Sourander, & Kaljonen, 2000). Emotional difficulties may play a crucial role in sexting, because sending sexts to others may be influenced by peer pressure and peer influence, which are stronger in the early stages of adolescence (Brown, 1999).

Drawing on the assumption that adolescents with emotional difficulties are vulnerable while dealing with peer pressure, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Irrespective of gender, greater emotional problems will be associated with sexting only in younger adolescents.

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