

Teenage Sexting and its Consequences

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Abstract. The paper examined the consequences of sexting on the teenagers. Since **SEXTING** is a contraction of **SEX** and **TEXTING** (sending messages of a sexual nature basically through technological advancement of means of communication, such as the use of smartphones). The paper therefore, examined the concepts, the causes, perceptions, consequences and the ways forward. It was however suggested that the stakeholders in health, education and communication Technology should provide more educational interventions on the **SEXTING**, in order to eradicate all forms of sexual abuse among the teenagers at the global level. The efforts will ameliorate the existing sexting consequences among the teenagers.

Keywords: Consequences, Teenage and sexting.

1. Introduction

A lady once shared how the reactions of people around her to her expression of sexuality negatively affected how she viewed herself (and her sexual expression) and the world around her. In her testimony, McArdle (2015) wrote about her experiences of “sexting” more than a decade earlier when she was 13 years old where she described herself as a young person, curious about her sexuality. She disclosed that often arranged conversations via her webcam with five to six boys from school, during which she sometimes stripped for them. In her perception, this activity was “blissful” until one of the boys told his parents and things began to change. First, her parents, teachers, and other schoolmates got to find out about this “blissful” activity and she became a “pariah” and looked upon as a social misfit. Her parents were angry and disappointed in her so they deprived her of some basic stuff and kept her under watch for signs

of sexual misconduct while the boys involved seemed to receive only “a pat on the back” as reported in Buren (2018). McArdle (2015) explained that she started to wonder whether her sexual happiness or enjoyment and feelings were okay or not. She recalled how at peace she had been with being sexual and how actively she had chosen to engage in sexting, and concluded that it was the reactions of others that negatively affected her view of her own sexuality.

Sexting, as described by McArdle (2015), as well as Buren (2018), Ringrose et al (2012), Mitchell et al (2011), and Lenhart (2009) is the creation, sharing, and forwarding of sexually suggestive, nude or nearly nude images or video clips (and sometimes text messages) through cell phones and the internet or other electronic devices. This corroborates the impression that the role that mobile phones and new digital technology play in the lives and wellbeing of young people have long been the target of controversy with negative behaviors associated with young people and digital technology. The lady described above had perceived her experiences as positive, but as those in her social environment disapproved of this activity, she began to question whether she had been right to do what she did. Although it is difficult to assert how pervasive such experience is, it points to a modern phenomenon that can spark negative emotions such as shame, anxiety, and worry in young people though such activity could also be engaged in as part of sexual exploration for them (Cooper et al, 2016).

Although sexting is by no means restricted to young people, it is the participation of young people and its effect on their wellbeing that have led to widespread concern from parents, educators, and others. One of the fears and concerns raised about sexting, especially by young people, is that young people may

be jeopardizing futures by putting compromising, ineradicable images online that could be available to potential employers, academic institutions, and family members.

Nevertheless, considering the fear and genuine concern that teenage sexting may constitute unacceptable social behavior, this paper aims to look at teenage or adolescent sexting with a consideration for several aspects of a complex phenomenon that is still novel and not fully understood but has gained increasing attention from both the scientific community, parents, educators, and the general public. There are risks involved for young people which must not be ignored, including grooming for molestation, sexual exploitation, and other forms of sexual abuse conducted over the internet (Johnson & Svedin, 2017; Cooper et al., 2016).

However, Buren (2018) and Lee and Crofts (2015) warn that there is a risk that such concerns may overshadow other nuances of sexting and that teen-sexting may become unnecessarily synonymous with only its negative outcomes. Thus, the need to understand both the good and bad aspects of sexting rather than just focusing on the risks and challenges – which are indeed important to explore. Adolescence is generally understood to be an intense period of sexual development and teenagers are considered to be particularly vulnerable as they transit beyond their family world while still developing capacities for adulthood (World Health Organization, 2018).

It must also be noted that, to date, most of the research on teenage sexting (and even adult sexting as the case may be) have been conducted in the developed parts of the world, especially in the United States and Europe, with little or no research findings from the underdeveloped world such as Africa and the Middle East, which calls for the need to carry out research to increase knowledge about sexting among young people in Africa. The paper draws upon bioecological model of human development as a theoretical framework of understanding adolescent sexual development with regards to sexual expression and activity, considering the interaction of biological, psychosocial, and environmental factors that influence behavior.

