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A decade of sexting research – Are we any wiser?

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Mori et al.\(^1\) provide a much-needed meta-analysis and systematic review of the associations of sexting with sexual behaviors and other health indicators. Their rigorous analysis will be a valuable resource to clinicians. It also serves as another reminder that, despite the boom in sexting research over the past decade, scholars have only begun to scratch the surface of the phenomenon. Next to the urgent need for a unified conceptualization of sexting in order to generate sufficient cumulative evidence\(^1,3\), two other areas for future work are made apparent.

First, one of the main findings was that the associations between sexting and several risk behaviors were stronger among younger adolescents, compared to older teenagers. Early adolescents (between 12 and 15 years old) might be particularly vulnerable to risks associated with sexting, given their young age\(^1,3\). Yet, despite the clear need for sexting research to focus on this developmental stage, only five out of the 23 studies in Mori et al. reported a mean participant age below 15 years old\(^1\), leaving the most critical age group understudied. This highlights the need for future risk behavior surveillance studies to begin to include digital sexual behaviors along with standard offline sexual behaviors, so that we can obtain reliable evidence for all age groups.

Second, past research may have lost valuable time by treating the act of sending sexts itself, whether consensual or not, as problematic for too long. Just as with cyberbullying\(^4\), hardly any sexting research has accounted for contextual factors, which may affect the correlates that are identified\(^1\). Mori et al.\(^1\) provide excellent suggestions for future studies to assess the intention, mediums, content, context, and format of sexting. I would add that important contextual factors may include the extent to which youths experience pressure to send sexting images and the extent to which they feel expected to do so (e.g., under influence of relational
scripts and peer norms). Furthermore, especially when studying the psychological consequences of sexting, considering whether the senders experienced regret or worry after hitting “send” might be another useful factor that might explain associations with internalizing problems, such as anxiety or depression. The concern that sexting images may resurface at any time in the future\textsuperscript{5} may especially contribute to these emotions, regardless of the initial consensual context or harmless intention. In sum, this review is an essential step for the field to mature, and a reminder that it is past time to start focusing on the real issues surrounding sexting.
References


