



HELSINKI JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES
A Scientific Publication of Helsinki University, Finland.
Volume: 10 Issue: 1 February, 2026
Pages: 87-95, 2026; Publication No: HJSSH.49072
ISSN: 3442-3567

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

QUALITATIVELY EXAMINING AND ANALYZING SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY IN AN ONLINE ARENA WITH A FOCUS ON SEXTING

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Abstract

Technologies have completely revolutionized the way people live, work, study, and connect daily in the current world. The fast growth of the technological world has resulted in a greater requirement for theory and practice to successfully utilize the collaborative online arenas. However, there has been widespread sexual exploitation perpetrated by sophisticated organized criminal syndicates, a profitable sex business, and sexting due to frequent interaction with these online arenas. The word “sexting” is used to refer to the practice of receiving and transmitting sexually explicit images through various virtual communications, particularly in most internet environments. Although sexting is not limited to teenagers, their involvement and the impact on their lives have prompted significant concern among parents, schools, and the media. As a result, this article will examine the tiny but growing area of qualitative research on sexting to determine sexting’s impact on people’s well-being. Building on this, the primary goal of this report was to broaden the understanding of why a person engages in sexting by analyzing the theorized behavioral and cognitive mechanisms depicted by social learning theory and social opportunity structure devised to expand this existing, one-dimensional theoretical framework. The results of this study show that many individuals in online communities see sexting as “fun” and “amusing.” Besides, for adolescents unwilling to engage in actual sexual escapades, sexting may play an integral role in the sexual exploration period. Negative consequences for one’s well-being, such as reputational harm, are also addressed. Furthermore, according to the findings, scholars must continue to employ innovative, interactive techniques with the young generation to investigate the impacts of this sophisticated communication type.

Keywords: Adolescence and Young People, Online Platform, Sexting, Social Learning Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Access to technological or digital devices is becoming more widely available, which has an impact on social life. Advances in science and technology offer many advantages in terms of communication and digitalization of machinery, equipment, and gadgets, which, in turn, improves the efficiency of job performance, operations, and other activities (Russell & Sluckin, 2016). Tablets, smartphones, PCs, laptops, and other apps, as well as other information and communication technology, play a significant role in individual’s daily lives and have sparked the development of a new cyberworld. Cyberspace makes sharing ideas and information, playing games, participating in social forums and conversations, producing intuitive media, doing business, and other activities easier. Technologization has enhanced the advantages and availability of the internet, goods, and gadgets. Still, it has also increased the dangers that may impact an individual’s life and society’s life in general

(Yépez-Tito et al., 2020). As new means of communication arose, so did new addictions, crime, and violence. Numerous studies have revealed that by using modern technologies, children and adolescents are experiencing a range of online abuse and harassment, including online bullying and online stalking (Morelli et al., 2016; Yépez-Tito et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2021).

Another phenomenon that has emerged with the use of modern technology is sexting. Sexting (“sex” plus “texting”) generally means the act of sending, sharing, or exchanging sexual messages, photographs, or videos via digital platforms (Yépez-Tito et al., 2020). Sexting is quickly becoming one of the most serious ethical issues when it comes to publishing sexually explicit text as well as audio-visual materials in the virtual world. WhatsApp, Viber, Myspace, Instagram, and Facebook, among others, are all platforms that enable the spread of sexting over the internet. However, there is currently a dearth of national studies on sexting, its effects, treatments, and motivations for such conduct (Houck et al., 2014).

Communication through different technologies has been an essential element in establishing romantic connections in the past decade. People are increasingly turning to social media to start, maintain, or end relationships. According to Klettke et al. (2014), audio-visual as well as text materials with sexual content are most often exchanged between couples for a variety of reasons, including stimulating their mutual closeness. The role of these electronic devices in the lives and well-being of younger generations has long been a source of debate in most online forums (Adamczyk et al., 2019). Increased access to obscenity, smartphone usage, and cyberbullying are all negative behaviors linked with young people and gadget use. Sexting, defined as the process of transmitting sexually explicit material through texts and online platforms, is one such activity that has gotten a lot of attention from legislators, academics, and the media (Strasburger et al., 2019). The issue usually develops after a breakup, when personal pictures and texts are exploited to exact revenge.

