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Sexting



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Definition

The sending of self-made sexually explicit text message, photographs, or videos through electronic media.

Introduction

Scholars have defined sexting in a variety of ways, from broad definitions that include the sending of all types of self-made sexually explicit media (Barrense-Dias et al. 2017) to more specific definitions that are limited to sending photos and videos of particular body parts. Studies also differ in the timeframe; respondents were asked to recall (e.g., 6 months vs. a year), and whether the studies were conducted among adolescents or adults. This discrepancy in methodology has resulted in muddling the accuracy of research findings (Barrense-

Dias et al. 2017). For example, the prevalence of sexting defined as the sending of both sexually explicit text messages and photographs has ranged from about 1% to 30% for adolescents and as high as 57% for young adults (Klettke et al. 2014).

While sexting can take place through all types of electronic media, qualitative research finds that it most often occurs through smartphone applications, such as standard texting, Snapchat, or WhatsApp, as some people might feel that it increases their feeling of privacy and security (Van Ouytsel et al. 2017). Although sexting was originally treated by the literature as a deviant behavior, it is now increasingly viewed as a normative part of sexual communication and expression (Barrense-Dias et al. 2017; Kosenko et al. 2017; Temple 2015).

Motives

For adolescents, sexting can be part of their sexual development and romantic relationship experimentation. Furthermore, it might provide some adolescents with an alternative means to experiment with and to develop their sexual identity (Van Ouytsel et al. 2017). For both adolescents and adults, sexting mainly takes place within the context of establishing a romantic relationship or within an already established romantic relationship, as a sign of love, in order to flirt, or as a gift or surprise to the romantic partner

(Barrense-Dias et al. 2017; Englander 2015; Van Ouytsel et al. 2017). Outside of a relationship context, sexting has also been found to occur as a joke, a dare, or as a bonding ritual between friends (Lippman and Campbell 2014; Van Ouytsel et al. 2017). Because of the more distant and asynchronic nature of digital communication, it might make some users more comfortable to express their emotions and sexual desires through digital sexually explicit messages, as opposed to in-person contact (Van Ouytsel et al. 2017). Research has also found that sexting among adolescents could function as a first step towards sexual activity, as it has been found to precede and co-occur with offline forms of sexual contact (Kosenko et al. 2017; Temple and Choi 2014). Longitudinal research has shown that sexting is significantly more likely to precede offline sexual activity, but not sexual risk behavior, among adolescents. Some adolescents could use sexting to indicate their willingness to engage in offline sexual behavior or they could use it to indicate their readiness to take the relationship further (Temple and Choi 2014). Among adults, sexting has also been found as a way to engage in sexual hook-ups (Dir et al. 2013).

Risks Associated with Sexting

In some cases, sexting can occur under pressure. Coerced sexting appears to occur most frequently among (young) women, who report that they felt pressured to engage in sexting by peers, friend groups, or romantic partners (Barrense-Dias et al. 2017; Drouin et al. 2015; Lippman and Campbell 2014; Walrave et al. 2015). A study by Englander (2015) found that 70% of undergraduate college students had experienced a form of pressured or coerced sexting in the 4 years prior to the survey. This study also revealed interesting gender differences with respect to coerced sexting. Males were significantly more likely to report that they never experienced a form of pressure, whereas female students were more likely to report that they always or sometimes felt pressured when engaging in sexting (Englander 2015). Next to forms of explicit

pressure and coercion, women are sometimes confronted with more implicit forms of pressure, with men insisting and repeatedly asking them to engage in sexting, making women feel obligated to engage in sexting, or arguing that they have to engage in sexting to prove their love (Drouin et al. 2015; Van Ouytsel et al. 2017).

Next to the potential for sexting messages to occur under pressure, the behavior has gained research attention related to potential reputational risks of engaging in this behavior. Leaked sexting messages could lead to reputational damage for the person who created them (Lippman and Campbell 2014; Van Ouytsel et al. 2017). Qualitative studies identified three major ways in which sexting images could be abused (Van Ouytsel et al. 2017). First, sexting images could be distributed out of revenge, after a romantic break-up. Second, victims could be blackmailed in exchange for additional sexting pictures or offline sexual acts. A third way in which sexting content could be distributed is when boys show the content in order to boast about getting these types of messages. Especially among males, sexting has been found to enhance their social status within the peer group, while a leaked sexting message could harm a girl's reputation (Van Ouytsel et al. 2017).

Conclusion

Sexting takes place through digital media in general and mobile applications in particular. While sexting may be a normative behavior and can be used to express romantic interest and sexual intimacy, it can also be problematic when it occurs under pressure or when the sexting content is abused by others. Early scholarly research treated the act of merely sending sexting messages as a deviant act, but it is now mostly understood within the need for sexual expression and sexual development from both adolescents and adults alike.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Adolescent Issues](#)
- ▶ [Anonymity of Cyberbullying](#)

- ▶ Cyberbullying
- ▶ School Bullying
- ▶ Sexual Behavior
- ▶ Sexual Identity
- ▶ Sexual Socialization

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