2. Concepts of Teenage Sexting

Like any other phenomenon that has grabbed the attention of professionals and scholars, several scientific investigations have been carried out to provide a better understanding of sexting – even though it is still a relatively recent research problem in view. As it sounds, SEXTING looks like a

contraction of SEX and TEXTING (sending messages of a sexual nature basically through technological advancement of means of communication, such as the use of smartphones).

Regarding teenagers and young people, defining sexting can be controversial because on the one hand, sexting may be considered as a harmless way to express desire and a consensual activity between two persons (whether as adults or whatever) in a sexualized context (see Crimmins & Seigfried-Speltar, 2014). On the other hand, some negative consequences could result from this same activity, such as humiliation, cyber-bullying, or harassment, especially when the content is shared with others without consent and it goes viral (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Crimmins & Seigfried-Speltar, 2014; Dake et al., 2012). There may also be legal and moral aspects, such as the association and demonization of sexting with pornography, particularly when minors are involved (Gomez & Ayala, 2014).

One may also wonder whether there are any implications or significant differences in SEXTING between children, teenagers, and adults with accompanying consequences! This may not be a primary aim of this paper, but it is an idea that creeps. There are questions about actions that define sexting (such as sending, receiving, or forwarding sexual messages); media types (such as texts, images, or videos); sexual content; and transmission modes. Are there any gender issues in sexting? What are the prevalence rates of sexting, and how does this seemingly harmless activity affect relationships and mental health?

When the word “sexting” was first used, it referred to the practice of sending short messages with sexually suggestive messages via short message services (SMSs) or instant message services such as MSN-messenger (Crofts et al., 2015). But as social communication via the internet has become more visual and image-based, sexting has gotten a broader meaning not only including text messaging, but this has not been consistent across studies (Drouin et al., 2013). In some studies, sexting has been strictly defined as only including the sending or forwarding self-produced texts or images of a sexual nature via internet, and in other studies, broader definitions that include video and webcam sex have been used (Madigan et al., 2018; Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Klettke et al., 2014; Drouin et al., 2013). Such use of different definitions of sexting may have provided some confusion in the assessment of prevalence rates of adolescent sexting (Klettke et al., 2014).

Another issue with the term sexting is that young people themselves seldom use this term to describe the activity (Crofts et al., 2015). Instead, they use words such as “exchanging pictures,” “taking sexy selfies,” or in some cases “receiving or sending a boob/tit/pussy/dick pic” (Albury et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2013) and lots more. In a recent focus group study (unreported data, not included in this paper), Swedish adolescents referred to sexting as sending “nudes” or “nude-images” or “nude-videos.” Thus, there may be a discrepancy between how scholars refer to the phenomenon to how young people refer to it, meaning that adolescents taking part in studies may not share the same understanding of sexting that researchers and/or adults do.

Buren (2018) further points out that some researchers also use other terms that are more descriptive of what they have studied but are similar to sexting. For instance: “voluntary sexual exposure online,” “adolescents’ sexual contact [...] through mobile phone use” or “sexual messages on the internet” (Jonsson et al., 2014; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Vanden Abeele, et al., 2012). As sexting has become the most used term among scholars, using other terms may, however, risk this important research to be overlooked. For the purpose of this paper, however, sexting generally refers to the generation or exchange of multimedia messages such as texts, pictures/images, or videos of a sexual nature between persons.

3. Prevalence and Motivation of Sexting

Prevalence rates of adolescent sexting tend to differ across studies and may also vary across cultures and other social strata. For instance, some studies have indicated very low prevalence rates of sending sexts (such as 2.5%) (Mitchell et al., 2012), whereas other studies have indicated considerably higher frequencies (e.g., 27%) (Temple et al., 2014). This could be due to the above-mentioned variations with the definition of sexting. But the difference may also be due to different sample composition, such as country difference, gender proportions, or socioeconomic differences (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017).

Another reason for differences in prevalence rates may be the use of different methodology between studies (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). There have also been age differences in the samples between studies. For example, studies with older adolescents tend to have higher prevalence rates (e.g., Van Ouytselet et al., 2014), compared to studies with younger adolescents (e.g., Livingstone & Görzig, 2014). Some studies

also differ in the included age range of the ‘sextors’ (persons involved in sexting) which may affect mean prevalence rates (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2012; Ringrose et al., 2013).

