

Identity, Sexuality, and Relationships among Emerging Adults in the Digital Age

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Chapter 13

Victimization or Entertainment?

How Attachment and Rejection Sensitivity Relate to Sexting Experiences, Evaluations, and Victimization

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ABSTRACT

As texting continues to serve as an increasingly common method of communication among emerging adults, increases in rates of sexting, or sending sexually explicit messages, pictures, or videos, have also been observed. While consensual sexting can facilitate intimacy in relationships, when used as a tool to victimize others, it has been shown to yield a range of negative outcomes- from embarrassment to severe depression and suicide. This chapter aims to review the existing literature on emerging adults' engagement in and evaluations of sexting, while also considering the risks associated with sexting victimization. The role that individual characteristics, such as attachment style and rejection sensitivity, play in the relationship between experiences with and evaluations of using sexting as a tool for victimization will also be explored.

INTRODUCTION

As technology use increasingly dominates the social lives of emerging adults (EAs), intimate communication—and potentially victimization—between romantic partners is transforming. This shift is especially apparent in rates of sexting, or the sending or receiving of sexually suggestive written messages, pictures, or videos. Sexting has become an increasingly common relationship ritual in young adults' romantic

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lives, with a conservative estimate of nearly 43% of youth between the ages of 18-24 years having sexted (Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013). In another sample, 80.9% of 697 undergraduate participants reported having sent a sext at least once in their lifetime, and nearly half of the entire sample (48.5%) had sent a sext within the last 30 days (Hudson & Fetro, 2015). Given its ubiquity in emerging adulthood, it is essential to consider that although consensual sexting can facilitate intimacy in relationships (e.g., Burkett, 2015), when individuals are coerced into sexting or when sexting is used as a tool to victimize others, it can yield a range of negative outcomes from embarrassment to severe depression and suicide (Celizic, 2009; Judge, 2012). Nonetheless, little research has examined EAs' actual engagement in and evaluations of sexting as they relate to individual characteristics that might be associated with heightened vulnerability to the potential negative outcomes of sexting. In an attempt to understand those individuals who might be most at risk, this chapter presents an original study that addresses this gap in the literature by assessing EAs' engagement in and evaluations of sexting and sexting victimization, together with individual characteristics—insecure attachment and rejection sensitivity—that have been demonstrated to be associated with other types of relational victimization (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; Drouin & Tobin, 2014), and which therefore might be linked to heightened vulnerability to the negative aspects of sexting, such as sexting victimization.

BACKGROUND

General Trends in Sexting

Though sexting prevalence rates vary from study to study (see Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014), even conservative estimates (e.g., Gordon-Messer et al., 2013) indicate that sexting has become common practice among EAs. The variability in estimates of sexting behaviors is likely due to the complexity in operationalizing sexting altogether (Klettke et al., 2014). In a review of young adults' sexting, Klettke and colleagues (2014) found on average 53% of young adults send sexual texts and photos (49% reported sending sexts specifically with photo images), while 56% of young adults report having received sexts. Klettke and colleagues (2014) emphasized the importance of breaking down sexting prevalence rates by type of sext (e.g., text or image) and the role of the individual (e.g., sender or recipient). In line with this recommendation, this chapter's authors assessed EAs' sexting in terms of sending and receiving text, image, and video messages. Similar to Klettke and colleagues' (2014) results, this chapter's authors found that 57% of EAs sent or received text based sexts, 43% sent and 49% received photo sexts, and 17% sent and 20% received video sexts.

As sexting in all forms has become a more normative manner of communication within relationships, a body of literature has emerged suggesting that sexting can be not only a normative, but also a positive experience in emerging adulthood, fostering intimacy and pleasure within a close relationship (Burkett, 2015; Parker, Blackburn, Perry & Hawks, 2013), as evidenced in studies assessing EAs' motivations for sexting. For instance, Hudson and Fetro (2015) found that in a sample of college students, attitudes toward sexting, perceptions of sexting norms, and behavioral intentions of sexting all significantly predicted activity with sexting; Kopecký (2011) found that individuals reported sexting to be viewed as arousing or to initiate sexual activity. Additionally, for those who were considered current sexters (i.e., had sent a sext within the last 30 days), the strongest predictor of their sexting activity was their attitude toward sexting, which the authors suggest indicated that current sexters were intentional in their sexting, and were motivated to sext because they wanted to and not because they felt social pressure to do so (Hudson

& Fetro, 2015). These motivations to sext were mirrored in work by Lee and Crofts (2015), who argued that the gendered discourse surrounding females' motivations to engage in sexting does not accurately reflect the motivations most females actually express. Lee and Crofts (2015) acknowledge the existence of the widely discussed scenarios involving females experiencing pressure to send sexts to males; however, they suggest that most females decide to engage in sexting to pursue pleasure or because they desire to do so. Work by Dir and Cyders (2015) similarly implies that, although many people discuss sexting in terms of negative outcomes, these were rarely reported in that sample (the most common negative experience was having sexts shared with others, which happened to 12% of the sample). Renfrow and Rollo (2014) suggested that undergraduates were aware of the risk of having their sexts shared, but engaged in sexting anyway and attempted to minimize these risks by keeping sexts fun and less explicit, maintaining deniability in their sexts, and citing the normalcy of their actions. These participants also suggested that they saw benefits to sexting, such that it helped maintain their relationships, especially long distance relationships (Burkett, 2015; Drouin et al., 2013). From these studies, it is clear that sexting can serve a unique purpose in romantic relationships, and despite an overwhelmingly negative narrative surrounding sexting, EAs do not all perceive it to be victimizing or risky.

Sexting Victimization

Despite the perceived benefits of sexting, research has established that there can be significant risks associated with sexting victimization. Contrary to Lee and Crofts (2015), work by Drouin, Ross, and Tobin (2015), for instance, demonstrated that approximately one fifth of a sample of EAs felt coerced into engaging in sexting. In fact, across a number of studies (e.g., Englander, 2012; Kopecký, 2011; Walker, Sanci, Temple-Smith, 2013), pressure or coercion from peers or partners was listed as a frequent motivation for sexting. Drouin and colleagues (2015) found that although the reported coercion was typically subtle, as opposed to containing threats, participants still reported trauma associated with this coercion, especially when looking back at the events. This study also revealed that sexting coercion was associated with intimate partner violence, as well as coercion into engaging in physical sex, indicating that sexting is another outlet through which intimate partner violence can be perpetrated (Drouin et al, 2015). Thus, even rare occurrences of sexting victimization should be addressed diligently.