Because sexting often involves the self-production of explicit content, Stanley et al. (2018) argue that similarities have been made between the negative repercussions of adolescent sexting and teen pornography consumption. This includes a higher tolerance for inappropriate sexual activities and the harassment of others. Sexting has also been related to poor well-being consequences in people, resulting in low self-esteem and sadness (Sorbring et al., 2014). While quantitative studies like these have made a significant contribution to young people’s discourse, it is essential to remember that they cannot prove causation independently. Furthermore, qualitative investigations may capture the subtleties of human experience and contextual elements that quantitative studies cannot. As a result, this report will examine qualitative research on sexting’s impact on the young generation’s well-being. This will be among the first evaluations to concentrate only on qualitative research in this area of the internet. As a result, the article will be very useful in determining the future paths of such studies. The article uses the social learning theory to describe the characteristics and pattern of migration from the terrestrial to the online arena and vice versa in response to the sexting issues (Akers, 2017).

Theoretical Framework in Online Arena’s Sexting Behavior

Social Learning Theory

This theory proposes that sexting and other illegal behaviors are taught via many unique mechanisms ingrained in deviant people and communities (Akers & Jennings, 2015). Akers’ concept of social learning theory is a system of thinking that may be used to explain aberrant conduct. Sutherland’s differential association theory (1947, as cited in Boman & Freng, 2017) and cognitive learning theories were used to develop the idea. According to the social learning hypothesis, deviant conduct is acquired via imitation of role models, such as

classmates and parents. The social learning theory's ideas are helpful in understanding several deviant behaviors, including teenage alcohol and drug use, as well as adolescent smoking (Akers, 2017). Robert Burgess and Ronald Akers combined the TDA with psychological behaviorism ideas, especially operant conditioning, to create a more nuanced version of the famous sociological as well as the criminological theory of differential association (TDA). According to Akers and Jennings (2015), this led to the development of their differential association– reinforcement theory, which aimed to uncover the particular behavioral processes involved in forming connections.

Furthermore, Akers worked alone to improve social learning theory and include concepts from cognitive psychology, culminating in the present four-part form. Definitions, Differential reinforcement, Differential association, and imitation are some of these (Akers, 2017). Concerning the social learning theory, there is a strong direct relationship between taking part in aberrant behavior and accepting that a particular depraved act is desirable or warranted, associating with those who commit deviant acts as well as holding favorable opinions toward it, anticipating a reward that surpasses potential punitive measures, and becoming more vulnerable to misbehavior (Akers & Jennings, 2015). The following paragraphs will go through the different stated social learning theory components and apply them to online arena sexting.

Definitions

Definitions refer to a person's feelings towards a certain kind of conduct. According to Akers and Jennings (2015), they are impacted by a person's explanations, justifications, and attitudes about whether a certain behavior is more wrong or right, satisfactory or terrible, ideal or unwanted, warranted or unwarranted, suitable or unsuitable, justified or unjustified, justified or unjustified, justified or unjustified. Akers identifies negative, positive, and neutral thoughts regarding actions. Positive perspectives include the notion that aberrant conduct is morally acceptable. Unpleasant, improper, and wrong behavior are all defined by negative concepts. Finally, rationalizations and justifications for aberrant conduct make up neutralizing beliefs (Akers & Jennings, 2015). Previous research by Walrave et al. (2015) has shown a link between how young people are exposed to online settings that suggest they have participated in sexting and their favorable views about the conduct. Strassberg et al. (2013) discovered a link between sexting and young people's favorable views about the activity, such as sex texting is always OK with them. Strassberg et al. (2013) found that students with unfavorable views were less likely to engage in sexting. Positive views about sexting were linked to a greater desire to participate in the activity, according to research by Walrave et al. (2015). Similarly, teenagers' participation in sexting is influenced by what is perceived as their favorable view of the activity.

Differential Association

According to the idea, the people with whom people engage and identify themselves play an essential part in the formation of the social environment in which social learning takes place. Individuals are exposed to aberrant conduct and the values and norms that accept or disapprove of it via their interactions with others, such as their peers. These beliefs and actions will have an effect on whether or not people participate (Akers & Jennings, 2015). Adolescents' sexting activity is influenced by exposure to online venues, peer pressure, and perceived peer group attitudes, according to several qualitative researches. Numerous qualitative and quantitative researches corroborated these findings.

According to Lippman and Campbell (2014), injunctive social norms and whether or not peers would approve of conduct were predictive of even a wide range of online hazardous sexual activities, particularly among those who shared nude pictures and videos. Furthermore, it has been shown that peer pressure is associated with sexting behaviors

among adolescents. A further finding in a group of at-risk teenagers was that sexting was associated with a greater feeling of sexual activity acceptability from peers and family, as well as from the mainstream media (Houck et al., 2014). Besides, a link between sexting and subjective norms, or teenagers' reported attitudes toward their romantic acquaintances and partners was discovered by Walrave et al. (2015). Peer attitudes had a greater influence on the desire to participate in sexting than teenage views about the activity.