Buren (2018) also reviews that in an effort to synthesize these disparate results, a recent meta-analysis was conducted. This study included 39 studies with a total of 110 380 adolescents from different countries and found that the average prevalence rates were 14.8% for sending sexts and 29.4% for receiving sexts (Madigan et al., 2018). The impressive scope of the study provides an indication of how frequent sending and receiving sexts may be among adolescents, but as these figures are based on studies with varying definitions of sexting, it is still prudent to view these figures with caution.

In addition, it is likely that prevalence rates between countries are different (Baumgartne et al., 2014). Indeed, in a Swedish study of 18-year-old adolescents, higher prevalence rates were found, with around 20% having sent sexts (Jonsson et al., 2014). This higher rate of sexting among Swedish adolescents compared to Madigan and colleagues’ (2018) findings can possibly be explained by the higher mean age of the participants. Interestingly, in a comparative study between European countries, Baumgartner and colleagues (2014) found Sweden to have the highest prevalence rates of sexting among adolescents, but that these rates were lower (11.5%) than Madigan and colleagues (2018) mean (14.8%). Unfortunately, no prevalence rates have been reported for countries like Nigeria and other developing countries.

4. Age and Gender Differences in Teenage Sexting

Studies agree that the frequency of sexting tend to increase as adolescents get older (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2015; Baumgartner et al., 2014; Campbell & Park, 2014; Dake et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2012;). For young adolescents aged 12 to 14 years, sexting is considerably rarer than in older adolescents aged 15 or older (Kopecký, 2012). This is not surprising, given that the increase in sexting runs parallel with puberty and the increase in sexual exploration and overall sexual activity at these ages (Temple-Smith et al., 2016). For instance, as adolescents move from early adolescence into middle and late adolescence, the likelihood of them having a romantic partner increases (Diamond & Savin-Willians, 2009). Also not surprisingly, romantic partners have been identified as being the most common sexting partners

(Cooper et al., 2016). However, according to Hudson and Marshall (2017), emerging adults, ages 18 to 26, report the highest frequency of sexting behaviors among studies assessing those behaviors compared to other age groups

Studies on prevalence rates by gender have had mixed results. Most studies show that there are no differences between boys' and girls' likelihoods of receiving and sending sexts (Campbell & Park, 2014; Vanden Abeele et al., 2014; Dake et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2012; Lenhart, 2009). However, some studies show that boys are more likely to send and receive sexts (Beyens & Eggermont, 2014; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017), while others show that girls are more likely to send and receive (Reyns et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2012). In the 2018 meta-analysis, however, Madigan and colleagues (2018) found that gender did not moderate the prevalence of sexting, which leads to the conclusion that no meaningful differences in prevalence rates seem to exist between boys and girls. However, in Sweden however, Jonsson and colleagues' (2014) study found some gender differences in prevalence rates among boys born outside Sweden, girls born in Sweden, girls that lived with both parents, and girls living in families with some or severe financial problems. These groups were slightly more likely to have sexted (Jonsson et al., 2014). Gender has also been found to influence the understanding of, and practices related to sexting: For boys, sexting may be viewed as a means to status or masculinity; and on the other hand, for girls, it may be viewed as damaging to one's sexual reputation (Walker et al., 2013; Ringrose et al., 2012).

A question that remains is who adolescents sext with and how frequently. There are indications that sexting usually occurs between romantic partners (Cooper et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2015; Lenhart, 2009), but it also seems that adolescents may sext with people they have different relationships with, such as people they just met, or someone that the adolescent has a romantic relationship with (Lee et al., 2015). Not knowing with whom adolescents sext and how frequently may be a significant lack in the literature. For instance, Lee and colleagues (2015) found that adolescents who sext only with a romantic partner send sexts to fewer people than adolescents who are not in a relationship (Lee et al., 2015). Thus, this paper suggests that considering who adolescents' sext with can provide more detailed information on how sexting experiences may be different.

5. Adolescent Motivation for Sexting

Young people give several reasons for sexting, including fun, to get out of boredom, to get a

boy/girl's attention; as a joke; to get positive feedback; sexual experimentation or to initiate sexual activity, to flirt, to feel 'sexy,' as a form of self-representation, to fit in, in response to someone's post; or accidentally or unintentionally (Chaudhary, et al., 2017; Klettke et al., 2014). Some experts *have reported that personality factors such as higher sensation seeking, lower sense of coherence (person's ability to handle stressful life situations), and impulsivity are significant correlates of youth sexting* (Jonsson, 2015; Temple et al., 2014; Ouytsel et al., 2014).