Moreover, victimization can occur through the unauthorized sharing of sexts—an occurrence that is often viewed as a peer-encouraged means to obtain popularity amongst young men (Burkett, 2015; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). Media coverage offers additional evidence for such sexting victimization, although typically with extreme cases, for example, the widely broadcast story of an 18-year-old female who sent a sexual photo to her boyfriend. When the couple ended their relationship, the boyfriend distributed the sexual photo to their peers at school. Peers then began to humiliate the female, calling her degrading names, which left her feeling depressed, and afraid to attend school; soon after, she committed suicide (Celizic, 2009). Although suicide is an extreme and rare outcome associated with sexting, the evidence for this possibility of victimization clearly necessitates an understanding of what individual characteristics might place a person at greater risk for the negative rather than positive outcomes of sexting. Two such risk factors might be the attachment security of an individual as well as their sensitivity to rejection. Both of these characteristics have been shown to increase vulnerability to and expectations of interpersonal victimization through personal experiences of loneliness, exclusion, abandonment, or worry about partner availability (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck, Trevaskis, Nesdale, & Downey, 2013; Drouin & Tobin, 2014), and therefore necessitate further study into their relationship to sexting and sexting victimization.

ATTACHMENT, REJECTION SENSITIVITY, AND SEXTING

Individuals with insecure attachment or rejection sensitivity experience higher levels of victimization and vulnerability in their romantic relationships (Drouin & Tobin, 2014). However, to date, only two studies have assessed attachment in relation to sexting (see Klettke et al., 2014), and no research has examined the potentially moderating relation of attachment and rejection sensitivity with participants' engagement in and attitudes about sexting and sexting victimization. In this chapter, the authors will review the extant literature on engagement in and evaluations of sexting and sexting victimization as well as present findings from a recent study that assessed EAs' engagement in sexting, their perceptions of sexting and sexting victimization, and their self-reports of attachment security and rejection sensitivity. Gaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between these individual characteristics and individuals' engagement in and evaluations of sexting will be important in order to identify those most at risk for sexting victimization and inform potential intervention or awareness strategies for those individuals, in particular.

Insecure Attachment

Attachment refers to how individuals process and reflect on their thoughts and feelings regarding their own intimate relationship experiences. A wealth of previous research has demonstrated the relation between attachment and experiences of victimization and vulnerability in romantic relationships (see Drouin & Tobin, 2014). Attachment can be defined as a deep and enduring emotional bond between two people developed through the interactions a child has with his/her caregivers; such interactions can result in that child developing either a secure or insecure (e.g., anxious or avoidant) attachment. Whereas attachment is often used to describe the relationship a child has with his/her caregivers, many theorists have examined adult and couple attachment as well, noting many similarities in the unique context of adult romantic attachment, including the need for close physical contact, deep interest in one another, and experiencing a sense of safety when the other is nearby (see George, 2009). Adults often integrate their childhood attachment experiences into their adult relationships by seeking out similar characteristics in their partners that they experienced with their caregivers (Cassidy, 2001). Attachment classification, or the pattern of relating to others, develops into an internal working model that is thought to be the foundation for an individual's intimate relationships in the present and in the future (see Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011).

Previous research has shown that individuals with insecure attachment experience higher levels of victimization and vulnerability in their romantic relationships (Drouin & Tobin, 2014). However, to date, only a few studies have assessed attachment in relation to sexting (see Klettke et al., 2014). From those studies, there is evidence to suggest that EAs who demonstrate insecure attachment (i.e., anxious; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011, or avoidant; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012), are more likely to engage in sexting, and to view their sexting experiences as more victimizing (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013). As such, it is a logical extension of attachment theory to further investigate how an individual's anxious or avoidant attachment style relates to his or her experiences of sexting within intimate relationships.

Sexting can be used for a variety of reasons in romantic relationships, and those with differing attachment styles may vary in their motivations for sexting, which may in turn relate to sexting victimization. For some, sexting may serve as a new way to explore romantic relationships by providing a means of connection and reassurance, whereas for others sexting may provide distance within a relationship while

Victimization or Entertainment?

also sustaining intimacy. Regardless of these potential uses and benefits, sexting can also leave a sexter vulnerable to victimization. By utilizing sexting as a tool for intimacy, or lack thereof, a sexter may be exposing him or herself to the potential for victimization through the distribution of their sexual images and messages. Below, the authors discuss the relation between anxious and avoidant attachment with motivations for and experiences of sexting and sexting victimization.

Anxious attachment, on one hand, is characterized as having a strong desire for intimacy with others but also an intense fear of being abandoned. Individuals with anxious attachment are likely to seek approval from others and will attempt to build closeness with their partner out of fear that their partner will lose interest in the relationship. These individuals may be worried or preoccupied about the availability and responsiveness of their romantic partner (see Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011). Those with anxious attachment often experience more pressure to send sexual messages to keep a romantic partner's interest or to satisfy relational expectations (Drouin & Tobin, 2014). Anxious individuals may use sexting to gain reassurance from their romantic partner and to ensure that their partner is emotionally invested (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012).

Those with anxious attachment also are more likely to experience sexting victimization in the form of unwanted but consensual sexting. In this context, individuals sext, but do so only because they feel obliged to participate. Heterosexual women who participate in unwanted but consensual sexting may display characteristics such as passivity, feeling responsible for maintaining relationship bonds, perceiving men's sexual urges as being uncontrollable and therefore unable to be resisted, and, for men, experiencing social pressure to have sex (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2012; Drouin & Tobin, 2014).

Avoidant attachment, on the other hand, is characterized as having a fear of being intimate or dependent on others. Individuals with avoidant attachment attempt to distance themselves from their partners to avoid being dependent or relied upon for emotional closeness and support (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). Those with avoidant attachment styles may be less likely to talk on the phone with their partner and often try to distance themselves, perhaps utilizing sexting as preferred means of communication (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). Thus, sexting could be appealing to avoidant individuals because it serves as a reasonable substitute for physical intimacy (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012).

Attachment theory also states that individuals develop expectations about whether loved ones will fulfill their needs or reject them (Erozkan, 2009). Insecure attachment has been linked to rejection sensitivity, which is characterized by fear of being deserted, abused, betrayed or victimized with a high degree of sensitivity towards rejection (Natarajan, Somasundaram, & Sundaram, 2011). A person with an insecure attachment also may be influenced by feelings of rejection and be more likely to experience victimization when they encounter rejection. Therefore, it is important to consider the interaction between insecure attachment styles and levels of rejection sensitivity when considering one's positive and negative experiences of sexting and sexting victimization and one's evaluations of such experiences.

