

SEXTING AND MOTIVES FOR SEXTING AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract: This article addresses sexting from its theoretical point of view and analyses the classification of its types and forms. Our focus is set to the motives for sexting among adolescents. The quantitative research carried out on the sample of 1,619 students in the Slovak Republic shows that adolescents can be divided into four groups according to their involvement in sexting: by-standers, victims, sexters and bi-directional sexters. It also shows that boys are involved in sexting more than girls. Semi-structured interviews with 37 adolescents aged 16–19 demonstrate that these adolescents encounter many forms of sexting such as partner's request for materials in question, requests from strangers, misused photos, blackmail, etc. The reasons for sexting include trust, relationship intimacy enhancement, distraction, effort to preserve friendship, etc. At-risk sexting stems from unawareness of consequences.

Keywords: sexting, peer-sexting, self-sexting, motives and reasons for sexting

1 Theoretical definition of sexting and its classification

Increasing accessibility to technological products affects the social life. The advances in science and technology provide us with many benefits in communication, as well as digitisation of machines, apparatus and devices which ultimately makes the work performance, services and other activities more efficient. Information and communication technologies, such as mobile phones, smartphones, laptops, tablets, PCs and various applications, play an important part in our everyday lives and incite the creation of a whole new world – cyberspace. Cyberspace makes it easy to communicate online, share information and ideas, play games, join discussions and social forums, conduct business, create intuitive media and perform other activities. The increase in benefits and availability of cyberspace, products and devices improved by technologization and electronization is directly related to the increase of risks that can affect an individual's life and social life in general.

Cyberspace is a platform for various forms of at-risk behaviour. As the new forms of communication emerged, new addictions, criminality and violence have spread as well. Sexting is currently becoming one of the specific ethical concerns that lies in posting text and audio-visual materials of sexual content in the virtual environment. Social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, Instagram, Viber, Whatsapp, etc., are all platforms that facilitate the online dissemination of sexting. In Slovak Republic, this primarily applies to Facebook and Instagram. However, there is still a lack of researches on sexting, its consequences, interventions and motives for such behaviour that would apply nationally. In Slovakia, the issue of sexting was marginally addressed by M. Gregussová, J. Tomková and M. Balážová. In 2010, they performed the research entitled *Dospievajúci vo virtuálnom priestore (Adolescents in cyberspace)* in cooperation with eSlovensko civic association and EU Safer Internet Plus programme. As for the EU KIDS ONLINE project, sexting was studied by K. Kopecký in cooperation with PRVoK. In 2013, methodological guide for children, *Deti v sieti – ako chrániť seba a naše deti na internete (Children in the Web - How to protect ourselves and our children on the Internet)*, was published. Apart from other subjects, the authors also studied sexting and sexuality on the Internet. Other relevant information materials about sexting are available on the project's website <https://www.zodpovedne.sk/>. This issue is currently being studied by K. Hollá in collaboration with other authors under VEGA project no. 1/0100/18 Self-sexting and peer-sexting and related educational intervention.

The term sexting is a neologism consisting of the words 'sex' and 'texting'. As the availability of devices with the option to access the Internet and send text messages and photos increased, sexting has become more popular among both the adolescents and the adults. Sexting is conventionally described as the 'exchange of sexual messages or images' (Livingstone, 2011).

Hinduja and Patchin (2010) define it also as 'sending or receiving sexually explicit or sexually suggestive images and videos via mobile phone'. After performing the analysis and comparison of foreign publications about sexting, we proclaim that sexting refers to the acts of creating, sending and receiving provocative photos depicting nakedness, sexually explicit images and texts, sexually suggestive naked or partially naked photos, images and videos (Hollá, 2016).