Another identified motivation for teenage sexting is the feeling of pressure from others, both direct and indirect. This pressure usually comes from a romantic partner or a friend, and it is more common for girls than boys to feel pressured. The pressure can take different forms, but one of the most common is the threat to losing a romantic relationship (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walrave et al., 2013)

From the results of a study in Belgium conducted with secondary school students, it was found that youth who justify sexting hold positive attitudes towards sexting, perceive peer approval of sexting, and perceive positive emotional consequences of sexting such as thrill and excitement, were more likely to engage in sexting (Ouytsel et al, 2017). However, in that same study, young people were neither influenced by observing celebrities posting sexy pictures of themselves nor affected by perceived parental attitude toward sexting.

Sexting practices may also be a normative relationship practice in the current social, sexual, and technological environment (Chaudhary, et al., 2017; Schloms-Madlener, 2013). For example, some young people prefer safe, non-casual or short-term virtual involvements compared to actual physical or emotional relationships.

6. Risk-Taking Behaviors and the Consequences of Teenage Sexting

For emphasis, since the emergence of research on sexting over the past few years, there has been a conceptual debate within the scientific community that distinguishes between two clear arguing lines: one side tends to argue for a "normalizing discourse" whereby authors believe sexting to be a normative behavior as a part of sexual expression in a relationship, and it is possible to practice "safe sexting" to avoid negative consequences. The other side tends to argue that sexting is a risky behavior that requires intervention and prevention to diminish

its prevalence, and has been labelled “deviance discourse” (see Gasso et al., 2019 for details).

Although sexting is a common behavior among the younger population, the deviance discourse seems to have more scientific support than the normalizing discourse. For example, recent meta-analyses reported by Mori et al. (2019) and Kosenko et al. (2017) found a significant relationship between sexting and three aspects of sexual behavior: increased general sexual activity, unprotected sex history/lack of contraceptive use, and increased number of sexual partners, that are considered sexual risky behaviors. It was also found that internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depression, were significantly associated with sexting. Importantly, the younger the adolescents, the stronger the observed associations.

Klettke et al. (2014) in their review of the literature found significant relationships between sexting and risky sexual behavior and with several other adverse outcomes, such as (a) the sharing of sexual content without consent, (b) legal consequences, and (c) negative mental health repercussions. Furthermore, research highlights an existing relationship between mental health or psychological health and online victimization behaviors, such as cyberbullying, online dating violence or revenge porn, which are closely related to sexting (Brenick et al., 2017; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015; Reyns et al., 2013; Agustina, 2012). Fahy et al. (2016) emphasizes a high prevalence of cyberbullying and the potential of cyber-victimization as a risk factor for future depressive symptoms, social anxiety symptoms, and below average well-being among young people from the observation that cyber-victims and cyberbully-victims were significantly more likely to report symptoms of depression and social anxiety.

Consequently, it would be expected that sexting behaviors as a form of victimization might also be related to a higher likelihood of reporting depressive and anxiety symptoms. Along the same line of thought, more research findings indicate that a higher degree of depressive symptoms is associated with greater internet use, and a more frequent and problematic internet use is associated with higher rates of sexting behavior (Holoyda et al., 2018; Medrano et al., 2018; Tokunaga & Rains, 2010). There have also been research findings that report associations between sexting and substance use, such as alcohol, marijuana, and illicit drugs (Temple et al., 2014; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014).

From the foregoing findings and postulations, it would be reasonable to hypothesize that higher engagement in sexting behaviors might predict higher rates of depressive symptoms and negative consequences.

7. Conclusion

The effect or consequences of sexting on the wellbeing of young people is difficult to quantify into a binary positive and negative outcome as factors, such as gender, age, and relationships or culture can all alter how both senders, receivers, and observers are affected by the activity and this challenges the traditional notion that sexting is exclusively bad for wellbeing of young people. However, despite the grounds for ‘demonizing’ sexting and labelling it as unacceptable behavior, it is empathizing to consider the normalization discourse based on the appeal from some researchers that teenage sexting should not be defined or researched solely based on the view that sexting is primarily associated with problematic sexual activities and risks – the so-called deviance discourse. However, it is important to keep in mind and understand the possible negative consequences that can accompany sexting. Regardless of the consequences experienced, young people continue to engage in sexting behaviors, though the significance of the negative consequences reported are intense and should not be ignored. The field of research on sexting is still in its early stage and there are several aspects that require further investigation, considering its complex nature. This is in recognition of the need to develop more effective interventions and policy to help support and educate young people as they navigate the rapidly evolving and involving digital world.

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