

Sexting Behaviors Among Young Hispanic Women: Incidence and Association with Other High-risk Sexual Behaviors

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Abstract Several legal cases in the United States in which adolescents were charged with child pornography distribution after sharing nude photographs of themselves with romantic partners or others have highlighted the issue of sexting behaviors among youth. Although policy makers, mental health workers, educators and parents have all expressed concern regarding the potential harm of sexting behaviors, little to no research has examined this phenomenon empirically. The current study presents some preliminary data on the incidence of sexting behavior and associated high risk sexual behaviors in a sample of 207 predominantly Hispanic young women age 16–25. Approximately 20% of young women reported engaging in sexting behavior. Sexting behaviors were not associated with most other high-risk sexual behaviors, but were slightly more common in women who found sex to be highly pleasurable or who displayed histrionic personality traits.

Keywords Sexting · Sexual health · Adolescent development

Introduction

Sexting is a colloquial term that refers to individuals sending explicit photographs or messages to others. Several cases of sexting have caused alarm over potential harmful consequences. In recent years young female celebrities such as Miley Cyrus and Vanessa Hudgens experienced having personal sexual photographs of themselves widely released. At least one teenager is known to have committed suicide after nude photographs of her were circulated to peers by an ex-boyfriend [1]. Given concerns that teens and adults who engage in sexting may experience serious embarrassment and social consequences should photographs escape their control, legal and youth health experts have struggled with how best to address this relatively new phenomenon.

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In the United States and elsewhere [2], some lawmakers have taken advantage of child pornography laws to attempt to enforce harsh penalties on some youth in order to set an example. For example in Pennsylvania, six youths were charged with felony child pornography distribution after three girls were found to have sent nude photographs of themselves to boyfriends [3].

To date, little peer-reviewed research has been done on sexting behavior (a basic search for “sexting” on PsychINFO and Medline turned up no hits, nor did a more general search for sexual behavior linked to internet technology). One study by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy [4] has previously examined this phenomenon, finding that approximately 20% of teenagers and 33% of young adults have exchanged semi-nude or nude photographs with others electronically, with women slightly more prone to engage in these behaviors than males. A second study by Lenhart [5] found somewhat lower rates (4–8%) of sexting behaviors among teens. The current study hopes to add to this limited data by providing further information on the incidence of sexting behaviors (sending nude photographs of oneself to others), and the relationship of sexting with other sexual behaviors. This study focuses specifically on sending and receiving explicit photographs, as it is these behaviors which have attracted legal attention, and which may have the greatest risk of causing future harm or embarrassment.

Methods

Participants

Participants in were 207 young women enrolled at a Hispanic Serving university in the South. Their average age was 20.70 years ($SD = 2.22$). Regarding ethnicity 199 (96.1%) were Hispanic, 5 were white non-Hispanic (2.4%), and 1 respondent each fell in the category of black, Asian or other.

Materials

For the purposes of this study a survey of sexual behaviors including high-risk sexual behaviors, sexting behaviors and attitudes toward sexting, contentment with one’s own sexual relationships (whether engaging in sex or abstaining) and experiencing of pleasure in sexual behaviors (from kissing to intercourse) was developed. Respondents were asked questions related to number of sexual partners, having experienced a sexually transmitted disease, having become unintentionally pregnant or having elected to abort a healthy pregnancy. Respondents were asked how frequently they “sent erotic or nude photographs of myself (sexting) to another person” and “received nude/erotic photographs from another person”. Respondents were also asked a series of five questions about attitudes toward sexting such as “Sending nude photographs of myself to other people has too many risks” or “Sending nude photographs of myself could be exciting or fun”. Coefficient alpha of sexting attitude questions for this sample was 0.77. Questions related to contentment with sex life included “I feel in control of my sex life”, “Sex (or my decision to abstain) has been a wonderful and healthy part of my life” with a coefficient alpha between these six questions of 0.71. Experiences of pleasure in sex included questions such as “I regularly find sexual behavior (from kissing to intercourse) pleasurable” and “Sexual behavior (from kissing to intercourse) is a fun and enjoyable activity” with coefficient alpha between the seven items of 0.70. All questions were worded so that they could apply equally to a

sexually active individual or to women who had made a choice to abstain from sexual intercourse. These questions were all 4-point Likert-scale items (Never true, Seldom, Very often, Always true). The full questionnaire is available on request from the author.

As individuals with histrionic personality disorder tend to be more sexually seductive and outgoing, histrionic personality symptoms were considered. A 16-item questionnaire of Histrionic personality symptoms developed from DSM-IV criteria [6] was also administered. Items were 4-point likert-scale and included “I like to be the center of attention” “A lot of people find me sexually appealing” and “I tend to change my romantic partners often.” Coefficient alpha of this scale for the current sample was 0.84.

