Chapter 6

Sexting Behaviors Among Adolescents and Adults: Prevalence and Correlates Within Romantic Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Exchanging sexually explicit messages has become an increasingly common form of interaction for both adolescents and adults. Although sexting has been identified as a risk factor for a variety of negative outcomes, this research has generally been conducted without attention to the relationship context of the communicators. This chapter will examine the prevalence of sexting in the context of existing romantic relationships, and how sexting may relate to features of the relationship. The authors will review existing research examining motivations for sexting with romantic partners, pressure to engage in sexting, and associations between sexting and romantic attachment styles and relationship satisfaction. The chapter will conclude with discussion of important future directions for research.

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INTRODUCTION

With the rapid rise in the number and popularity of digital communication platforms, exchanging sexually explicit messages has become increasingly common (Madigan, Ly, Rash, Van Ouytsel & Temple, 2018). Sexting, which can include exchanging sexually explicit text communication, images, or video, has been associated with a variety of negative outcomes, including risky sexual behaviors (Dake, Price, Maziarz & Ward, 2012; Ševčíková, 2016), social problems such as cyberbullying (Kowalski, Limber & Agatston, 2007), and psychological maladjustment (Brinkley, Ackerman, Ehrenreich & Underwood, 2017; Selkie, Kota, Chan, & Moreno, 2015; Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Ponnet & Walrave, 2014). However, much of the foundational research examining sexting has focused on the correlates and consequences of engaging in this behavior (Dake et al., 2012; Houck et al., 2013; Klettke, Hallford & Mellor, 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014), without examining the context in which this behavior occurs. A commonly overlooked context in which sexting occurs is within offline romantic relationships (Döring, 2014, Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). Understanding how sexting occurs within the context of these relationships, and may be impacted by features of these relationships, is an important step in understanding the impact of sexting on psychosocial functioning. The guiding purpose of this chapter is to describe sexting behaviors within the context of romantic relationships, summarizing research on how sexting may relate to features of these relationships and identifying where additional research is needed.

This chapter will begin with a review of the definitions of sexting and prevalence rates of sexting in and out of both adolescents’ and adults’ romantic relationships. The primary focus will be to review existing research that has examined sexting behaviors within the context of romantic relationships, focusing on motivations for sexting, pressure to engage in sexting, non-consensual sharing of images, and the correlations between sexting and relationship satisfaction and romantic attachment style. Given that research examining sexting with one’s romantic partner has primarily been examined in young adult samples, this will represent the majority of the research reviewed. Studies examining sexting within adolescent and later adult relationships will also be presented when available. Research on sexting has also predominantly focused on heterosexual couples. These couples will be the focus of our review, however we will specify when research examining non-heterosexual relationships is presented. The chapter will conclude with future directions for research.
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