Rejection Sensitivity

Rejection sensitivity is defined as a disposition to cognitively and affectively process information in such a way that rejection is both expected and perceived in the actions of others (Downey & Feldman, 1996). People who are highly sensitive to rejection fear being deserted, abused, or betrayed by others, and tend to react very strongly to instances of actual and perceived rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Rejection sensitivity is associated with a range of problematic behaviors in intimate relationships. For instance, these individuals are likely to believe that their partner is dissatisfied with their relationship,

and have been found to rate partners' behaviors as being more conflictual than do third-party observers (Norona, Salvatore, Welsh, & Darling, 2014). Consequently, those high in rejection sensitivity react accordingly and display behaviors such as jealousy, suspicion, and seeking control over a partner (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Alternatively, individuals high in rejection sensitivity may act submissively toward their partner and defer to their wishes in hopes of avoiding rejection (Hafen, Spilker, Chango, Marston, & Allen, 2014; Young & Furman, 2007). High levels of rejection sensitivity also have been linked to higher levels of depression, loneliness, exclusion, and, of particular importance for the present chapter, victimization from others (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2013). Given these characteristics associated with rejection sensitivity, it is unsurprising that rejection sensitivity is linked to both an increased risk for victimization and a greater negative response to the experience of victimization in the form of self-rated negative moods, and experimenter rated reactions of confusion, anger, or sadness (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2014).

Because young people who are sensitive to rejection are highly motivated to avoid experiencing rejection, they may engage in behaviors that put them at risk for victimization (Young & Furman, 2007). In fact, rejection sensitivity has been linked to increased risk of victimization in multiple contexts including peer networks, friendships, and romantic relationships (Hafen et al., 2014; Zimmer-Gembeck & Duffy, 2014; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2014). Rejection sensitivity also has implications for the quality of these relationships, such that young adults who were high in rejection sensitivity in adolescence were less likely to be engaged in romantic relationships in emerging adulthood, and those who were in romantic relationships tended to report more negativity and anxiety within that relationship (Hafen et al., 2014); this study also revealed that females who increased in rejection sensitivity from adolescence to emerging adulthood were more likely to take on a role of submissiveness within their relationship, and defer power within the relationship to their partner.

Although these risks for victimization are clear, perhaps most related to patterns of sexting in emerging adulthood is the relation between rejection sensitivity and risk for sexual victimization as reported by Young and Furman (2007). Just as adolescent girls were more likely to act in ways that they believed were 'wrong' as a means to avoid losing their partner (Purdie & Downey, 2000), this study found that adolescents high in rejection sensitivity were more likely to experience sexual aggression into emerging adulthood (Young & Furman, 2007). However, as stressed by Edwards and Barber (2010), it is critically important to consider the context of sexual victimization; they astutely highlight that not just physically forced sexual interactions, but also compliant or consensual engagement in an activity in which someone does not really wish to partake, constitute sexual victimization, though contextually variant. While it is readily apparent that forced sexual interaction is victimization, coercion into consensual acts is also a form of victimization. Evaluations of victimization and responses to victimization differ based on the context in which victimization occurs (see Brenick & Romano, 2016; Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010). Edwards and Barber (2010), examined sexual victimization in the context of condom use during intercourse, and the study found that those rejection sensitive individuals who wanted to use condoms during intercourse were less likely to use condoms if they believed that their partner did not want to use them. Similarly, sexual victimization also can take place through sexting, a context that also does not include forced sexual interaction. Given Edwards and Barber's (2010) findings on condom use, it is likely that those EAs who are highly rejection sensitive would be much more likely to yield to their partner's wishes to engage in sexting if that is what they believed their partner would want. Furthermore, this allows for potential continued victimization through unauthorized sharing of those sexts with unintended recipients. Although sexting is becoming an important part of relationships that inherently requires negotiations

Victimization or Entertainment?

of roles within a relationship, no research thus far has considered sexting as a context for victimization that might be influenced by an individual's rejection sensitivity.

Beyond the direct influence of rejection sensitivity on the potential for victimization, rejection sensitivity is also highly related to insecure attachment styles (Natarajan et al., 2011). Given the literature linking attachment style to victimization both theoretically and empirically (Natarajan et al., 2011), and the clear association between rejection sensitivity and attachment (Erozkan, 2009; Natarajan et al., 2011), it is important to consider both individual characteristics in tandem. This was demonstrated in a study by Ozen, Sumer, and Demir (2010) in which relationship satisfaction (in this case, friendship) was predicted by both attachment and rejection sensitivity. Attachment had a direct effect on relationship satisfaction; however, rejection sensitivity moderated this effect such that rejection sensitivity influenced friendship satisfaction only for adolescents highly avoidant in their attachment style (Ozen et al., 2010). As suggested above, it is possible that rejection sensitivity might act as a moderator with insecure attachment to predict negative sexting experiences. If so, this situation sets the stage for individuals to be vulnerable to victimization, such as coercion into sexting, and then experience its negative outcomes as highly rejection sensitive individuals experience in their relationships. Altogether, it is clear that both attachment and rejection sensitivity are important individual characteristics to consider in relation to sexting patterns and victimization in emerging adulthood, but further research is needed to more clearly understand the relationship.

Current Research on Insecure Attachment, Rejection Sensitivity, and Sexting

The authors' present work set out to address these gaps in the literature by administering an online survey comprised of Collins' (1996) attachment scale, Downey and Feldman's (1996) rejection sensitivity questionnaire, and Alderson and Samimi's (2014) sexting experiences questionnaire. A sample of 169 EAs between 18-25 years of age ($M_{age}=20.70$, $SD=.96$; 4.7% African-American, 9.5% Asian-American, 77.5% European-American, 7.7% Hispanic-Latino) was obtained through online recruitment using email listservs sent out to the entire student body of a large public university in New England. The majority of participants self-identified as female (79.8%), as heterosexual (93.2%), and as being in a relationship (55.3%).

Measures

The online survey assessed participant demographics, attachment style, level of rejection sensitivity, and beliefs about and experiences with sexting. First participants were asked to report their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and relationship status. Participants then completed the attachment, rejection sensitivity, and sexting experiences scales detailed below. Although the three measures have been widely used and are well established and validated, we pilot tested the combined instrument. Test fatigue was minimal, and comprehension was high, so no changes were made to the protocol.

Attachment

The *Revised Adult Attachment Scale* (Collins, 1996; alternative scoring) was used to assess participants' levels of insecure attachment. In the 18-item questionnaire, participants were asked to think about all of their relationships (past and present), and then respond to items in terms of how they experience their

relationships. A scale of 1 (not at all characteristic of me) to 5 (very characteristic of me) was used to respond to items such as, “I find that people are never there when you need them” and “I often wonder whether romantic partners really care about me.” The measure addressed two components of attachment: attachment anxiety ($M=2.91$, $SD=1.02$) and attachment avoidance ($M=2.78$, $SD=0.74$). Previous studies have demonstrated that this is a reliable and valid measure (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), and the Cronbach’s alpha for the current sample was .87.