In the last decade, communication via various technologies became an important factor in the formation of romantic relationships. People are increasingly using media to initiate, keep or quit their relationships. Text and audio-visual materials of sexual content most frequently occur between partners who exchange their intimate and sexually explicit photos due to several reasons. Exchanging sexually explicit messages between people in a romantic relationship stimulates their mutual intimacy (Klettke et al., 2014). The problem arises if the couple breaks up and one of the partners uses the intimate photos to get their revenge. Lenhart (2009) states that sexting mostly occurs:

1. between partners;
2. between partners at first and then the content is shared with other people who it is not dedicated to;
3. between two people who want to start a romantic relationship.

Foreign publications, however, offer various classifications of sexting. Van der Hof and Kooops (2011) introduce two types of sexting:

1. *self-sexting* – describes situations when an individual posts their own sexually explicit photos and videos on the Internet;
2. *peer-sexting* – describes situations when peers send their sexually explicit photos and videos one to another.

This division addresses the way the content is posted. It might be a situation when someone posts their photo or video of sexual or sexually explicit content on the Internet or when such photos are sent among peers. Further types of sexting were studied by Scholes-Balog in collaboration with other authors (2016) who divided sexting into six categories, i.e. as sending:

1. sexually suggestive photos and videos;
2. photos and videos exposing people in underwear or lingerie;
3. nude photos and videos;
4. sexually suggestive text messages;
5. and 6. sending or showing other sexts that were intended to be private.

This classification is based on the types of sexting behaviour and the above-mentioned findings clearly show how sexting is performed. Another division is offered by Wolak and Finkelhor (2011). Sexting is described as:

1. *aggressive* – this type is closely related to another negative and often illegal usage of content;
2. *experimental* – refers to the exchange of sexual and sexually explicit photos and videos between two people in a relationship who want to flirt or make contact with each other.

This implies a general division of sexting and its forms. Sexting was analysed in detail by Hudson (2011) who differentiates its four forms:

1. *consensual sexting* – both parties voluntarily participate on sexting;
2. *sexbusting* – sexting is used to harass, force or abuse other people;
3. *illegal sexting* – sexting occurs among minors or between minors and adults;

4. *at-risk sexting* – sexting has various negative consequences such as victimization, humiliation, job loss, divorce, etc.

This classification appears to be the most comprehensive. It includes behaviours within the scope of standards for partners' coexistence (consensual sexting). However, it also covers forms of inappropriate behaviour which fall outside these standards. They are (in real life, as well as in cyberspace) often closely related to the other at-risk behaviours such as cyberbullying, cybergrooming, paedophilia and pornography.

2 Motives and reasons for sexting

There are several specific motives that have provoked the outbreak and dissemination of sexting among adolescents and adults in the world. Sexting among adolescents usually occurs in the following contexts:

- as an opportunity for younger people with no experience in sexual activities to become sexually active;
- as an opportunity to draw someone else's attention;
- as a proof of trust and intimacy between sexually active people.

Adolescents post their own intimate photos for different reasons. They often believe that sending illegal photos and videos would help them draw the attention of the opposite sex or start a modelling career. We register the age of those who send sexually explicit materials is decreasing worldwide, including Slovakia. Therefore, it is not rare to see children involved in online sexting. As for children, the main motives for exposing oneself in the cyberspace are primarily related to drawing someone else's attention, as well as getting tangible things in return. Our intention is not to analyse motives and reasons for sexting among children as they are often misled by inappropriate online communication. As a result, they become victims of criminal offences such as paedophilia, pornography and cybergrooming. In this section, the focus is set on the motives and reasons for sexting among adolescents. Kopecký (2015) uses five essential points describing the motivation for sexting, as follows:

1. sexting as a part of romantic relationships: sexual or sexually explicit photos and videos are shared between partners either as a way to get the other person's attention at the beginning of a relationship or to strengthen trust and intimacy during the relationship.
2. sexting as a way of distraction;
3. social pressure of peers;
4. opportunity to express oneself in the society;
5. way to get revenge – especially between ex-partners.

Exchanging sexually explicit messages can be a type of flirting or a way to draw attention of potential partners. Motives for sexting often include distraction, provocation, pressure from partners and peers. Lohmann (2012) – one of the authors who study at-risk phenomenon – states following motives in his publication:

1. infatuation – occurs most often; a person in love would do anything to prove their love to their partner;
2. pressure from peers – to be accepted in a group of peers;
3. curiosity – sexting makes the adolescents curious, leads them to examination and experimentation;
4. insufficient awareness of possible consequences of sexting.

