

Public Abstract

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Title:ADOLESCENT SEXTING: AN EXAMINATION OF THE PSYCHOSOCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CREATION AND SHARING OF SEXUAL IMAGES

Sexting, typically defined as the sending, receiving, or forwarding of sexually explicit or suggestive messages or images through cell phones and other mobile devices, is a popular activity among adolescents and is becoming a part of the dating process. Societal concerns about adolescent sexting range from moral panic to legality issues. Similarly, much existing research on sexting centers on legal issues or bullying, while less research considers the health implications of sexting. The most recent research has begun to examine the associations between media socialization and sexting. It is important to understand the various predictors of sexting; this could inform intervention programs centered on this phenomenon. Thus, this study examined the psychosocial predictors of adolescent sexting, focusing specifically on developmental, gendered, and technological explanations. After a pre-test of 220 college-age individuals was completed in order to determine the positive and negative consequences of sexting, a cross-sectional survey of 201 Midwestern adolescents aged 14-17 was conducted.

Results showed that higher levels of online disinhibition positively predicted sexting intentions, subjective norms, and behaviors, yet it did not predict sexting attitudes, and these relationships were not moderated by personal false beliefs or imaginary audience beliefs. Higher levels of online disinhibition also positively predicted the receiving and requesting of sext messages, but not the sending of sext messages. The second set of analyses showed gender differences in sexting: boys had more favorable attitudes about sexting, girls perceived higher levels of subjective norms of sexting, yet there was no difference between sexting intentions or behaviors between boys and girls. Additionally, boys requested sext messages more than girls, but boys and girls were equally likely to send and receive sexting messages. Results also showed that girls received more negative consequences for sexting, while boys received more positive consequences regarding sexting, and boys felt more strongly that girls should receive the negative consequences of sexting compared to girls. Finally, the acceptance of women as sex objects predicted positive sexting attitudes and intentions to sext, but this relationship was not moderated by gender. The third set of analyses showed that higher levels of trait self-objectification positively predicted favorable attitudes about sexting, sexting intentions, and sexting subjective norms for girls, and that self-objectification mediated the relationship between internalization of sexualization and sexting attitudes. Self-objectification did not predict any of the sexting variables for boys, but sociocultural beliefs about attractiveness portrayed in the media positively predicted sexting attitudes, intentions, and subjective norms for boys. The results of this study can usefully inform educational and targeted intervention programs regarding sexting risks.