



Sexting prevalence and correlates: A systematic literature review



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Sexting is a prevalent behaviour with greatly varying definitions and measurements.
- Attitudes towards sexting and outcomes are influenced by own sexting behaviour.
- People who have sexted are more likely to engage in sexual risk behaviours.
- There have been more observations of females perceiving pressure to sext than males.
- More research is needed with regard to risk- and protective factors in sexting.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 March 2013

Received in revised form 17 September 2013

Accepted 28 October 2013

Available online 5 November 2013

Keywords:

Sexting

Sexting behaviour

Sexual risk behaviour

Mental health

Attitudes

Attachment

ABSTRACT

Despite considerable controversy and speculation regarding sexting behaviour and its associated risks, to date there has been no integration and analysis of empirical literature on this topic. To collect and synthesise findings of the prevalence of sexting, its correlates, and the context in which it occurs, a systematic search of databases was conducted. Thirty-one studies, reporting on sexting prevalence and a diverse range of related variables, met inclusion criteria. The estimated mean prevalence weighted by sample size was calculated, with trends indicating sexting is more prevalent amongst adults than adolescents, older age is predictive of sexting for adolescents but not adults, and more individuals report receiving sexts than sending them. The correlates of sexting behaviour were grouped in terms of demographic variables, sexual and sexual risk behaviours, attitudes towards sexting, perceived outcomes of sexting, motivations for sexting, mental health and well-being variables, and attachment dimensions. Findings are discussed in terms of the trends indicated by the data, which provided substantiation that sexting behaviour is associated with numerous behavioural, psychological, and social factors. Limitations of the current research literature and future directions are also presented.

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1. Introduction

Sexing is a highly publicised issue, with discussions often focussing on the legal ramifications of this behaviour, as well as the purported impacts on recipients of sexted materials. However, little empirical research exists on its clinical correlates of those who engage in the activity. This paper addresses this gap, by systematically reviewing the literature regarding sexting, specifically focussing on prevalence rates as well as risk and protective factors. For this review, we will define sexting as the sending, receiving, or forwarding of sexually explicit messages, images, or photos to others through electronic means, primarily between cellular phones.

Sexing has received much media attention, with several potentially adverse outcomes identified, including (a) the broader dissemination of sensitive sexual material without consent, (b) potentially serious legal consequences, particularly if those involved are under legal age, (c) negative mental health repercussions, and (d) associated risk behaviours (Celizic, 2009; Judge, 2012; Richards & Calvert, 2009). Aggravating circumstances, such as blackmail, sexual abuse, or lack of consent, that typically surround cases of sexting behaviour that have come to the attention of law enforcement agencies further raise related health and sexual risk behaviour concerns (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2012).

Given the degree of attention sexting behaviour has received, there have been calls for increased awareness of the behavioural and psychosocial factors thought to be associated with sexting (Katzman, 2010). Others have pointed to sexting as a health issue in need of further study (Muscari, 2010). Although the salience of publicised court cases of sexting may implicitly denote that these behaviours are related to adverse outcomes and poor mental health, the average experience of sexters is unclear. Knowledge of the effects of variables, such as gender and age, may help clarify which demographic groups are more likely to engage in sexting behaviours. As well as knowledge of the prevalence and outcomes of sexting, others considerations surrounding these behaviours may be important. For example, an increased understanding of how people view sexting behaviour, including their attitudes towards it, their perception of the risks involved, and their reason for engaging in these behaviours, would provide a richer context for their occurrence.

Although numerous opinion and critical pieces on the topic of sexting have emerged in recent times, empirical research reviewing the prevalence and correlates of sexting is lacking. Further, articles presenting summaries of research have been based on findings from a limited time-frame (e.g. Lounsbury, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2011), or have included only a sub sample of available studies without accompanying analysis (Agustina & Gómez-Durán, 2012). Given that research into sexting behaviours is in its early stages, and there has been large variation in research questions and methods across fields of inquiry, there is a need for a synthesised review. Such a review may assist in providing a clearer picture of findings relating to sexting behaviour to date, more accurately orient researchers towards gaps in the evidence, and identify future research directions more clearly. Therefore, the aim of this review is to systematically collate, review and summarise previous empirical research pertaining to sexting behaviour, and variables associated with sexting behaviour.