Rejection Sensitivity

Participants were administered the 18-item *Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire* (Downey & Feldman, 1996) to assess rejection sensitivity. The questionnaire asks participants to imagine themselves in hypothetical social situations and rate how concerned or anxious they would be about potential rejection in the scenarios. A scale of 1 (very unconcerned) to 6 (very concerned) was used to evaluate situations such as “Your boyfriend/ girlfriend has plans to go out with friends tonight, but you really want to spend the evening with him/her, and you tell him/her so.” Participants were then asked to rate how concerned or anxious they would be over whether or not their boyfriend or girlfriend would decide to stay in. Scoring for this measure ranges from 2.00 to 26.00; the current participants’ average score was 8.84 ($SD=3.32$). Previous studies have demonstrated that this is a reliable and valid measure (Downey & Feldman, 1996), and the Cronbach’s alpha for the current sample was .85.

Sexting Experiences

A subsample of questions from Alderson and Samimi’s (2014) questionnaire of potential sexting outcomes was used to assess participants’ sexting experiences. This instrument provides a previously validated multifaceted conceptualization of sexting, assessing both the behaviors and beliefs of the participant in regards to the positive, negative, and neutral aspects of sexting. Specifically, the measure includes questions on five distinct sexting themes: *sexting entertainment*- participants’ ratings of sexting as enjoyable and fun, Cronbach’s alpha = .86; *sexting expectation*- participants’ ratings of how typical and expected it is to engage in sexting, Cronbach’s alpha = .78; *sexting sharing*- participants’ reports of sharing sexts that they have received, Cronbach’s alpha = .78; *sexting risk*- participants’ beliefs that sexting is risky and could yield negative outcomes, Cronbach’s alpha = .86; and *sexting regret*- participants’ reports of having sent a sext that they later regretted sending (1 item). Responses were scaled from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample questions include: “Sexting is a regular part of romantic relationships nowadays” (expectation; $M=3.15$, $SD=1.08$); “Sexting is fun” (entertainment; $M=3.93$, $SD=1.34$); “Sending sexually suggestive photos or videos is risky” (risk; $M=6.25$, $SD=0.77$); “I share the sexts I receive with my friends” (sharing; $M=1.79$; $SD=1.28$); “I have sent a sext and then regretted sending it later on” (regret; $M=3.44$, $SD=1.97$).

Results

For each of the dependent measures of sexting experiences, hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted with four steps: the first model included the control variables—gender and relationship status—as predictors. The second model added rejection sensitivity, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment as predictors. The third and fourth models added all two- and three-way interaction terms, respectively,

Victimization or Entertainment?

between the three predictor variables of interest. The data met all relevant statistical assumptions for this analysis. Given that interaction terms were examined in these regressions, all variables were mean centered (the variable mean was subtracted from each variable value) prior to analyses to increase interpretability of the results and reduce multicollinearity. This analysis revealed significant findings for three dependent variables: sexting entertainment, expectation, and sharing. Surprisingly, no significant results emerged for sexting risk or regret. Below we detail the significant results.