There may be a large number of motives for sexting. It is essential, however, to explain to young people that sexting poses a danger and that nude or half-naked photos should remain private. Published cases of sexting might serve as a good example to do so. Otherwise, an individual's photos and videos could be posted on public portals even without them knowing. Therefore, it is highly important to point out the consequences of their behaviour.

2.1 Quantitative-qualitative research of sexting – sexting 'in practise'

So far, only one national research that would focus on sexting among the adolescents has been carried out in the Slovak Republic. This research involved 1,619 students aged 11–18 (the age mean was 14.5).

Table 1 – Research sample structure (Hollá, 2017)

| Region | N | Sex | | Age Mean (SD) |
|-----------------|-------|------|-------|-----------------|
| | | Boys | Girls | |
| Bratislava | 205 | 102 | 103 | 14.55 (SD=2.31) |
| Trnava | 202 | 62 | 140 | 14.50 (SD=2.30) |
| Trenčín | 202 | 91 | 111 | 14.48 (SD=2.29) |
| Nitra | 202 | 92 | 110 | 14.49 (SD=2.29) |
| Žilina | 204 | 97 | 107 | 14.44 (SD=2.31) |
| Banská Bystrica | 209 | 87 | 122 | 14.51 (SD=2.31) |
| Prešov | 200 | 75 | 125 | 14.50 (SD=2.29) |
| Košice | 195 | 93 | 102 | 14.60 (SD=2.26) |
| Total | 1,619 | 699 | 920 | 14.51 (SD=2.29) |

The aim of this research was to *detect if sexting behaviours occur in the studied population, as well as to study if there are any subcategories of sexting involvement.*

To examine the latter, we used LCA methods and statistical criteria such as Akaike information criterion (AIC), Bayesian information criterion (BIC), the adjusted Bayesian information criterion (aBIC), log-likelihood and relative entropy.

Table 2 Quality level of different LCA sexting models (Hollá, 2017)

| Nm. of classes | AIC | BIC | aBIC | Log-likel. | Rel. entr. |
|----------------|----------|----------|----------|------------|------------|
| 2 class. | 17,421.2 | 17,771.6 | 17,565.1 | -8,645.6 | 0.958 |
| 3 class. | 16,076.7 | 16,604.8 | 16,293.5 | -7,940.3 | 0.971 |
| 4 class. | 15,282.1 | 15,988.2 | 15,572.0 | -7,510.1 | 0.915 |
| 5 class. | 14,918.7 | 15,802.6 | 15,281.6 | -7,295.3 | 0.961 |

According to the quality assessment of different models, model of four latent classes turns out to be the best option for sexting examination. The entropy for this model refers to 0.915 which is considered relatively high. This implies there are four groups (classes) of people involved in sexting – by-standers, victims, sexters and bi-directional sexters.

The largest group is represented by 69% adolescents standing by who can be also identified as witnesses. They are aware of sexting and its presence (Image 1).

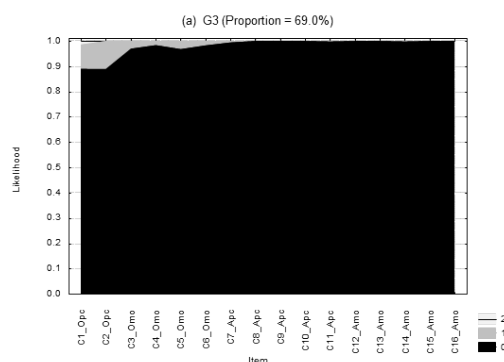


Image 1 – Witnesses of sexting

They could have witnessed sexting either directly or indirectly. Image 1 demonstrates that the score of this group is very likely to be 0 (marked as black) in case of all items, i.e. people in this group are neither victims, nor initiators of any sexting form.

