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Brief Report: A First Investigation into Gender Minority Adolescents' Sexting Experiences

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A First Investigation into Gender Minority Adolescents' Sexting Experiences

Abstract

Introduction

Gender minority adolescents, such as transgender, gender nonconforming, gender diverse and non-binary youth, may face unique challenges with regard to online sexual communication. They may be especially vulnerable for sexting-related risks. The aim of this study is to explore the sexting experiences of gender minority youth among a school-based sample.

Methods

This brief exploratory study reports on a survey that was conducted among 1293 respondents with an average age of 14.79 years old ($SD = 1.97$) in the Dutch-speaking area of Belgium, and compares engagement in sexting experiences between cisgender and gender minority youth.

Results

The results of our exploratory study show that gender minority adolescents were more likely to have ever been pressured to send a sexting image. There were no significant differences with regard to receiving sexts, or receiving forwarded sexts. None of the gender minority youth reported that they had forwarded a sexting image from someone else, as opposed to 9.3% of cisgender youth who had forwarded a sext.

Conclusions

Despite the explorative nature of our study, the results suggest that gender minority youth may be at an increased risk to experience sexting-related pressure. Additional research is needed to investigate the sexting experiences of gender minority adolescents. Gender minority youth may

benefit from education about safer sexting, and specifically ways to cope with sexting-related pressure.

A First Investigation into Gender Minority Adolescents' Sexting Experiences

Sexting, herein defined as the sending of self-made sexually explicit images, can be considered as a normal form of sexual experimentation and communication. For example, the most recent meta-analysis showed that worldwide on average 14.8% of youth had sent and 27.4% had received a sexting message (Madigan, Ly, Rash, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2018). The prevalence rates of teenage sexting appear to have increased over time, because of changing norms and the widespread use of smartphones (Madigan et al., 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020). In adolescence, sexting is also associated with some negative outcomes and risks (Mori, Temple, Browne, & Madigan, 2019). The main risk of sexting is that the images are distributed to others without consent of the person that created the picture (i.e., non-consensual distribution/forwarding of sexting or image-based sexual abuse), which may lead to bullying, harassment and negative psychosocial consequences for the victims (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Van Ouytsel, Lu, Ponnet, Walrave, & Temple, 2019). Sexts can be shared out of revenge, to gain peer popularity, or to gossip about others (Bindesbøl Holm Johansen, Pedersen, & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2018; Setty, 2020). In extreme cases, sexting pictures are also used to extort the victims to get back together into a romantic relationship, for financial gain, or to coerce the victims into sexual contact (i.e., sextortion) (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018).

Some teenagers may also experience pressure to send sexting images from romantic partners or friends. Within romantic relationships, some teenagers may feel that sexting is expected of them and that they otherwise will lose their romantic partner if they do not agree to send a sext (Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, & Peeters, 2017). Some teenagers also report peer pressure (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). Studies have found that youth who perceive positive peer attitudes towards sexting, are more likely to engage in sexting themselves (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011; Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, et al., 2017;

Walrave et al., 2015). For some adolescents, pressure to engage in sexting can be a virtual extension of harassment that is experienced offline (Choi, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2016; Ross, Drouin, & Coupe, 2019).

Within romantic relationships sexting has also been associated with experiences of dating violence. Prior research has found that adolescents' engagement in sexting was associated with higher perceptions of verbal conflict in their romantic relationships (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2019) and cyber dating abuse victimization (Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2016). Among a sample of adolescents and young adults, it was found that individuals who forwarded sexting images without consent of the creator (i.e., image-based sexual abuse) are more likely to perpetrate dating violence (Morelli, Bianchi, Baiocco, Pezzuti, & Chirumbolo, 2016). Similarly, adolescents who engage in sexting due to negative motivations, such as coercive motivations, are also more likely to be perpetrators of dating violence (Bianchi, Morelli, Nappa, Baiocco, & Chirumbolo, 2018).

While there are several studies available on the sexting experiences of sexual minority youth (i.e., youth who identify as non-heterosexual) (Kim, Martin-Storey, Drossos, Barbosa, & Georgiades, 2019; Rice et al., 2012; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2019; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016), there is almost no empirical evidence on the experiences of gender minority youth. For the purpose of this study, we define gender minority youth as adolescents whose gender is different than the sex that they were assigned at birth.

Until now studies on sexting have combined gender minority individuals together with sexual minority participants (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2015), despite the fact that gender and sexual identity are uniquely distinct concepts and need to be assessed separately (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2015). There is a distinct difference between the concepts "sexual minority" and "gender minority" (Reisner, Greytak, Parsons, & Ybarra, 2015; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2015). Sexual minority refers to romantic or sexual attractions and includes individuals who do not identify

as completely heterosexual. Gender minority individuals may experience any type of sexual attraction, or identify with any sexual orientation. Gender minority individuals have a different gender identity than the sex that was assigned at birth (Reisner et al., 2015). Combining gender and sexual minority youth into one study, may hide the unique challenges that gender minority youth face (Reisner et al., 2015).