Procedure

Respondents filled out the survey in a laboratory setting so that responses were private and fully anonymous. Once surveys were completed they were dropped by the participants in a sealed “lock box” that was not opened until all participants had completed (a process that took several months). Thus participants were assured that their responses could not be matched to their identities by the research assistants (who were themselves female) present in the laboratory. While surveys were being administered, no males were present in the laboratory facility. All study procedures were compliant with local IRB and designed to meet APA standards for research with human participants. Data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software, employing correlational and regression designs.

Results

Incidence

Data from the current sample indicated that 20.5% of young women reported sending erotic or nude photographs of themselves to others at least once. In the current sample 34.5% reported receiving erotic photographs from others at least once. A χ^2 test of non-independence revealed that these two variables tend to be highly related, $\chi^2(9) = 109.76$.

Correlation with Other High-risk Sexual Behaviors

Bivariate correlations were run between frequency of sexting behaviors and other high-risk sexual behaviors. A Bonferroni correction of $P = 0.005$ was applied to control Type I error rates due to multiple comparisons across all bivariate analyses. Results for these correlations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Correlations between sexting behavior and other sexual behavior outcomes

	Partners (1 year)	Partners (life)	STDs	UP	Abort	US	Pregnancy risk
Sexting	0.02	0.17	0.04	0.09	.14	.07	0.24*

UP unplanned pregnancies, Abort history of elective abortion, US history of unprotected sex with new partners; pregnancy risk = unprotected sex with any partner when pregnancy was not desired

* $P \leq 0.005$

Sexing was not related to other high-risk sexual behaviors with the exception of having sex without use of birth control methods. A separate stepwise regression on this last variable was run with marital status as a control variable, but this did not break this relationship.

Correlation with Sexual Satisfaction and Sexing Attitudes

Bivariate correlations were used to examine the relationship between sexting and contentment with sex life, pleasure in sex and sexting attitudes. Results indicated that sexting behaviors did not correlate with contentment with sex life ($r = -0.09$), but did correlate significantly with pleasure in sex ($r = 0.20$). Sexting behaviors were highly correlated with positive attitudes toward sexting ($r = 0.69$).

Sexing and Histrionic Personality Symptoms

To assess whether sexting behaviors were more common among women with histrionic personality traits a stepwise multiple regression was employed with age, GPA and histrionic traits. The resulting model was significant [$R = 0.21$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.04$, $P \leq 0.01$], with only histrionic traits ($\beta = 0.21$) as a significant predictor of sexting behavior.

Discussion

Several important findings are gleaned from the current study. First, incidence rates for sexting behavior for current sample indicate that, although the majority of young women do not engage in sexting, it nonetheless a relatively common (20.5%) behavior in the current sample. Results also suggest that for the majority of women who engage in sexting, this is a mutual and consenting activity, although this may not always be the case. Further testing is warranted to ascertain the degree to which these behaviors are consenting or coerced. Nonetheless it appears likely that the majority of women engaged in sexting view this activity as an exciting facet of their sexual lives. Sexting was not associated with other high-risk sexual behaviors, aside from failure to use birth control when not seeking pregnancy. Sexting was more common among women who enjoy their sexual behaviors generally, as well as among women with Histrionic personality traits, although both these relationships were relatively small.

Although the majority of women who engage in sexting appear to have positive attitudes about the behavior, risks of embarrassment and (for minors) legal repercussions remain should these young women lose control over the photographs. Legal responses that focus on felony charges for minor individuals engaged in sexting do not appear consistent with risks, and several states appears to be introducing legislation to legalize sexting between sexually involved minors [7, 8]. Given that minors are not legally prohibited from actual sexual behavior with each other, criminalization of consenting, shared nude photographs may represent a disconnect between the law and technology rather than a reasoned response to this issue. Public education campaigns which focus on teenagers and educate them regarding the risks of sexting and other issues related to digital safety in a reasoned, non-emotional and non-moralizing fashion would arguably be more likely to bear positive fruit than criminalization.

The current study is preliminary and not without limitations. The current sample is convenience in nature and comprised mainly of Hispanic women. Thus generalization to other groups should only be undertaken with great care. As with any survey data on sensitive topics, socially desirable responding is always a risk.

It would be desirable for future research to probe more broadly at problematic outcomes that may be associated with sexting behavior, such as depression, bullying or negative experiences related to sexting incidents. It is hoped that this article will provide some initial data on this new phenomenon and provide groundwork for future research.

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