



Brief report: The association between adolescents' characteristics and engagement in sexting



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ABSTRACT

The potential emotional and legal consequences of adolescents' engagement in sending sexually explicit pictures through the internet or the mobile phone (i.e., sexting) have caused significant concern about the behavior among practitioners and academics. The present study compares the characteristics of students who engage in sexting to those who do not. A survey among 1028 adolescents of 11 secondary schools in Belgium was administered. Logistic regression analyses suggest that sexting is significantly linked with sensation seeking, experiential thinking styles and depression, while controlling for gender, age, family status and students' response to economic stress. The results are of importance to practitioners who could adapt their prevention and intervention campaigns to better reach this complex youth. Differences with the findings of previous studies highlight the importance of continuing research on sexting and the need to pay attention to the specific context in which adolescent sexting takes place.

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The limited research on adolescent sexting has mainly focused on the associations between sexting and a variety of risk behaviors and states, such as sexual risk behaviors, health risk behaviors, conduct problems and emotional difficulties (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, Ponnet, & Heirman, 2014). A brief report by Temple et al. (2014), for instance, investigated the relationships between teenage sexting and impulsivity, substance use and symptoms of anxiety and depression. This line of research on adolescent sexting holds important implications for practitioners as it can help them to screen for involvement in other risk behavior when a sexting incident occurs (Temple et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2012).

Compared to the amount of research on the risk behaviors and states associated with adolescent engagement in sexting, far less studies have focused on personality traits that might be predictive of sexting. Examining the traits and characteristics of teenagers who engage in sexting behavior can help practitioners to better understand the unique context in which adolescent sexting takes place and can aid them in identifying at-risk youth.

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The scarce research on the association between personality traits and adults' engagement in sexting (e.g., Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013), has only limited relevance for the research field on adolescent sexting. Teenagers' engagement in sexting may differ from adult sexting, as it is often driven by specific peer group dynamics (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Walrave, Heirman, & Hallam, 2014). Moreover, it plays an important role within adolescents' sexual development process (Temple et al., 2014) and has distinct legal consequences for those involved (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Van Gool, 2014).

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the association between adolescents' engagement in sexting, personality traits (i.e., sensation seeking and rational and experiential thinking styles), while controlling for background variables such as gender, age, family status, and the social economic status of the respondents. Moreover, we examine the relation between sexting and depression, as these are examples of important traits and states that might alter individuals' decision making processes (Lauriola, Panno, Levin, & Lejuez, 2014; Shad, Bidesi, Chen, Ernst, & Rao, 2011), and therefore might impair adolescents' ability to fully evaluate the potential adverse consequences of sharing sexting messages.

Methods

The data are a part of a large-scale longitudinal study on online self-disclosure in 98 classes of 11 secondary schools in Flanders, Belgium. In the second wave a question about sexting was asked. The sample comprises 1028 adolescents (58.0% girls; $n = 596$) between 15 and 18 years old ($M = 16.68$; $SD = .67$). Formal consent from the school's principal and parental consent was sought prior to the study.

Measures

Demographics and control variables

Participants answered questions about their age, gender, family status and their response to economic stress within their families. These variables were used in the analysis as control variables and were measured during the second wave of our study.

The item about the *family status of the respondents* asked whether they lived with their mother and father or whether they lived in a different family setting. The responses were recoded into 1 = *living with both parents* (74.8%; $n = 767$) and 2 = *not living with both parents* (25.2%; $n = 259$).

The *student's response to economic stress* included all eight items from the second version of 'The Responses to Stress Questionnaire' (Wadsworth & Compas, 2002) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$), which asks students to indicate "how often they experienced and how they responded to economic strains in their lives" (Wadsworth & Compas, 2002, p. 253). All factor loadings were above .71.

Traits and depression

Validated measures were used to assess sensation seeking, rational and experiential thinking styles and depression.

Sensation seeking was measured on a 6-point scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$) during the first wave of our study, using seven items from the Brief Sensation Seeking Scale (Hoyle, Stephenson, Palmgreen, Lorch, & Donohew, 2002). All factor loadings were above .42.

Rational and experiential thinking styles were measured on a 6-point scale using the rational (5 items) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$) and experiential engagement (5 items) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$) scales from the brief Rational-Experiential Inventory (REI) (Pacini & Epstein, 1999) during the first wave of our study. The factor loadings for the items assessing experiential thinking styles were above .47 and above .43 for the items assessing rational thinking styles.

Depression was measured during the second wave of our study using the 4-point, 8-item CES-D8 scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$), which was validated across countries and genders (Ponnet et al., 2013; Van de Velde, Bracke, & Levecque, 2010). The factor loadings for all items were above .56.

Sexting behavior

Sexting behavior was assessed using a single-item question asking the respondents whether they had sent a sexually suggestive picture (naked or half naked) of themselves using the internet or a mobile phone in the months prior to the study. The response options ranged from 1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*. Because most students did on average not engage ($M = 1.21$; $SD = .68$) in sexting behavior, the responses were recoded into a binary variable with 0 = *never having engaged in sexting during the past months* (88.9%; $n = 907$) and 1 = *having engaged in sexting* (11.1%; $n = 114$). Seven respondents decided not to answer the question.

Data analysis

The scales were created using Principal Axis Factoring. A logistic regression model was executed in IBM SPSS 22.0 to address the study's aim. In a first step, the control variables were entered. In a second step, the predictor variables sensation

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