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Association between Sexting and Sexual Coercion among Female Adolescents

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate whether experiences of offline sexual coercion are associated with adolescent females' involvement in different types of sexting behaviors. It draws on data from 450 ethnically diverse female adolescents with an average age of 19.02 years ($SD = 0.74$) who were originally recruited in southeast Texas. The participants were asked about their experiences with sexual coercion, and their engagement in sexting behavior (i.e., sending, requesting, and being asked for a sext, and receiving a sext without giving permission). Logistic regressions were used to analyze these relationships, while controlling for age, ethnicity, education level, living situation, and sexting behaviors in the year prior of the study. Offline sexual coercion was significantly associated with sending and being asked for a naked image, as well as receiving a naked image without giving permission. The results suggest that sexting could function as an online extension of offline forms of sexual coercion.

Keywords

Sexual coercion; sexting; sexual risk behavior; adolescents

Introduction

Sexting can be broadly defined as the sending of sexually explicit text messages or images via the Internet or mobile phone (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013; Houck et al., 2014). In line with previous research, we focus on the sending or sharing of self-made sexually

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explicit images (Temple et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014; Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2014). Use of a more narrow definition of sexting allows us to better assess the associations of this specific type of sexting, as opposed to using a composite score or broad conceptualization which mixes different types of behaviors (messages and pictures). While research findings linking sexting and risk behaviors (Houck et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2014), and sexting and health (Temple et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014) have been equivocal, studies demonstrating an association between sexting and actual sexual behavior is consistent and robust (Rice et al., 2012; Temple & Choi, 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). When done willingly, sexting may be considered a 21st century form of courting and dating. However, sexting does not always occur within a positive context (Englander, 2015). Indeed, sexting has been shown to predict digital dating violence (Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2016), and research has consistently found that females are often repeatedly asked, pressured, or coerced by others to send self-made sexually explicit pictures (Englander, 2015; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012; Walker, et al., 2013). Females report feeling compelled to comply with requests for sexting images, for fear of losing their romantic partner or concern about the potential for negative social consequences (e.g., ridiculed, name calling, ostracized) (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker et al., 2013). Similarly, a qualitative study by Ringrose and colleagues (2012) indicated that engagement in sexting was an extension of offline forms of physical harassment often experienced by teenage girls, such as being touched or groped without consent. In a study among male and female college students, Englander (2015) found that 70% of those who had engaged in sexting felt at least sometimes pressured or coerced to send a self-made sexually explicit photograph, both within and outside of a romantic relationship. When focusing on sexting coercion within the context of romantic relationships, Drouin and Tobin (2014) found that 55% of female college students in a romantic relationship sent a self-made sexually explicit text message, photograph, or video of themselves despite a lack of willingness. Using a more narrow definition of sexting Reed, Tolman, & Ward (2016: 9) found that 21% of females in their collegiate sample had been pressured by their partner “to take a sexually suggestive/nude photo or video.”

Although studies suggest concurrence between sexting and offline forms of sexual coercion, the extent of this relationship is not fully understood. Our study builds on qualitative data (Walker et al., 2013; Ringrose et al., 2012), and on prior quantitative studies (Drouin, Ross, & Tobin, 2015) by using a large ethnically diverse community-based sample and by including multiple forms of sexting behaviors. Specifically, we investigate the extent to which sexual coercion is linked to different types of sexting behaviors among adolescent females. Given the knowledge that the line between offline and online behaviors is becoming increasingly blurred (Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2012), we expect that offline sexual coercion will be linked to sending, requesting, and being asked for a sext, as well as receiving a sext without giving permission.

Methods

Procedure and participants

Data are from Waves 5 and 6 of *Dating it Safe* (Temple, et al., 2013), an ongoing longitudinal cohort study of adolescent risky behaviors. Participants ($n = 1042$) were originally recruited from mandated classes in 7 public high schools in southeast Texas (response rate: 62%). Of the 583 females who participated at baseline (spring 2010), 460 (retention rate: 79% of original participants) participated in Wave 6 (spring 2015). We excluded 10 females who reported as “completely homosexual” as prior research (Rice et al., 2012) has shown that sexting behaviors may manifest differently in same sex relationships. The average age of participants ($n = 450$) was 19.02 ($SD = 0.74$). Additional sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. The study was approved by the last author’s IRB.

Measurement

Sexting in the past year (Waves 5 & 6)—Based on previous studies (Temple and Choi, 2014), female participants reported four sexting behaviors in the past year with a yes/no response format: 1) Being asked, “have you been asked to send naked pictures of yourself through text, email, or things like SnapChat?” 2) Requesting: “have you asked someone to send naked pictures of them to you?”, 3) Sending: “have you sent naked pictures of yourself to another through text, email, or SnapChat?” and 4) Receiving without one’s permission, “has anyone sent you a naked picture without you asking?”

Sexual Coercion (Wave 6)—The following two items from the Sexual Experience Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982) measured sexual coercion: “Have you ever given in to sex play (fondling, kissing, or petting, but not intercourse) when you didn’t want to because you were overwhelmed by a man’s continual arguments and pressure?” and “Have you given in to sexual intercourse when you didn’t want to because you were overwhelmed by a man’s continual argument or pressure?”. To distinguish child maltreatment from sexual coercion, we asked participants to consider the timeframe “since you were fourteen”. Participants were also given the following definition: “By sexual intercourse, we mean penetration of a woman’s vagina, no matter how slight, by a man’s penis. Ejaculation is not required. Whenever you see the words sexual intercourse, please use this definition.”

