Whether or not to engage in sexting: Explaining adolescent sexting behaviour by applying the prototype willingness model

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217 pupils aged between 15 and 19 years

## Implications For Educators About

Other

# Abstract

Sexting has received increasing scholarly and media attention. Especially, minors’ engage\_x0002\_ment in this behaviour is a source of concern. As adolescents are highly sensitive about
their image among peers and prone to peer influence, the present study implemented
the prototype willingness model in order to assess how perceptions of peers engaging in
sexting possibly influence adolescents’ willingness to send sexting messages. A survey
was conducted among 217 15- to 19-year-olds. A total of 18% of respondents had engaged
in sexting in the 2 months preceding the study. Analyses further revealed that the subjec\_x0002\_tive norm was the strongest predictor of sexting intention, followed by behavioural will\_x0002\_ingness and attitude towards sexting. Additionally, the more favourable young people
evaluated the prototype of a person engaging in sexting and the higher they assessed their
similarity with this prototype, the more they were willing to send sexting messages.
Differences were also found based on gender, relationship status and need for popularity.

# Outcome

"The perceived social norm is the most important predictor of sexting intentions. The individuals’ perception of what peers actually do is more important in explaining risky online sexual behaviours than others’ approval of the behaviour. Additionally, as peer relations and popularity among the peer group are important for some youth, there is a possible influence of students’ desire for popularity. As being sexually active can be seen as a behaviour that increases a teen’s status in the peer group. Being romantically involved can also involve in higher scores on attitude and a more positive subjective norm. Female adolescents were found to be less intended or willing to send sexting messages since engaging in sexting practises would induce more reputational risks for girls. Nevertheless, although girls share a more negative attitude towards sexting than boys, some engage in this behaviour. This could be linked to their relational context. The trust placed in their partner might overshadow the perceived risk of their sexting message being shared with others during the relation or after a possible break-up. Another explanation is that some girls engaging in sexting are put under pressure by their partner to send this kind of message. This could be part of a larger pattern of sexual coercion. Therefore, nonconsensual sexting could be
indicative of forms of relational abuse.
Information and prevention campaigns could therefore focus on perceived social norms by giving youth a strong signal that sexting is not normative among adolescents. Sexting itself should not be banned, as it can form an important expression of sexuality and intimacy. Conversely, how young people may minimise risks of abuse of intimate messages should be part of educational efforts. In this, the role of bystanders is also crucial. They should be empowered to function as a defender of the person whose picture is disseminated instead of being the assistant of the peer that spreads the sexting message among audiences that were not intended by the depicted person." (Walrave et al., 2015, 804-806)