

Chapter 13

Victimization or Entertainment? How Attachment and Rejection Sensitivity Relate to Sexting Experiences, Evaluations, and Victimization

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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, play in the relationship between experiences with and evaluations of using sexting as a tool for victimization will also be explored.

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

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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. 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 have been demonstrated to be associated with other types of relational victimization (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; Drouin & Tobin, 2014), and which therefore 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. Klettke and colleagues (2014) emphasized the importance of breaking down sexting prevalence rates by type of sext (e.g., text or image) and the role of the individual (e.g., sender or recipient). In line with this recommendation, this chapter's authors assessed EAs' sexting in terms of sending and receiving text, image, and video messages. Similar to Klettke and colleagues' (2014) results, this chapter's authors found that 57% of EAs sent or received text based sexts, 43% sent and 49% received photo sexts, and 17% sent and 20% received video sexts.

As sexting in all forms has become a more normative manner of communication within relationships, a body of literature has emerged suggesting that sexting can be not only a normative, but also a positive experience in emerging adulthood, fostering intimacy and pleasure within a close relationship (Burkett, 2015; Parker, Blackburn, Perry & Hawks, 2013), as evidenced in studies assessing EAs' motivations for sexting. For instance, Hudson and Fetro (2015) found that in a sample of college students, attitudes toward sexting, perceptions of sexting norms, and behavioral intentions of sexting all significantly predicted activity with sexting; Kopecký (2011) found that individuals reported sexting to be viewed as arousing or to initiate sexual activity. Additionally, for those who were considered current sexters (i.e., had sent a sext within the last 30 days), the strongest predictor of their sexting activity was their attitude toward sexting, which the authors suggest indicated that current sexters were intentional in their sexting, and were motivated to sext because they wanted to and not because they felt social pressure to do so (Hudson

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