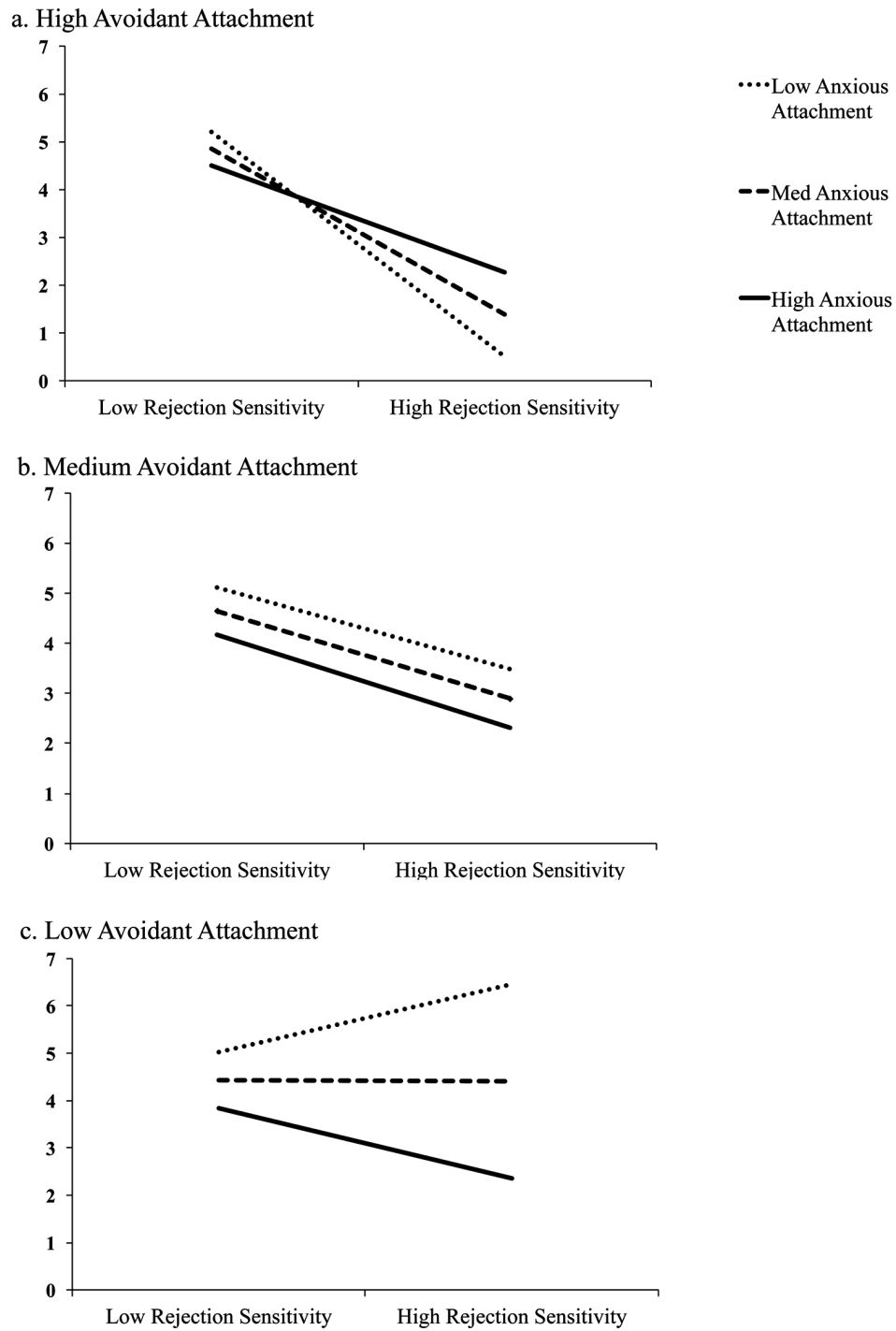
Sexting Entertainment

First, it is possible that insecure attachment and rejection sensitivity might not only leave an individual more likely to experience the negative and victimizing experiences of sexting, but also less likely to experience the positive experiences of sexting (e.g. seeing it as enjoyable and fun). To assess this possible influence, the authors analyzed the relation between insecure attachment, rejection sensitivity, and sexting entertainment. The results of the multiple regression analysis were significant in the highest model ($F(1,151)=5.62, p<.05$) with the following significant predictors: relationship status, rejection sensitivity, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment. The last three effects were qualified by a significant 2-way interaction (anxious attachment by rejection sensitivity) and a significant 3-way interaction (anxious attachment by rejection sensitivity by avoidant attachment; see Table 1 for all coefficients). These results reveal that individuals in a romantic relationship, as compared to those who are single, were more likely to find sexting entertaining. In general, individuals who were higher in rejection sensitivity or avoidant attachment, or lower in anxious attachment found sexting to be less entertaining and enjoyable. However, the significant 3-way interaction (anxious attachment by rejection sensitivity by avoidant attachment) qualifies these findings such that higher levels of rejection sensitivity only relate to decreased entertainment value of sexting among participants who are either high in anxious or avoidant attachment; in cases where participants were only highly rejection sensitive in the absence of both anxious or avoidant attachment, they rated sexting as significantly more entertaining (see Figure 1).

Sexting Expectations

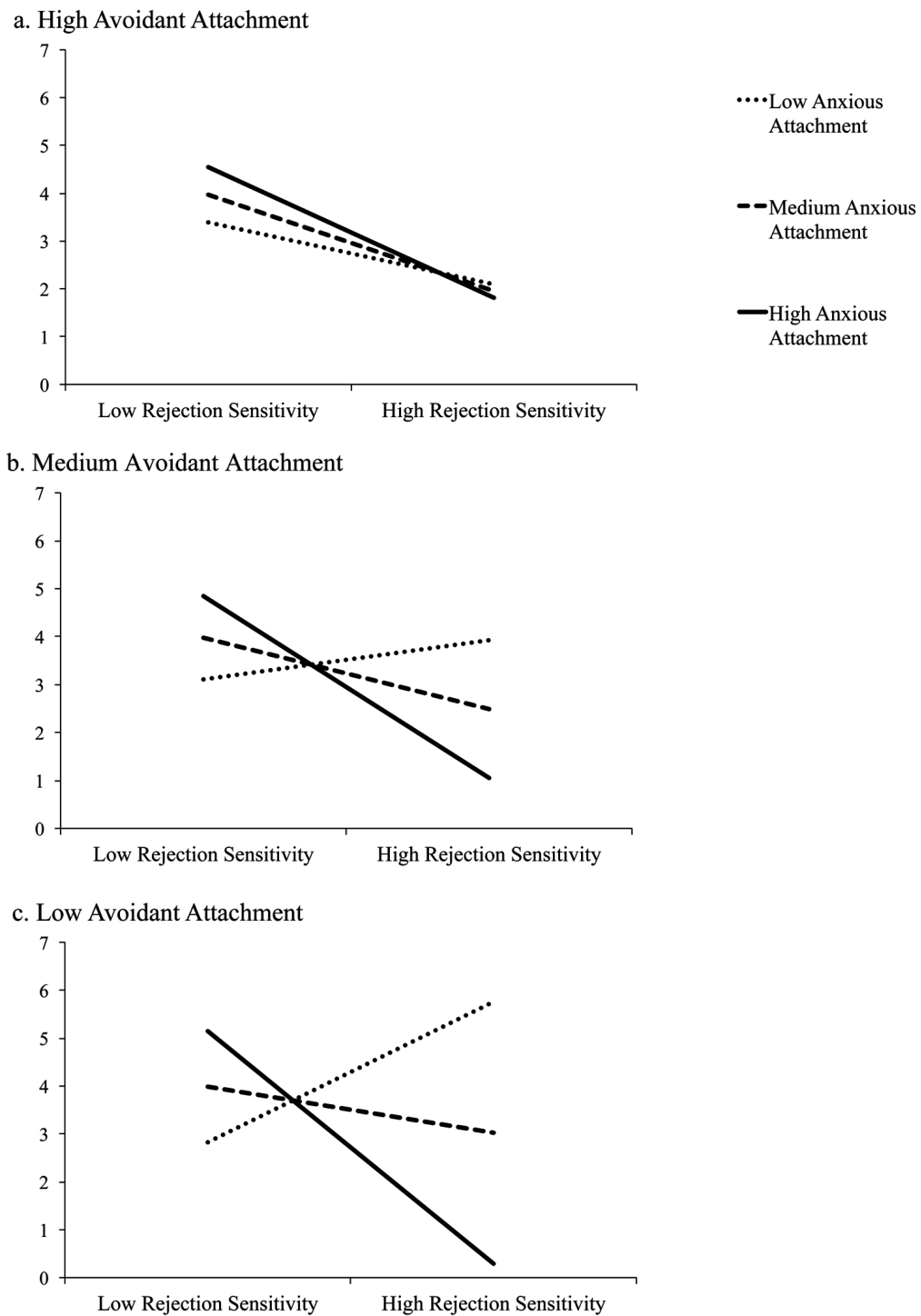
Next, sexting expectations were assessed as participants' beliefs about the typicality in which sexting is engaged among EAs. The multiple regression analysis was significant in the highest model ($F(1,151)=5.11, p<.05$) with anxious attachment as the only significant independent predictor, a significant 2-way interaction (anxious attachment by rejection sensitivity), and a significant 3-way interaction (anxious attachment by rejection sensitivity by avoidant attachment; see Table 1 for coefficients). Individuals who were higher in anxious attachment rated sexting as a highly typical experience in which they are expected to engage in intimate relationships. The significant 3-way interaction (anxious attachment by rejection sensitivity by avoidant attachment) provides a more nuanced picture; overall, participants who were lower in rejection sensitivity were moderately accepting of sexting as a normative expectation in relationships regardless of their levels of anxious or avoidant attachment. However, participants with higher rejection sensitivity and either higher anxious or avoidant attachment were less likely to rate sexting as typical and expected, whereas participants with higher levels of rejection sensitivity in the absence of both anxious and avoidant attachment, instead rated sexting as increasingly expected and typical (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Sexting entertainment: 3-way interaction between avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, and rejection sensitivity



Victimization or Entertainment?

Figure 2. Sexting expectations: 3-way interaction between avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, and rejection sensitivity



Sexting Sharing

The last set of significant findings resulted from multiple regression analysis on participants' experiences of sharing a sext that they received from someone else. Only the first model was significant ($F(2,158)=8.70, p<.001$), with both gender and relationship status as significant predictors (see Table 1 for coefficients). Males are more likely than females to share the sexts they receive with others. Individuals who are single, as compared to those who are in a relationship, are more likely to share the sexts they receive with others.