Analysis

Logistic regression was employed to explore whether sexual coercion is associated with sexting behaviors. Because the data are from a longitudinal study, we were able to control for previous sexting behaviors (in 2014 when participants were ~18) in assessing the association between sexual coercion and sexting (in 2015 when participants were ~19). Ethnicity, education level (e.g., public/private university, community/technical college), living situation (e.g., living with family, partners, roommates, alone), sexual activity (e.g., had sex (intercourse) vs. never had sex), and length of relationship (over 1 year vs. other) were included in the model as covariates. All variables (save age) were included in the model as dummied-coded variables. For example, sending a naked picture was coded as “sent a sext” = 1 vs. “did not send a sext” = 0).

Results

The prevalence of sexting and sexual coercion are shown in Table 1. Overall, female adolescents experiencing lifetime sexual coercion were more likely to engage in sexting behaviors (See Table 2). Even after controlling for age, ethnicity, education level, living situation, previous sexting and sexual behaviors, and length of the relationship, offline sexual coercion was significantly associated with sending a sext, being asked for a sext, and receiving a sext without one's permission (See Table 3).

Discussion

As expected, we found that female adolescents who experienced offline forms of sexual coercion were more likely to have sent, been asked for, and to have received a naked image without permission compared to their counterparts who had not experienced offline sexual coercion. This association persisted even after controlling for previous sexting and sexual behaviors and several demographic variables. This finding is consistent with qualitative research demonstrating that adolescent girls often experience pressure to send naked images, as well as studies demonstrating a link between sexting and experiencing offline forms of harassment (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2013). We did not find an association between sexual coercion and asking for a naked picture, which makes intuitive sense given the fact that this is the only sexting behavior that is entirely voluntary. Taken together, our findings indicate that female adolescents who experience offline sexual coercion are more likely to sext, and are more likely to be confronted with online forms of sexual pressure (i.e., being asked for sexting images or receiving naked pictures without permission). Sexting could function as a continuation of offline forms of sexual coercion and function as an additional way for perpetrators to harass their victims. This is particularly alarming because 1) coercion is no longer limited to in-person interactions, and 2) perpetrators may use the coerced images to further harm women with blackmail or threats (Walker et al., 2013).

Notwithstanding study limitations (e.g., self-report, regionally based sample, single items as outcome measures), these findings have important implications for practitioners as it shows that sexting could be a marker of lifetime victimization of sexual coercion, and vice versa. When a sexting incident occurs, practitioners, such as school counselors or psychologists, could inquire whether the engagement in sexting is linked to victimization of other forms sexual coercion. Moreover, results suggest that sexting should be discussed in combination with efforts to promote healthy relationships and prevent sexual coercion. Educational efforts could, for instance, teach adolescents how they can deal with pressure to engage in offline and online sexual acts by discussing effective negotiation strategies and communication styles, and by explaining boundaries within romantic relationships.

Future research should examine the health and psychosocial consequences for adolescent victims who are experiencing both online and offline forms of sexual coercion. It would also benefit from investigating the different relational contexts in which the offline forms of sexual coercion occur (e.g., differences between coercion in dating relationships versus established romantic relationships). Similarly, future research could also take young people's

motives for engaging in sexting into account, as associations with sexual coercion might differ depending on individual reasons to engage in sexting (e.g., using sexting to flirt with a romantic partner as opposed to engaging in sexting out of fear of losing a partner).

In conclusion, the current study is among the first to investigate how experiences of offline sexual coercion are associated with adolescent females' involvement in sexting behaviors, and to demonstrate that sexting could function as an online extension of offline forms of sexual coercion.

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Table 1

Sample Characteristics

	N (%)
Ethnicity	
Hispanic	150 (33.4%)
White	122 (27.1%)
African American	123 (27.3%)
Others	55 (12.2%)
Attending college	
Public/Private University	171 (38.2%)
Community College/ Technical school	151 (33.7%)
Not in college (e.g., working)	126 (28.1%)
Living with..	
Family	227 (50.7%)
Friend(s)/Roommate(s)	96 (21.4%)
Girlfriend/Wife or Boyfriend/Husband	89 (19.9%)
Alone	36 (8.0%)
Sexual Activity	
Virgin	67 (14.9%)
Non-virgin	383 (85.1%)
Length of relationship	
1 year	281 (62.4%)
> 1 year	169 (37.6%)

Table 2

Lifetime experiences of sexual coercion among females involved in sexting

Sexting	Sexual Coercion		Univariate analysis
	Yes (%)	No (%)	
Being asked			
Yes	79 (17.9%)	123 (27.8%)	$\chi^2 = 25.76, p < .001$
No	42 (9.5%)	198 (44.8%)	
Requesting			
Yes	38 (8.6%)	68 (15.4%)	$\chi^2 = 4.96, p = .03$
No	83 (18.8%)	252 (57.2%)	
Sending			
Yes	65 (14.7%)	96 (21.7%)	$\chi^2 = 21.52, p < .001$
No	56 (12.7%)	225 (50.9%)	
Receiving			
Yes	59 (13.4%)	85 (19.3%)	$\chi^2 = 19.49, p < .001$
No	62 (14.1%)	234 (53.2%)	

Table 3

Association between sexting and sexual coercion

	Being asked	Requesting	Sending	Receiving without one's permission
	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)
Sexual coercion	2.35 (1.35, 4.10)	1.07 (0.60, 1.91)	1.79 (1.03, 3.09)	2.08 (1.22, 3.54)

Note. Adjusted for past-year sexting behaviors at previous wave, sexual behavior (sexually active = 1 vs none = 0), length of the relationship (*longer than 1 year* = 1 vs. others = 0) age, ethnicity, education level, and living situation.