2. Method

2.1. Literature search

To ensure quality assurance, the present review was conducted in accordance with the evidence-based guidelines for systematic reviews set forth in the PRISMA statement (Liberati et al., 2009). On August 4th 2013, electronic literature searches were conducted using the following databases: Academic Search Complete, CINAHL, MEDline, PsycARTICLES, PsycEXTRA, Psychology and Behavioural Science Collection, and PsycINFO. These databases were chosen to reflect the broad range of fields in which research on sexting has appeared,

including psychology, communications, legal studies, and medicine. The search included articles published between January 2000 and August 2013 (inclusive) that were written in the English language. The word “sexting” was used as the keyword appearing in the title. The abstracts of all returned articles were then read and assessed for eligibility. The full article was retrieved only if the following inclusion criteria were satisfied:

- The focus of the article was the prevalence of sexting and/or variables related to sexting;
- sexting was defined as sending texts or photos, receiving texts or photos, or sending as well as receiving texts or photos of a sexual nature;
- the article presented original quantitative empirical data, rather than a summary or critique of previously reported data; and
- sufficient information was presented so that the methodology of the study and the results could be extracted.

The initial search returned 159 articles, with 128 remaining after the removal of duplicates. Of these, 34 were identified by their abstract as potentially meeting criteria. After evaluating the full text, 19 of these were retained for review. The reference lists of these articles were then examined and any additional studies that appeared to satisfy criteria for inclusion, but were not captured by the initial search, were obtained and assessed. This search yielded a further 12 eligible studies. In total, 31 articles were included in the final review. A visual summary of the search process is presented in Fig. 1, whilst details of the included studies are provided in Table 1.

One notable issue with research examining sexting behaviour is the variability with which sexting behaviour has been defined and measured (Lounsbury et al., 2011). Whilst some studies have demarcated and measured distinctive sexting behaviours, such as sending

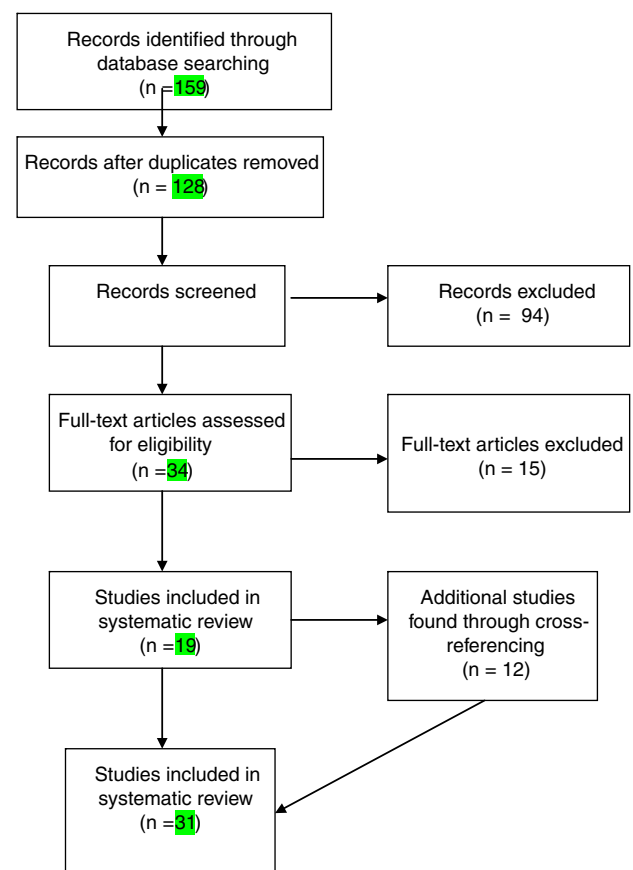


Fig. 1. Flowchart of the study selection process.

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