Chapter 7
Send Nudes?: Sexting Experiences and Victimization Relating to Attachment and Rejection Sensitivity – Incorporating Sexual Minority Perspectives

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ABSTRACT
As texting continues to serve as an increasingly common method of communication among emerging adults, increases in rates of sexting, or sending sexually explicit messages, pictures, or videos, have also been observed. While consensual sexting can facilitate intimacy in relationships, when used as a tool to victimize others, it has been shown to yield a range of negative outcomes: from embarrassment to severe depression and suicide. This chapter aims to review the existing literature on emerging adults’ engagement in and evaluations of sexting, while also considering the risks associated with sexting victimization. The role that individual characteristics, such as attachment style and rejection sensitivity as well as demographic characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, and relationship status, play in the relation between experiences with and evaluations of using sexting as a tool for victimization will also be explored.

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INTRODUCTION

As technology use increasingly dominates the social lives of emerging adults (EAs), intimate communication—and potentially victimization—between romantic partners is transforming. This shift is especially apparent in rates of sexting, or the sending or receiving of sexually suggestive written messages, pictures, or videos. Sexting has become an increasingly common relationship ritual in young adults’ romantic lives, with a conservative estimate of nearly 43% of youth between the ages of 18-24 years having sexted (Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013). In another sample, 80.9% of 697 undergraduate participants reported having sent a sext at least once in their lifetime, and nearly half of the entire sample (48.5%) had sent a sext within the last 30 days (Hudson & Fetro, 2015). Given its ubiquity in emerging adulthood, it is essential to consider that although consensual sexting can facilitate intimacy in relationships (e.g., Burkett, 2015), when individuals are coerced into sexting or when sexting is used as a tool to victimize others, it can yield a range of negative outcomes from embarrassment to severe depression and suicide (Celizic, 2009; Judge, 2012). Nonetheless, little research has examined EAs’ actual engagement in and evaluations of sexting as they relate to individual characteristics that might be associated with heightened vulnerability to the potential negative outcomes of sexting. Even more, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), are largely absent from the literature on sexting, and are at an increased risk of victimization due to their marginalized status. Studies have found that individuals who identify as LGB participate in sexting more regularly than their heterosexual peers (Albury, 2014), yet they remain out of focus for most of the current studies. In an attempt to understand those individuals who might be most at risk, this chapter presents an original study that addresses this gap in the literature by assessing EAs’ engagement in and evaluations of sexting and sexting victimization, together with individual characteristics—insecure attachment and rejection sensitivity—that are associated with other types of relational victimization (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; Drouin & Tobin, 2014), and sexual orientation, which has thus far been largely left out of the literature on sexting victimization, all of which might be linked to heightened vulnerability to the negative aspects of sexting, such as sexting victimization.

BACKGROUND

General Trends in Sexting

Though sexting prevalence rates vary from study to study (see Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014), even conservative estimates (e.g., Gordon-Messer et al., 2013) indicate that sexting has become common practice among EAs. The variability in estimates of sexting behaviors is likely due to the complexity in operationalizing sexting altogether (Klettke et al., 2014). In a review of young adults’ sexting, Klettke and colleagues (2014) found on average 53% of young adults send sexual texts and photos (49% reported sending sexts specifically with photo images), while 56% of young adults report having received sexts. Furthermore, studies have shown that individuals who identify as LGB demonstrate higher rates of participation in sexting than their heterosexual peers (Albury, 2014). These rates are specifically high in gay males, but are overall higher than heterosexual peers because of social pressures to keep homosexual relationships out of the public view. As a result, many LGB individuals turn to online sources to find
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