The absence of research on sexual communication by gender minority youth is remarkable, given that they may rely more often on the Internet to connect with peers, find support groups, initiate relationships, and find information about their gender identity (Cannon et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016). In other contexts, gender minority youth have been found to be more likely to report sexual harassment in offline and online spaces (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Korchmaros, 2014), dating violence (Dank, Lachman, Zweig, & Yahner, 2014), and bullying or harassment (Coulter, Bersamin, Russell, & Mair, 2018; Reisner et al., 2015). Gender minority youth may also experience greater difficulties to access safe environments (e.g., inclusive care giving and health services), which could even further increase the consequences of abuse (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). In some schools, gender minority youth may even face discrimination or harassment by teachers (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010).

The fact that prior research found that gender minority youth are more likely to experience bullying, dating violence, sexual harassment, and peer harassment, raises the question if they are also disproportionately vulnerable for sexting-related risks, such as sexting-related harassment and pressure. Given these disparities, the purpose of this brief report is to explore the sexting experiences of gender minority youth among a school-based sample. We aim to compare the sexting experiences of gender minority youth with those of cisgender youth (i.e., youth who are the same gender than the biological sex that they were assigned at birth). The aim of the study is to use a variety of sexting measures, including normative sexting

behaviors (e.g., the creation and sending of sexting images) as well as problematic forms of sexting (e.g., receiving pressure to engage in sexting or forwarding sexting without consent). By providing preliminary data on this understudied issue, this exploratory study aims to inspire future research.

Methods

Sample and procedures

This study is part of a larger dataset on teenagers' media use and media consumption. During the fall of 2019, the data were collected among 20 middle schools and high schools throughout all Dutch-speaking provinces of Belgium. After data cleaning, the general dataset consisted of 4255 respondents. The survey comprised of two sections. The first section was completed by all respondents and asked demographical information and their general media use. After filling out the first section, the respondents were randomly assigned to one of several subthemes, including a subsection about sexting and cyberbullying. The researchers opted for this strategy in order to avoid survey taking fatigue. The subsection on sexting was completed by 1293 respondents with an average age of 14.79 ($SD = 1.97$). Our study reports on data from this subsample. It was stressed throughout the survey that participation was voluntary and that participants were allowed to skip questions. The surveys were collected in cooperation with two organizations that focus on media literacy education, which participants could contact in case that they wanted to talk about the study.

Sexting related questions

We measured five sexting items on a scale from 1 = *never* to 4 = *weekly*. Given the on average low frequency of sexting behaviors and in order to allow group comparisons between small sample sizes, we decided to dichotomize the behaviors into 0 = *did not engage in sexting*, and

1 = *engaged in sexting*. Dichotomizing sexting items is common in sexting research (e.g., Ojeda, Del-Rey, Walrave, & Vandebosch, 2020; Temple et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2019). For space reasons, a list of the items is included in Table 2.

Gender identity measures

In Belgium, all citizens from the age of 12 receive a government-issued identity card, which contains the information that is recorded in the national register. With regard to sex registered on their identity card, 636 of the respondents indicated that they were registered as a boy ($n = 636$ boys; 49.2%) and 657 were registered as a girl ($n = 657$ girls; 50.8%). In a second step the respondents were asked how they felt (i.e., *boy/girl/other*). Eighteen respondents felt different than the gender that was indicated on their identity card ($n = 18$; 1.4%). One respondent skipped this answer and did not provide their information and was excluded from the analysis. The respondents who identified with the same gender that was provided on their identity card, were coded as 0 = *cisgender youth* and the other respondents were coded as 1 = *gender minority youth*. At this point in the survey it was stressed again that all responses would remain anonymous.

Demographic variables

Other demographic variables were age, the year of the Belgian secondary school system, the living situation at home (recoded into 1 = *living with both parents* and 2 = *other living situation*), the main language most often spoken at home (1 = *Dutch* or 2 = *a different language*). The demographic breakdown of the sample is summarized in Table 1.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS v.26.0. As is recommended for small sample sizes, we performed Fisher's Exact Test to determine differences between categories (Kim, 2017). For some variables it was impossible to perform statistical significance testing, because of low prevalence rates. Missing values on the variables were excluded from the analyses using list wise deletion.

Results

Three of the 18 gender minority youth (16.7%) had sent a sexting image of themselves in the two months prior to our survey. As reported in Table 2, they were more likely to have ever received pressure to send a sexting image, with 44.4% of the gender minority respondents reporting to have experienced sexting-related pressure as opposed to around 20% of cisgender youth. There were no significant differences with regard to receiving sexts, or receiving forwarded sexts. None of the gender minority youth reported that they had forwarded a sexting image from someone else.

Discussion

This brief report provides exploratory data on sexting behaviors among gender minority youth (which may include transgender and non-binary youth). We should start the discussion section with stressing that the results of the study need to be interpreted with caution, given the low sample size of our study. However, reporting these preliminary data is important, as it may call attention to this understudied population and may provide the basis for future research.