Differential Reinforcement

Differential reinforcement is a component that includes the anticipated consequences of deviant conduct. The likelihood that a person would participate in or avoid an activity is influenced by their perceptions of the present and future incentives and penalties. Social or non-social incentives and punishments are possible (Akers et al., 1979). Approval, such as a better social position or getting praise, is a positive and negative social reinforcement. They may also involve rejection in the form of loss of respect or criticism from friends and relatives. Non-social incentives may include benefits such as receiving a rush from doing the activity or drawbacks such as feeling embarrassed about particular behaviors. The legal repercussions of this aberrant conduct may also be included in differential reinforcement (Akers & Jennings, 2015). Even though sexting may have negative consequences, such as reputational damage, this is in the event sexting messages or photos are made public. This may also offer adolescents some perceived advantages, such as positive reinforcement (Ringrose et al., 2013). Sexting may have an important influence on how young people view personal connections, particularly in the context of a romantic engagement (Lippman & Campbell, 2014).

Sexting may be used in this context to enhance one's connection with one's partner (Walker et al., 2013), or it may be used as a method of being sexually active without sexual illnesses or unwanted pregnancy dangers (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Aside from that, early adult study suggests that sexting may be utilized to rekindle pleasure and affection in an existing romantic relationship (Parker et al., 2013). Sexting may provide a sense of satisfaction even when it is not done in the context of a love relationship. According to Lippman and Campbell (2014), sexting participation is associated with the status of one's peer group. Boys who considered they to have a strong sexual attraction to another were more likely to send a sexting message to that other person. According to a qualitative study, some women felt compelled to participate in sexting to get the attention they desired from male partners. According to a study by Ringrose et al. (2013), some guys competed for peer group status by collecting as many sexting texts from girls as they could. Walrave et al. (2014) also discovered that the following beliefs were linked with a greater likelihood of sexting: This suggests that sexting will attract attention to the sender, increase the likelihood of finding an intimate partner, and decrease the likelihood of contracting sexually transmitted illnesses.

LIMITATION

According to this component of social learning theory, people model their behavior after the behavior of another individual (Akers & Jennings, 2015). When people near the person, such as their peers, act as role models, it is possible that imitation may occur rapidly. Imitation may also be accomplished indirectly via the use of media (Akers & Jennings, 2015). Rice et al. (2012) found that students who had sent a sexting message were more likely than those who had never sent a sexting message to be able to identify someone else who had sent a sexting message in the first place. It has also been shown that descriptive peer norms, or a person's impression of their peers' online hazardous sexual behavior, may be predictive of a variety of potentially harmful and dangerous sexual online actions among teenagers (Baumgartner et al., 2015). Walker et al. (2013) conducted a

qualitative study. They reported mostly on the experiences of many females who felt compelled to engage in sexting after obtaining sexually explicit messages from other people they knew.

Sexting may be influenced by contemporary media and social media culture, as well as other factors. Several scholars say sexuality and sex escapades are more prominently shown and are openly discussed (Hasinoff, 2014). Celebrities may use social media to publish sexual photos of them and sexualize their bodies in the same way they do in front of the general public. Adolescents' willingness to participate in sexting activities may be influenced by how they see others. Pornography use was also related to transmitting and receiving sexting pictures and texts among adolescents in previous studies conducted among teens in various countries (Stanley et al., 2018).

DISCUSSION

According to numerous studies, it is possible to investigate sexting from a variety of theoretical viewpoints in order to help educators, practitioners, and policymakers better understand why young people participate in it and how to address the problem via laws, prevention, and instructional efforts (Campbell & Park, 2014). The purpose of this research was to investigate whether or not the components of Akers' social learning theory could properly explain online sexting behavior. Sexting inside a romantic relationship was shown to have a smaller variance, explained by the final model, than sexting outside of one, as seen by the study results.

In fact, as shown by the greater explained variance of the latter model, the social learning theory designed to study aberrant behavior may be the most appropriate theory to explain sexting when it occurs outside of a romantic relationship. Additionally, it examines the more dangerous of the two sexting behaviors that were the subject of this research, which is the significantly riskier activity (Houck et al., 2014). Sexting with a romantic partner and sexting with someone who is not involved in a love connection were both investigated in this research, which was one of the first to do so. The number of times teenagers watched celebrities upload sexual images of themselves on social media platforms had no effect on whether or not they sexted inside or outside of an intimate relationship, according to the findings (Mascheroni et al., 2015).

