

SEXTING AMONG ADOLESCENTS

A gendered online phenomenon, related to individual and social determinants

Jonas Burén

Psykologiska institutionen, 2020

Avhandlingen för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsstyrelsen vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligens försvaras fredagen den 16 oktober 2020, klockan 13.00 i sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Sonia Livingstone, Department of Media and Communications, the London School of Economics and Political Science, Storbritannien.

Avhandlingen baseras på följande tre artiklar:

- I. Burén, J., & Lunde, C. (2018). Sexting among adolescents: A nuanced and gendered online challenge for young people. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 85, 210–217. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.02.003>
- II. Burén, J., Lunde, C., & Holmqvist Gattario, K. (2020). The role of appearance esteem, dysfunctional appearance beliefs, and self-objectification in adolescents' sexting behaviors. Under revision.
- III. Burén, J., Holmqvist Gattario, K., & Lunde, C. (2020). What do peers think about sexting? Adolescents' views of the norms guiding sexting behavior. Under revision.



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ABSTRACT

Burén, J. (2020). *Sexting among adolescents: A gendered phenomenon, related to individual and social determinants*. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, P.O. Box 500, 405 30, Gothenburg, Sweden.

This thesis concerns sexting among Swedish adolescents and adolescent sexual development. Adolescence is a period of major bodily, cognitive, and social changes and of sexual exploration. As many post-millennials have intertwined their lives with digital technologies, this sexual exploration also occurs in the digital context in the form of sexting. Sexting is the sending of nude or semi-nude pictures or video clips online. With sexting being a relatively common phenomenon among adolescents, questions have been raised concerning why adolescents engage in it and with whom, what sexting experiences adolescents have, and how sexting affects adolescent sexual development. Answering these questions may be central to better understanding adolescent sexting and, more importantly, may shed light on the role of sexting in healthy adolescent sexual development. The three constituent studies of this thesis addressed these questions. In **Study I**, 1653 adolescents (mean age 14.20 years) completed a questionnaire. The results indicated that, depending on whom the adolescent had sexted with, the prevalence rates were 4.4–16.0% for sending sexts and 23.5–26.8% for receiving sexts. It was most common for participants to send sexts to a romantic partner, and the least common to a stranger. Girls were more likely to report negative experiences of sexting than were boys and felt more pressure to send sexts. Developmental factors such as age, perceived pubertal timing, online risk-taking, and peer and family support were all related to sexting, but different relationship patterns emerged depending on gender and to whom the sext was sent. In **Study II**, a hypothesized model was tested using SEM to examine whether different aspects of body image were related to sexting. The study showed that sexting was more common among adolescents who perceived appearance to be important for their self-image and in their social context (i.e., dysfunctional appearance beliefs). How much one monitors and views one's body as an object of others' desire (i.e., self-objectification) was also related to sexting with a stranger among boys. In **Study III**, 808 answers to an open-ended question were qualitatively analyzed for content, to examine the social norms that operate in the adolescents' peer groups. Among peers, sexting was seen as an acceptable activity based on certain conditions, for example, that it occurs within a trusting relationship and that there is mutual agreement between the sexting partners. It was not seen as an accepted practice if, for example, the partner was someone unknown. In the peer group, it was also perceived that girls were unfairly treated when engaging in sexting, that sexting entailed certain risks, and that some adolescents may engage in sexting for attention or pleasure. The results of the three studies were discussed in relation to the overarching aims of the thesis. More specifically, sexting was assumed to be related to several psychosocial factors within and outside the adolescent. It was also concluded that it is important to consider whom the adolescents' sext with and that although sexting may play an important role in adolescents' sexual exploration and expression, it may also entail certain risks of harm. Sexting can be understood as one sexual behavior among others that may fit into adolescent sexual development.

Keywords: sexting, adolescents, gender, body image, peer norms

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