The second most numerous group is represented by 19.1% students. These students are more likely to become victims of sexting. They were threatened once or twice in a month that their own sexually explicit photos would be posted and misused (Image 2).

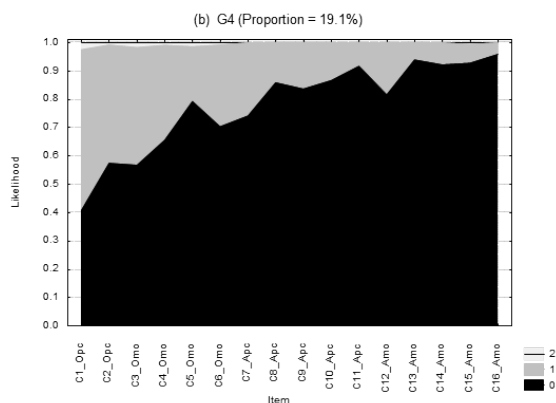


Image 2 – Victims of sexting

The third group includes 10.5% adolescents. These adolescents are highly active in sexting. They are sexters who are, however, less likely to get involved in the active forms of sexting repeatedly (Image 3).

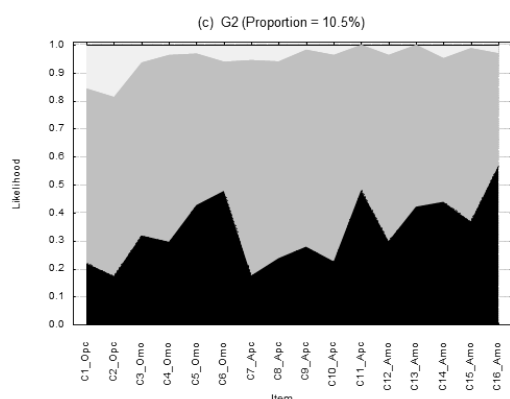


Image 3 – Sexters

The least numerous group (1.4% research sample) is represented by students who actively participate in sexting by sending their own nude photos, as well as photos exposing other people from school and by requesting the others to provide their nude photos.

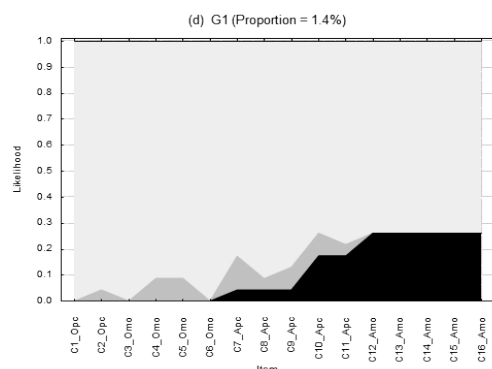


Image 4 – Bi-directional sexters

The gender-based analysis shows that boys' involvement in active sexting increases at the age of 13–18. Boys at the age of 17 and 18 are the most active in sexting. The same applies to girls at the age of 16 and 17. Interestingly, as much as 5% girls would send their own photos to their boyfriends or partners via computer even if they consider such behaviour severe.

We subsequently interviewed 37 young people (29 girls and 8 boys at the age of 16–19) to examine their causes of and motives for sexting. By the means of semi-structured interview we aimed to find out if these participants had encountered sexting before and what motives and reasons had led them to such behaviour.

Have you ever encountered sexting? If so, how?