Our data did not allow us to assess whether gender minority youth are more likely to experiment with taking and sending self-made sexually explicit images. Our study found that gender minority youth experienced more pressure to engage in sexting than non-gender minority adolescents. There were no differences between the groups for receiving sexts, or for receiving forwarded sexts without consent of the creator. These results echo prior research on

the experiences of sexual minority youth, that found that sexual minority adolescents are more likely to experience online harassment and that they may be disproportionately affected by digital risks (Cannon et al., 2017; Van Ouytsel et al., 2019; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2015, 2016). Gender minority youth may use the Internet more frequently to build relationships with romantic partners, compared to their cisgender peers (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016). They may face unique challenges with regard to safety and anonymity in online spaces, and may be especially vulnerable for digital forms pressure and abuse (Cannon et al., 2017). Future work could explore these dynamics in more detail.

Several limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the results of our study. Given the recruitment strategy and the relative small sample size, the results of our study cannot be generalized and should be interpreted with caution. The downside of our school-based study design is that we reached a relative small number of gender minority adolescents. In our sample, only 1.4% of the total respondents were a gender minority. This proportion of gender minority respondents is similar to other school-based studies that focused in differences between gender minority and cis gender students. In several studies with a similar research design, the prevalence rates of transgender or gender minority youth ranged between 0.5% and 2.7% (e.g., Clark et al., 2014; Dank, Lachman, Zweig, & Yahner, 2014; Guss, Williams, Reisner, Austin, & Katz-Wise, 2017; Johnson et al., 2019). Because of our sample size, we were not able to perform a more fine-grained analysis of the dataset. Future work is warranted to allow for more powerful statistical analyses. Future research could use more nuanced and extensive measures to capture gender identity. Finally, given that the study was part of a larger project, only a limited number of variables could be captured, future research should include a wider range of demographical variables and psychosocial outcomes (i.e., anxiety, depression, etc.), and the application of theoretical models, such as minority stress models.

In conclusion, our exploratory study serves as an important call for future research to more deeply examine the extent of the experiences of gender minority youth with sexting. An important question for future research is to explore whether evidence-based educational tools are needed to help them to remain safe from online exploitation. Qualitative work is also warranted in order to fully investigate the lived experiences of gender minority youth with regard to sexting (e.g., by asking about the context in which sexting takes place, or about their sexting partners, vulnerability to coercion...). Given that prior research has found that motivations to engage in sexting differ between sexual minority adults and heterosexual adults (Bianchi, Morelli, Baiocco, & Chirumbolo, 2019), future research could investigate the sexting motivations of gender minority adolescents. Regarding our study's implications for practice, it is advised that counselors should engage in conversations with gender minority youth about the opportunities and risks of sexting, and, most importantly, how to deal with sexting-related pressure.

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	Gender identity	
	Cisgender	Gender Minority
	M (SD) <i>n</i> (%)	M(SD) <i>n</i> (%)
Age	14.80 (1.97)	14.11 (1.91)
Year of secondary education		
1 st year of secondary education	268 (21.0%)	6 (33.3%)
2 nd year of secondary education	127 (10.0%)	2 (11.1%)
3 rd year of secondary education	220 (17.3%)	5 (27.8%)
4 th year of secondary education	253 (19.9%)	1 (5.6%)
5 th year of secondary education	186 (14.6%)	2 (11.1%)
6 th year of secondary education	188 (14.8%)	2 (11.1%)
7 th year of secondary education	32 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Living situation		
Living with both parents	928 (72.8%)	8 (47.1%)
Other living situation	346 (27.2%)	9 (52.9%)
Language spoken at home		
Dutch (native language of the study region)	955 (75.9%)	14 (77.8%)
Other language	303 (24.1%)	4 (22.2%)

Table 1. Demographic variables

Note: The 7th year of secondary education is a voluntary year that students can enroll in to specialize in a vocation. It is a part of the secondary school system in the Dutch-speaking community in Belgium.

	Gender identity		Fisher's Exact Test
	Cisgender	Gender Minority Youth	
Taking a sexually explicit image in the past two months <i>(without necessarily sending one)</i>			N/A
No	1128 (88.8%)	14 (77.8%)	
Yes	142 (11.2%)	4 (22.2%)	
Sending a sexually explicit image in the past two months <i>(total sample)</i>			N/A
No	1163 (91.6%)	15 (83.3%)	
Yes	107 (8.4%)	3 (16.7%)	
Ever received a sexting image			.639
No	707 (56.1%)	9 (50.0%)	
Yes	553 (43.9%)	9 (50.0%)	
Ever received pressure from someone else to send a sext			.016*
No	1017 (80.3%)	10 (55.6%)	
Yes	249 (19.7%)	8 (44.4%)	
Ever saw a forwarded sext/received a forwarded sext without knowledge of the person who made the image			.623
No	797 (63.3%)	13 (72.2%)	
Yes	464 (36.8%)	5 (27.8%)	
Ever forwarded a sext themselves without knowledge of the person who made the image			N/A
No	1143 (90.7%)	18 (100%)	
Yes	117 (9.3%)	0 (0.0%)	

Table 2: Prevalence rates of different sexting behaviors compared between cisgender and gender minority youth.

Note. N/A = not applicable (Fisher's Exact Test could not be calculated); * $p < .05$.