The Social Domain Theory and Evaluations of Sexting Victimization

These findings clearly demonstrate the benefit of examining both insecure attachment and rejection sensitivity in relation to EAs' engagement in and attitudes about sexting. It is equally important, though, to consider EAs' social and moral evaluations of sexting victimization. The Social Domain Theory (see Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014; Turiel, 1983) provides a theoretical and methodological framework through which this can be accomplished. The theory asserts that "morality is primarily about ways of approaching social relationships and how people ought to treat each other" (Turiel, 2014, p.19). This framework has been utilized extensively to assess children's, adolescents', and adults' social and moral evaluations of a myriad of social interactions—and potential transgressions—ranging from interpersonal rejection (Park & Killen, 2010) and exclusion (Brenick & Killen, 2014), to harassment (Horn & Nucci, 2006), retribution (Ardila-Rey, Killen, & Brenick, 2009), and deception (Perkins, & Turiel, 2007). However, to date, no research has focused on evaluations of victimization through sexting.

The Social Domain Theory conceptualizes social interactions as the quintessential context in which individuals coordinate three distinct domains of social thought: *the moral*, *the societal*, and *the psychological*. Research guided by the Social Domain Theory often employs the use of real or hypothetical scenarios of social interactions involving transgressions. Participants are asked to comprehensively evaluate the rightness or wrongness of the transgression; these evaluations are directly related to the coordination of the three domains of social knowledge.

Moral constructs manifest as universal, generalizable concerns regarding potential harm, welfare, and justice. Such moral concerns are used to determine and justify the level of acceptability or objection warranted by a social transgression (Smetana et al., 2014; Turiel, 1983); for instance, the unauthorized sharing of a sext beyond the intended recipient.

The *societal* domain involves conventions that define acceptable social interaction based on group norms, expectations, and authority within a given context. Transgressions within the societal domain are considered wrong only so long as the social norms and rules dictate, but would be evaluated as acceptable if those rules and norms were removed or changed (Smetana et al., 2014; Turiel, 1983). As an example, consider a high school with the following rule: cellphone use is banned in the classroom and any student caught using their cellphone in class must show school administrators their phone content. In this situation, a sext might be shared beyond the intended recipient, but it would be viewed as a more acceptable transgression due to the context defined rules governing cellphone usage.

Finally, *psychological* constructs deal with personal preferences. Issues within the psychological domain are considered "rights...grounded in notions of self and personal agency" (Smetana et al., 2014, p.25) rather than transgressions. An EA might believe that a sext that was sent to him is now his property to do with as he pleases- that it is his personal choice.

Victimization or Entertainment?

When a social interaction falls squarely within the moral domain, a transgression will be viewed as highly unacceptable, regardless of societal rules or personal preferences (see Brenick & Killen, 2014; Crystal, Killen, & Ruck, 2008; Heinze & Horn, 2014; Horn & Nucci, 2006). Transgressions in the societal domain are seen as less wrong than moral transgressions, as the context specificity of the acceptability of the transgression is taken into account in the former. Psychological transgressions are often not even considered to be wrong, but rather personal prerogatives (Smetana et al., 2014). However, social interactions are complex and typically appeal to multiple domains of social thought; multifaceted transgressions are often viewed as more acceptable given that moral concerns are coordinated with competing societal or psychological concerns (Brenick & Romano, 2016; Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002;). The coordination of these competing concerns relates directly to whether an act is even viewed as victimizing, and, if so, what action, if any, should be taken in response (see Rutland et al., 2010). At its core, EAs may believe it is wrong to victimize the original sext creator by sharing a sext without permission (a transgression squarely in the moral domain), but what if peer conventions dictate that everyone shares sexts they receive (societal domain)?

Does it matter if a sext is simply shown to a friend in close physical proximity rather than forwarded to the cellphone of another individual in any location? In the former, the sext, though shared, does not transfer possession again and cannot be shared further, yet the opposite is true for the latter. Moreover, do EAs differentiate between the sharing of sexts in which the person depicted in the sext is known from those in which the person depicted is a stranger? Finally, how might these evaluations relate to an individual's attachment and rejection sensitivity? The current study provides empirical assessment of participants' evaluations of hypothetical sexting victimization scenarios.

Current Research on Evaluations of Sexting Victimization

In addition to assessing EAs' attachment styles, rejection sensitivity, and sexting experiences, the study presented here also assessed participants' evaluations of sexting victimization. In collaboration with an EA research assistant, two scenarios and the accompanying follow-up questions were developed specifically for use in this study. The measure was pilot tested with a sample of EAs to assess testing fatigue, comprehension, and ecological validity of the scenarios as presented. Only minor changes were made to the scenario wording.

Participants were presented with two hypothetical scenarios depicting scenes in which one male individual, while out with male friends, received a picture sext of a woman. The scenarios differed in only one way; in the unknown condition the sext recipient and his friends did not know the woman depicted in the sext, but in the known condition, the sext recipient and his friends knew the female depicted in the sext. In line with Social Domain Theory established methodological protocol (see Brenick & Killen, 2014; Killen et al, 2002), the unknown condition was always presented first so that the scenario order reflected increasing levels of intimacy (from an unknown woman to a known woman). The text of the unknown scenario read as follows: "Bob is hanging out with his best friends Sean and Mike. Bob's phone rings, he has just received a message from his friend AJ. AJ just forwarded Bob a sexual picture of a female that none of them know." For both scenarios, participants rated the acceptability (i.e., how good or bad) of two potential responses by the scenario protagonist: 1. showing the sext to his friends nearby, or 2. electronically forwarding the sext to others. Participants also justified their answers in open-ended responses.

A mixed within- and between- subjects design was used to investigate participants' evaluations of sexting scenarios. A 2 (gender: female, male) x 2 (relationship status: single, in a relationship) x 2 (familiarity of target: known, unknown) x 2 (sharing type: show sext, forward sext) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), with anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, and rejection sensitivity as covariates, was conducted for the following dependent measures: showing acceptability and forwarding acceptability.

The vast majority of participants considered sharing sexts through methods of both showing the sext to friends close-by (74% when the sext depicts someone unknown to the group, 89% when known) and forwarding the sext to others electronically (96% unknown; 98% known) to be wrong and unacceptable. However, the actual ratings of acceptability differed significantly by scenario type ($F(1,153)=22.75$, $p<.001$; $\eta_p^2=.13$); and by gender ($F(1,153)=18.47$; $p<.001$; $\eta_p^2=.10$). These findings indicate that participants rate it as more wrong for the scenario protagonist to share a sext when the scenario target is known to the group than when the target is unknown. In addition, females think it is significantly worse to share a sext than do males.

Two significant interaction effects, however, yield a more complex understanding of EAs' evaluations of sexting victimization. First, a significant 2-way interaction between scenario type and scenario action revealed that while participants think it is less acceptable to show a sext of a known, rather than an unknown, scenario target, participants think it is equally bad to forward a sext regardless of whether the scenario target is known or unknown, ($F(1,153)=11.56$, $p<.001$; $\eta_p^2=.07$). Second, a significant 2-way interaction between scenario action and gender revealed that the effect of gender is much more striking in the show condition than in the forward condition; though males are only slightly more accepting than females of forwarding a sext, when the scenario target is simply showing a sext to friends nearby, females rate this as significantly less acceptable than males ($F(1,153)=20.02$, $p<.001$; $\eta_p^2=.12$).