Moreover, when other social learning theory variables were taken into consideration, no evidence was found that witnessing similar behavior from others, such as celebrities, on the internet might lead to young people engaging in such behavior themselves. Individuals' propensity to engage in sexting while in a romantic relationship was shown to be correlated with the degree to which they believed their friends approved of the practice. Sexting and other risky online sexual behaviors are related to perceived peer acceptance (Houck et al., 2014). Sexting is comparable to other teenage risk habits, such as smoking or drinking, in that peers accept it. Future research may focus on developing prevention and intervention programs that address the impact of peer social norms. In addition, according to statistics, only a tiny proportion of young individuals engage in the activity when in a romantic relationship (Walrave et al., 2014). Another option is to use trained students to inform their peers about the risks of participating in the activity (van Ouytsel et al., 2014).

According to Pinyaphong et al. (2020), peer education in conventional sexual health education has proved effective and may influence sexual risk-taking behavior among teenagers. Positive reinforcement was not linked with sexting in a romantic relationship, even after controlling for the other factors. Experimenters discovered that engaging in sexting with someone other than a sexual partner was linked with both social and non-social reinforcement, which was loaded on various variables in the study. According to the results, sexting with someone who is not a romantic partner is still linked with positive non-social reinforcement, even though all other factors have been controlled. As a result, when young

people see the emotional repercussions of sexting as positive, such as pleasure or excitement, or as a pleasant sensation, they are more inclined to engage in this kind of sexting behavior. This is backed by scientific evidence.

Gaps and Recommendations for Future Research

The number of qualitative studies of sexting in a variety of contexts and educational settings, such as religious institutions and schools, remains limited. This area of research is steadily expanding as educators, legislators, and the media pay more attention to adolescent sexting and the consequences of doing so. In addition, since the bulk of present research is focused on heterosexual couples, there is a substantial gap in research on younger generations in same-sex relationships, which future studies may address. Another part that is notable for its absence is the methods section. According to the findings of this research, although there is broad agreement that youth are masters of internet interaction, just a few qualitative studies on youth and sexting have used online methods to capture what sexting implies to them. Using online techniques may offer respondents more anonymity and greater comfort; this is particularly essential when dealing with sensitive study subjects such as sexting. Besides, while working with children, the imbalance of knowledge and power between researchers and respondents has been identified as the most important ethical concern. This imbalance may be addressed by adopting a form of communication with which youths are likely to be competent and comfortable. As a result, future studies may benefit significantly from integrating such creative techniques into their plans.

Given the complexities of sexting, it's critical to keep these qualitative studies going ([Hasinoff, 2013](#)). It is anticipated that this assessment will assist future investigators in determining their course of action. As a result, more effective interventions and policies are needed to assist and educate the younger generation as they navigate the constantly changing digital environment. As a result, future studies may examine the degree to which teenage personality characteristics may explain sexting behavior in situations other than a romantic relationship ([Baumgartner et al., 2015](#)). Previous research has shown a relationship between impulsivity and a broad range of teenage sexting behaviors, as well as a link between sexting and a need for thrills in adolescents ([Choi et al., 2016](#)). When it comes to teenage sexual risk behaviors, sensation-seeking and impulsivity are key variables to consider. For example, having numerous sexual encounters or drinking or using drugs before sexual engagement are all high-risk behaviors ([Charnigo et al., 2013](#)).

A future study may look at how preventive and intervention efforts might address the perceived benefits of sexting with someone who is not your romantic partner. Professionals should emphasize once again that the long-term dangers of sexting outside of a romantic relationship exceed the short-term benefits of the practice. Our results indicate that further research is needed to identify whether respondents sexted within or even outside a loving relationship ([van Ouytsel et al., 2014](#)). Future research could look into whether the previously discovered correlations between a general measure of sexting and various types of risk behaviors and health outcomes, such as feeling despair or hopelessness, as well as suicidal thoughts, would hold true if people were sexting within or beyond romantic relationships.

CONCLUSION

A typical conclusion in studies on younger generations and sexting is that qualitative research adds a lot to the conversation since it provides the context that quantitative research lacks. They are, however, still rare ([Burkett, 2015](#)). This is supported by the limited amount of literature accessible for this review. The implication of sexting on young people's well-being is difficult to quantify into a binary good or bad result, according to the current research. The findings of the study show that teenage views are related to their sexting

behavior. There is a unique pleasure and sensation connected with the risks of sexting outside of a sexual relationship. Age, culture, gender, and relationships all tend to influence how sexting affects both senders and receivers, challenging the popular belief that sexting only harms teenagers. According to the findings, researchers should ask more specific questions regarding the recipient of sexting messages in their studies. School counselors, nurses, and teachers should understand the contextual distinctions between different kinds of sexting. These factors may impact teenage desires to participate in the activity and the information given by preventive intervention efforts.

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