

## VIEWPOINT

# Adolescent Sexting Research

## The Challenges Ahead

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**Sexting is a relatively** commonplace behavior among adolescents. A study in southeast Texas found that 27.6% (259 of 964) of teenagers have sent self-made sexually explicit photographs of themselves.<sup>1</sup> For some teenagers, sexting may be a normal part of their sexual development and experimentation.<sup>2</sup> However, it remains an important public health issue because the behavior comes with a risk for reputational damage and has been associated with other risk-taking behaviors such as substance use, risky sexual behaviors, and cyberbullying.<sup>1,3</sup> The field research has substantially grown during the past years. A search in the Web of Science index for the keyword "sexting" shows that in 2013, 74 articles were published on the topic. By October 2017, this body of research grew to 273 publications. Despite the boom of research activity surrounding sexting, critical aspects of the behavior have remained unexplored. To deepen our understanding of adolescents' sexting behavior and its associated risks and to inspire education and awareness-raising initiatives, sexting research needs to focus on addressing the limitations of prior research. These issues, as well as paths for further research, are highlighted in this Viewpoint.

### Measurement and Design

Some studies define *sexting* as the sending of sexually explicit text messages and pictures, while others focus on the sending and/or receiving of self-made sexually explicit pictures. Progress in sexting research is therefore hindered by a lack of consistency in the international literature regarding how to measure the behavior.<sup>2</sup> The field would greatly benefit from a consistent conceptualization of these behaviors across studies, which would enable a better comparison of results.<sup>2</sup>

To our knowledge, almost all studies on sexting use a cross-sectional design. The field would greatly benefit from longitudinal designs that could help identify the causes and consequences of engaging in these behaviors, as well as to capture changes in people's attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, longitudinal designs would also enable us to investigate whether teenagers who send sexting images remain engaged in the behavior as young adults and how this may be related to other risky behaviors.

Another limitation within the field is the lack of innovative research designs or data sets. Almost all studies on sexting rely on self-reporting measures. Participants might underreport their behaviors. This could especially be the case for problematic cases of sexting (such as sexting under pressure or leaked sexting images). Future studies could find other ways to understand adolescents' sexting experiences, for instance, by analyzing data from police reports, online fora, or re-

ports from hotlines that provide youth with free advice. This could provide insight into adolescents' actual experiences and the contexts in which sexting takes place. Another example could be the use of vignettes during surveys or individual interviews in which adolescents could report how they would respond or react in certain situations (eg, when a sexting photograph was forwarded).

### Research Populations

One of the main frontiers in the field of sexting research is the need to focus on the experience of youth who identify as a sexual minority (ie, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or questioning [LGBTQ]). The romantic experiences, and by extension, the sexting experiences for sexual minority youth might differ from those who identify as heterosexual. LGBTQ youth might have limited opportunities to engage in romantic relationships or might face social disapproval in doing so. It is often hypothesized that nonheterosexual youth rely, therefore, more heavily on the internet for social contact and sexual exploration than do heterosexual youth. Previous research found that sexual minority youth are also at a higher risk for online victimization, such as cyberbullying<sup>4</sup> and online harassment.<sup>5</sup> There is very little empirical research on the sexting experiences of LGBTQ youth and the thresholds and consequences they possibly experience. Future studies could focus both quantitatively and qualitatively on how sexual minority youth experience their romantic relationships online and engage in sexting, as it might pose challenges that are specific to this group.

Sexting research is also mostly limited to the experiences of young adults (ie, college students) or older adolescents in the last years of secondary school. Future research should take into account the experiences of younger adolescents, such as those in middle school, because the context in which sexting takes place among this age group might significantly differ from that of other age groups. To our knowledge, 3 studies have thus far focused on younger adolescents (ie, middle school youth).<sup>3,6,7</sup> In a sample of at-risk seventh grade students (aged 12-14 years), Houck et al<sup>6</sup> found that engagement in sexting was associated with engagement in a variety of other sexual behaviors. In a sample of middle school students (aged 10-15 years), Rice et al<sup>3</sup> found that engagement in sexting is associated with sexual activity and unprotected sex. Using a broad definition of sexting (ie, having sent or posted a sexual message of any kind on the internet), Ševčíková<sup>7</sup> found that engagement in sexting among adolescents was associated with emotional problems and alcohol use but that the associations were smaller among older adolescents

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(aged 15-16 years) than younger adolescents (aged 11-14 years). The results of these studies suggest that sexting among younger adolescents might be symptomatic of underlying emotional problems and engagement in other types of risky behavior. The differences between sexting correlates among younger and older age groups warrant further investigation into the experiences of these vulnerable youth and the related health consequences.

Future studies on adolescent sexting could also expand their scope by investigating how important adults in adolescents' lives (eg, parents, teachers, school counselors, health counselors, school nurses) deal with their confrontations with problematic forms of sexting. There is currently a lack of research that investigates how these important adults communicate with teenagers about sexting and the related risks and how they react when sexting incidents occur (eg, cyberbullying, cyber dating abuse, slut-shaming). Therefore, one of the next frontiers in sexting research will be to further investigate how adults help teenagers navigate sexting-related issues.

### Nonconsensual Forms of Sexting

A final frontier consists of the need for sexting research to focus on the context in which it takes place. Research on youth sexting has

almost exclusively focused on the sending and receiving of sexting messages. However, there is a lack of research that focuses on the motives and characteristics of individuals who ask others for sexting pictures, pressure others to engage in sexting, or engage in the nonconsensual sharing of sexting pictures (ie, secondary sexting). In getting a more complete picture of the different contexts in which sexting occurs, a challenge for future research will be investigating the characteristics of youth who pressure others to engage in sexting and the context in which the nonconsensual sharing of sexting takes place. This would help in designing prevention efforts to target youth who might engage in abusive forms of sexting behavior.

### Conclusions

The field of sexting research is still expanding. Although the pioneering research in the past years has contributed to a better understanding of the nature of sexting among adolescents, much about the nature of these issues remains to be explored. A focused research agenda, which should address the limitations outlined in this primer, will further help to minimize the associated health risks and help young people digitally explore their romantic relationships and sexuality in safe and healthy ways.

#### ARTICLE INFORMATION

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