Participants offered a number of justifications for their evaluations of sexting victimization. When the scenario target was known to the protagonist and his friends, participants often appealed to moral concerns for the victimization and rights violations experienced directly by the scenario target. When the scenario target was unknown to the protagonist and his friends, participants appealed more to moral concerns as well, but at a general level not specific to harm or rights violations of the target. For example, participants in the known condition reasoned: "The photo could have devastating effects on the woman's future"; "Because now there's an even larger chance they will come in contact with this girl that they personally know and ruin her life." Conversely, in the unknown condition, moral appeals were made on a broader societal scale, rather than concerns for the scenario target: "It's not acceptable [to] promote this type of sexual objectification" and "It's an invasion of privacy."

Additionally, in the unknown condition participants often appealed to the psychological and societal domain as well. In reference to the psychological domain, participants responded, "They then have the photo on their phone and can do whatever they want with it" and "Because it's his property," indicating that the sext was now the personal property of the recipient to do with as he pleased. In relation to the societal domain, participants responded, "It's just a social convention to share something to those around you on your phone if you weren't expecting such a message. It probably would be done without even thinking twice about who saw it," indicating that sharing sexts is the viewed as the status quo.

Perhaps what is most striking though, is the discrepancy between individuals' perceptions of sexting victimization, their actual sexting activity, and their perceptions of others' sexting activity. Clearly, participants found unauthorized sharing of sexts as wrong—a harmful moral violation of privacy and

Victimization or Entertainment?

decency. At the same time, 98% of our participants reported to having shared or forwarded a sext they received. In relation to the scenarios, 42% of participants believed it was likely or very likely that the scenario protagonist would forward the sext of an unknown woman—37% for a known woman. Incredibly, 98% of participants believed it was likely or very likely the scenario protagonist would show his friends the sext of an unknown person—69% for a known person. Participants see not just sexting, but this type of sexting *victimization* as a typical and expected occurrence.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings reviewed and newly presented in this chapter further establish the scientific knowledge that sexting, particularly with text and images, is an increasingly common behavior among young adults. In line with Klettke and colleagues' (2014) charge to the field, the newly presented findings in this chapter extend our knowledge by assessing EAs' engagement in multiple, clearly defined acts of sexting-breaking sexting down by content (i.e. text, image, video) and by the act of sending or receiving a sext. Additionally, sexting experiences were broken down into multiple dimensions reflecting both positive (entertainment) and negative (risk and regret) qualities of sexting experiences, as well as expectations surrounding sexting behaviors. Although the literature reports varying rates of the negative experiences of victimization through sexting, the present review emphasizes that even rare instances of sexting victimization have been shown to yield highly detrimental consequences (Drouin et al., 2015). As a result, it is imperative to explore all aspects of the multifaceted nature of sexting as well as potential indicators of vulnerability toward sexting victimization.

Accordingly, this chapter presented anxious and avoidant attachment and rejection sensitivity as three such significant predictors of sexting experiences and evaluations of sexting and sexting victimization. Previously, only a handful of studies had explored attachment and sexting, yet those findings indicate a significant relation between the two; specifically, individuals with insecure attachment may engage in sexting more frequently because of overestimated beliefs that sexting is expected of them. This result was replicated in the findings of the current study, but also expanded upon by examining both insecure attachment and rejection sensitivity as they relate independently and interactively to young adults' experiences and evaluations of sexting. The novel results demonstrate that individuals with higher levels of avoidant attachment or rejection sensitivity found sexting to be less entertaining and were less accepting of the idea that sexting was typical and expected. Individuals with higher levels of anxious attachment, however, found sexting to be more entertaining and were more accepting of the expectation to sext in relationships. This is in line with the few previous studies in the field that have described persons with anxious attachment as using sexual intimacy as a way to reduce tension, maintain a romantic partner's interest, and to build closeness with a romantic partner (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2011; Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013). Sexting may be a novel technological advancement that allows an individual with anxious attachment to maintain intimacy with a partner. However, interactions between insecure attachment and rejection sensitivity revealed a more complex relation; rejection sensitivity related to ratings of sexting as less entertaining and more expected only when an individual was also neither avoidantly nor anxiously attached. As a result, the interplay between rejection sensitivity and insecure attachment offers more comprehensive and precise insights about the proclivities toward and experiences of sexting and sexting victimization.

Beyond this, the authors have presented new insight into how EAs *evaluate* sexting and sexting victimization to complement our understanding of EAs' own *experiences* with sexting. To best address sexting victimization, it is essential to understand the ways in which EAs find sexting to be victimizing. For instance, when societal convention dictates the expectation to sext with an intimate partner, is it viewed as victimizing to be coerced into sexting? Similarly, when it is the real and perceived norm to share sexts with others without permission, is this form of victimization still viewed as a moral transgression? EAs view sexting as something that is risky, but they also feel obliged to engage in it within their relationships—thus, demonstrating a tendency to knowingly engage in risky behaviors. They rate it as wrong, as a violation of privacy and decency, to share sexts without permission, yet the vast majority also admitted to having shared a sext and believing others would as well. This demonstrates a clear disconnect between their behaviors and beliefs. Providing a comprehensive account of how EAs make sense of their own and others' sexting experiences is critical to addressing any discrepancies in frequency of sexting victimization as well as preventing and effectively responding to sexting victimization.

These conceptual and methodological approaches had not previously been reported in the published literature, but can help identify individuals who are more likely to experience the negative consequences (and less likely to experience the positive outcomes) of sexting. Additionally, these approaches clarify the ways in which sexting is enacted and viewed as victimizing. This knowledge not only has the power to inform the ways in which EAs approach sexting, but also can reveal the most effective methods of preventing and responding to sexting victimization.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This chapter has clearly delineated the need for additional research examining EAs' engagement in and evaluations of sexting and sexting victimization—including how both of these factors relate to attachment dimensions and sensitivity to rejection. The presented study contributed valuable information about the influence of individual characteristics on evaluations of sexting; however, though comparable to other late-adolescent/EA samples (e.g., Norona, Roberson, & Welsh, 2016), rates of rejections sensitivity were relatively low in the current sample. Future research could target samples with a larger range of rejection sensitivity, including those who are extremely rejection sensitive, and, to a lesser extent, a sample with a wider array of attachment styles; results from such studies could expand the field's understanding of the effects of these individual characteristics across a larger spectrum. Furthermore, our sample, like many before it, was predominantly female and heterosexual; future research would benefit from including a larger sample of males, as well as transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-heterosexual individuals. Despite the sample demographic, the current study did uncover striking gender differences in participants' evaluations of situations in which sexts were shared. Detailed analyses and further interpretation of these findings are imprudent due to the disproportionate sizes of the gender sub-samples. Due to space limitations, they are also beyond the scope of the current study and chapter. The results, however, do suggest that future research should consider the effects of gender on sexting behavior and evaluation. Future research also should identify additional individual characteristics that influence sexting and sexting victimization; such identification may provide a deeper understanding of which individuals are at greatest risk following engagement in sexting. Such individual characteristics might include factors such as a history of victimization, social competence, and other instances of risk-taking behavior.