- Indirectly – I heard about it.
- My boyfriend asked me to send him intimate photos.
- I sent photos exposing naked girls to my friends. I wanted to show them the current lifestyle and the way young girls lived.
- My classmate threatened my other classmate that he would post her photos online.
- My friends received someone's nude photo and showed me. The photo started to spread.
- A stranger once sent me a message on Facebook that included sexually explicit photo.
- My friends sent me photos on Facebook which exposed naked girls I know.
- I know some girls from our town/city who took their naked or half-naked photos and sent them to a 'friend' for a financial reward (app. €5).
- A stranger sent me photos on Facebook exposing them naked and asked me to evaluate their looks and send them my nude photos.
- I received half-naked photos of me and my friend. I was also asked to send them to another friend so I did it.
- I received an email with the photo of my naked classmate. I only sent photos showing my own body and I was not completely naked – I took the photo in the gym.
- I used to send my partially revealing photos when I had a crush on one girl (app. 10 times in that particular month).
- I received the photo of a half-naked girl I merely know.
- A stranger sent me their sexually explicit photo on Facebook.
- My half-naked photos were misused by my classmates in the group chat.
- I know sexting from my friend. He used to send his friends' inappropriate photos. Well, I did not feel comfortable at all.
- I got MMS with the photo of a naked man. I did not know him so I did not reply and forgot about that.
- I could see my classmates, both boys and girls, sending such photos to one another.
- I received someone else's nude photo and forwarded it. When I think about it, I just did the same thing someone had done before me – I just forwarded it. However, it got interesting when someone I knew asked me to send them mine. I am not proud of what I did but back then I did not think about it at all.
- I remember we were receiving photos from a student in our class for a week. We began to resent the person sending those photos and felt sorry for the student on them.
- I used to send my intimate photos to my boyfriend several times a week.
- People requested me to send my private and intimate photos but I never answered them.
- I received a photo of my friend who was naked and drunk and sent it to my classmate. I found it amusing back then but now I regret it. I had no right to send around someone else's photos – not even to people I know.
- When I was still at primary school, I received emails with photos exposing my naked classmates.
- Some boys wrote and asked me to send them my nude photos. I thought it was totally weird and inappropriate. It only happened three times that year but I found it too much and bothering.
- My friend was threatened by her boyfriend. He said he would post the photos she had sent him if they broke up.

As the literature along with the analysis of the above-stated answers show, the adolescents send their photos upon requests from their friends because they trust them and want to enhance the intimacy. Certain young people treat 'sexting in practise' differently. They think that having their partner's nude photo in the phone reflects how sexually active they are. They send these photos and request them from their friends in confidence. Furthermore, it can be stated that adolescents receive photos and requests to send their own photos from people they know and strangers respectively. In this case, they often do it for fun or to make and keep their friendships, not thinking about the consequences.

How did you feel afterwards?

- Sad, humiliated, afraid and worried, disgusted and uncomfortable...
- I wonder what to think about it and what my attitude should be. These days, people often seek their partners on the Internet but I also believe some stuff should not be posted online.
- I guess young couples are trying to communicate in various different ways even by sending photos to one another. However, I condemn any misuse of such photos and videos or threats of posting them.

What motives do adolescents have for sexting?

They want to draw attention of the others. Either they want to be 'cool' or they are bored and do it for fun. They enjoy viewing this kind of photos but they also want to make fun of the affected person. Another reason might be they want to attract the opposite sex and their surroundings. They want to become more popular among their peers and get as many likes on social networks as possible. They want to become more self-confident. They want to show off their looks, thinking they look more mature on the photos or have a nice body. They do it out of jealousy, prestige or to be attractive and popular in the cyberspace, as well as in the real life. They feel empty inside and do it out of revenge.

Adolescents who send their intimate and private photos to their partners or post them on social networks are very likely to be at-risk of blackmail, pressure, public humiliation, sexual harassment or sexual assault. This material could circulate online for several years and might be also used much later.

To conclude, it is quite difficult to detect the true prevalence of sexting as researchers use different definitions and methodology to examine this phenomenon. It seems that sexting might be a modern form of flirting. Adolescents could use it to initiate new relationships or keep the existing ones. Sexting is closely related to the individual's age, personality and social situation. During adolescence, young people become more curious and feel invincible. They are much more impulsive than the adults. All these variables also affect the formation and persistence of sexting either as acceptable or at-risk phenomenon. In some cases, sexting can indicate another at-risk behaviour. This allows educational and psychological intervention to take place and generate solutions to prevent any negative impacts on victim, as well as on the actor of sexting known as sexter.

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Primary Paper Section: A

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