Victimization or Entertainment?

In addition to continuing to examine individual characteristics that predispose EAs for risk of victimization through sexting, the dyadic context within which sexting occurs also may be important to examine. Another limitation of the current study is the reliance on a single reporter design. This presents the potential of inflated correlations between measures when relying on self-report, but also misses valuable information that can be obtained from other sources, especially given that sexting often takes place in dyads. A dyadic design would reveal much needed information about the relationship contexts in which sexting takes place. For instance, victimization might occur more readily when partners have discrepant desires for sexting, and, despite their reservations, one partner agrees to sext the other because they believe it is what the other wants. In these instances, it would be important to examine how accurately partners guessed the desires of their partners. The pressure experienced by one partner may be imposed by other sources, such as general social convention, and, in fact, may not be coming from their partner. Moreover, certain types of dyads may engage in more or more varied sexting behaviors, and, in turn, those behaviors may be evaluated differently (e.g., whether people judge sexting within committed relationships less negatively or as less risky than sexting between casual sexual partners). Future research might aim to answer questions including whether the quality of the relationship, experienced intimacy, status, or trust between partners influences engagement in, evaluations of, and risk for experiencing victimization via sexting.

Additional avenues of research that could expand our understanding of sexting include a fuller examination of social and moral reasoning about sexting victimization. For instance, how do young adults coordinate societal, moral, and psychological concerns (Smetana et al., 2014; Turiel, 1983) when pertaining to contexts of sexting victimization? Does an EA's own engagement in sexting relate to reasoning about the likelihood and acceptability of sexting victimization? Studies addressing research questions of this type may provide a more detailed assessment of the perceived risks of sexting and a more explicit conceptualization of what sexting victimization entails.

Finally, though the study presented in this chapter provides valuable insight into how current university students evaluate sexting and sexting victimization, a much broader understanding of the changing societal landscape in terms of engagement in and acceptance of sexting and sexting victimization is warranted. This suggested research would require a more complex operationalization of sexting and sexting victimization, including risk and regret, than is typically used, and could not just lump the sending, receiving, sharing, or forwarding of texts together under the broad umbrella of sexting. Additionally, future research should examine sexting among people in many different stages of life beyond emerging adulthood.

CONCLUSION

As the prevalence of sexting and presumed typicality of sexting victimization continue to increase, continued research and the treatment of sexting as a multifaceted phenomenon are warranted. The current chapter explored how often EAs reported engaging in different modes of sexting (e.g., text, image, or video) and their judgments of various sexting scenarios. Our findings revealed that many EAs reported engaging in sexting. Furthermore, they viewed sexting as risky, but nonetheless obligatory in their intimate relationships—demonstrating a tendency to knowingly engage in risky behaviors. Importantly, these results were influenced by participants' attachment and rejection sensitivity. Individuals with insecure

attachment and rejection sensitivity possess characteristics that might leave them more vulnerable to sexting victimization, pointing to the need for future research to examine these potential areas of risk.

This research could inform future education and intervention efforts aimed at providing training to EAs on how to address and avoid coercion into sexting and combat norms of victimization through unauthorized sharing of sexts. These training efforts could be tailored to individuals who experience attachment insecurity and sensitivity to rejection, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. For instance, on the one hand, individuals who are insecurely attached and sensitive to rejection might benefit the most from communication (e.g., about expectations) and boundary-setting skills training. On the other hand, efforts targeting all EAs more broadly might be most successful by working to change societal norms about sexting and sexting victimization (e.g., challenging the notion that women are expected by men to sext; taking action as a bystander to stop unauthorized sharing of sexts). Intervention efforts also might be effective with younger adolescent populations, and encompass more detailed preventative education about the multiple ways in which sexting can pose a risk to their social, emotional, and professional lives, while highlighting ways in which they may be more vulnerable to those negative consequences. Overall, sexting has become a common means of communication and expression within the intimate relationships of EAs, and given the significant developmental implications this has for EAs' cognition and behavior, as well as social and emotional well-being, the topic warrants further examination.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Anxious Attachment: An insecure attachment style that is characterized by having a deep desire for intimacy, while simultaneously fearing abandonment.

Attachment: The lasting emotional and affectionate bond (either secure or insecure in nature) that we develop in childhood with our caregiver and that manifests through the lifespan with the most important people in our lives (e.g. romantic partners).

Avoidant Attachment: An insecure attachment style that is characterized by having an aversion to being dependent on another individual, or having another individual dependent on you.

Evaluations of Sexting: The ways in which people judge and reason about the positive, negative, and neutral aspects of sexting behaviors.

Rejection Sensitivity: The tendency to expect or perceive others to act in ways that reject the individual.

Sexting Victimization: Being harmed by sexting. Sexting victimization can occur in various ways, ranging from feelings of coercion and pressure to sext, to the threat or act of having a sext shared with others without the prior consent of the individual depicted.

Sexting: Sending or receiving sexually suggestive text, picture, or video messages.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Multiple regression analysis for sexting experiences by attachment and rejection sensitivity

Step	Predictors	Sexting Expectations		Sexting Entertainment		Sexting Sharing		Sexting Risk	
		ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
1	Gender	0.01	-0.09	0.09**	-0.13	0.10***	-0.20**	0.02	-
	Relationship Status		-0.09		-0.23**		-0.25**		-
2	RS	0.03	-0.19	0.08**	-0.26*	0.02	-	0.03	-
	ANX		0.21*	0.04	0.21*	0.00	-	0.02	-
	AVOID		-0.14		-0.35***		-		-
3	RS x ANX	0.06*	-0.34**		-0.29**		-		-
	RS x AVOID		-0.08		-0.02		-		-
	ANX x AVOID		0.13	0.03*	0.05	0.00	-	0.00	-
4	RS x ANX x AVOID	0.03*	0.32*		0.31*		-		-
	Total R^2	0.13		0.24		0.13		0.07	

Note. $n = 161$. RS: Rejection Sensitivity; ANX = Anxious Attachment; AVOID = Avoidant Attachment.

Gender entered as a “dummy” variable: 0= male; 1= female. Relationship status entered as a “dummy” variable: 0= in a relationship, 1= single.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Tables show β s for all predictors in highest significant step.

Variables excluded from tables were not significant in any model.