


# Chapter 7

## Send Nudes? :

### Sexting Experiences and Victimization Relating to Attachment and Rejection Sensitivity – Incorporating Sexual Minority Perspectives

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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 as well as demographic characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, and relationship status, play in the relation between experiences with and evaluations of using sexting as a tool for victimization will also be explored.*

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## 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 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. Even more, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), are largely absent from the literature on sexting, and are at an increased risk of victimization due to their marginalized status. Studies have found that individuals who identify as LGB participate in sexting more regularly than their heterosexual peers (Albury, 2014), yet they remain out of focus for most of the current studies. 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 are associated with other types of relational victimization (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996; Drouin & Tobin, 2014), and sexual orientation, which has thus far been largely left out of the literature on sexting victimization, all of which 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. Furthermore, studies have shown that individuals who identify as LGB demonstrate higher rates of participation in sexting than their heterosexual peers (Albury, 2014). These rates are specifically high in gay males, but are overall higher than heterosexual peers because of social pressures to keep homosexual relationships out of the public view. As a result, many LGB individuals turn to online sources to find

## ***Send Nudes?***

partners and engage in sexting behaviors as a way of communicating sexual and romantic desires when finding a partner in real life may serve to be more challenging.

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, Brenick, Flannery, and Rankin (2017) assessed EAs' sexting in terms of sending and receiving text, image, and video messages, and 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. With new data from a larger and more representative sample, the authors of the present chapter, using the same methodology, found even higher rates of sexting; 68% of EAs sent and 77% received text-based sexts, 60% sent and 73% received photo sexts, and 33% sent and 47% received video sexts. Broken down further by demographics, 82% of LB females reported sending and 86% receiving text-based sexts, 68% sending and 75% receiving photo sexts, and 40% sending and 52% receiving video sexts, respectively. For GB males, 86% sent and 91% received text-based sexts, 85% sent and 88% received photo sexts, and 61% sent and 76% received video sexts. For heterosexual females, 62% sent and 75% received text-based sexts, 59% sent and 71% received photo sexts, and 28% sent and 38% received video sexts. Finally, for heterosexual males, 62% sent and 70% received text-based sexts, 50% sent and 69% received photo sexts, and 26% sent and 45% 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 might not only be 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, emerging adults 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 diligently addressed.

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). Furthermore, homophobia and hate crimes keep LGB individuals “closeted”, and as a result, many turn to online forums and profiles to safely express their sexual orientation. While simultaneously providing a safe-haven for communication, these forums can also create a dangerous space in terms of sexting. Individuals who choose to sext face the risk of being “outed”, bullied, and if they are rejected for their sexual orientation, increased rates of homelessness or drug usage (Maziarz et al., 2012). Yet despite this unique and complex relation between sexting and identity, LGB voices remain largely absent from research on sexting victimization. Although suicide, homelessness, and drug use are extreme and rarer outcomes 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

## **Send Nudes?**

in and attitudes about sexting and sexting victimization. In addition, there has been a dearth of literature in the field of attachment and rejection sensitivity amongst the LGB community, and as such they remain absent to this field of study. 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). Some studies have shown that individuals who identify as LGB may experience higher rates of anxious attachment due to parental rejection of their sexual orientation. This rejection leaves children anxious that they will not be loved due to their orientation, and can often transfer over to their romantic partners and can manifest as a fear of being abandoned or being unlovable for their orientation (Brown, 2010).

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, for exception see Brenick et al., 2017) and none with LGB youth. 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

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 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). It is an open question as to whether this would be the case with LGB individuals as well.

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

## ***Send Nudes?***

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 feel pressured 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 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 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 770 EAs between 18-25 years of age ( $M_{age}=19.17$ ,  $SD=1.44$ ; 7.1% African-American, 15.7% Asian-American, 58.7% European-American, 10.4% Hispanic-Latino, 10% Other) 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 (54.9%), as heterosexual (69.9%), and as being single (57.3%).

## 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 identify their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, 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



## Send Nudes?

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 ( $M=3.06$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ) and attachment avoidance ( $M=2.82$ ,  $SD=0.74$ ). 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 .89.

## 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 .90.

## 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 = .80; *sexting expectation*- participants’ ratings of how typical and expected it is to engage in sexting, Cronbach’s alpha = .84; *sexting sharing*- participants’ reports of sharing sexts that they have received, Cronbach’s alpha = .72; *sexting risk*- participants’ beliefs that sexting is risky and could yield negative outcomes, Cronbach’s alpha = .89; 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;  $M=3.68$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ); “*Sexting is fun*” (entertainment;  $M=4.18$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ); “*Sending sexually suggestive photos or videos is risky*” (risk;  $M=5.98$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ); “*I share the sexts I receive with my friends*” (sharing;  $M=2.05$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ); “*I have sent a sext and then regretted sending it later on*” (regret;  $M=3.42$ ,  $SD=1.95$ ).

## 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, sexual orientation, 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 inter-

action terms, respectively, 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 all of the dependent variables: sexting entertainment, expectation, sharing, risk, and 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 first model ( $F(1,673)=21.45, p<.001$ ) with the following significant predictors: gender, sexual orientation, and relationship status (see Table 1 for all coefficients). These results reveal that males, as compared to females, LGB individuals, as compared to heterosexual, and partnered individuals in a romantic relationship, as compared to those who are single, were more likely to find sexting entertaining. Additionally, there was a significant main effect of rejection sensitivity, such that those who were lower in rejection sensitivity were more likely to rate sexting as entertaining. However, the addition of the second step predictors did not explain significantly more variance than the first step ( $\Delta R = .01, p = .11$ ), and therefore we do not explore this relationship further.

### ***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 second model ( $F(3,670)=2.70, p<.05$ ) such that males, as compared to females, partnered individuals, as compared to those who are single, and individuals who were higher in anxious attachment rated sexting as a highly typical experience in which they are expected to engage in intimate relationships (see Table 1 for coefficients).

### ***Sexting Sharing***

Results from the multiple regression analysis on participants' experiences of sharing a sext that they received from someone else also showed significant effects. Only the first model was significant ( $F(3,669)=17.54, p<.001$ ), with gender, sexual orientation, and relationship status as significant predictors (see Table 1 for coefficients). These results suggest that males are more likely than females to share the sexts they receive with others, and individuals who are single, as compared to those who are in a relationship, are more likely to share the sexts they receive with others. A 2-way interaction between rejection sensitivity and anxious attachment also was significant, but again the additional variance explained by the third step of the model was not statistically significant so it was not prudent to explore further with these data ( $F(3,666)=2.01, p=.11$ ).

## Send Nudes?

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

Step	Predictors	Sexting Entertainment		Sexting Expectations		Sexting Sharing		Sexting Risk		Sexting Regret	
		$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
1	Gender	0.09***	-0.21***	0.04***	-0.20***	0.07***	-0.11**	0.02**	0.07	0.01*	0.05
	Sexual Orientation		0.13***		0.06***		-0.11**		0.11**		0.09*
	Relationship Status		-0.23***		-0.07		0.20***		0.09		-0.02
2	RS	0.01	-0.10*	0.01*	-0.03	0.00	-0.06	0.00	-0.04	0.05***	-0.01
	ANX		0.06		0.12*		0.01		0.06		0.26***
	AVOID		-0.02		0.02		0.05		0.01		-0.04
3	RS x ANX	0.00	-0.05	0.00	-0.01	0.01	-0.10*	0.02*	0.13**	0.00	0.02
	RS x AVOID		0.01		0.01		0.03		0.00		-0.03
	ANX x AVOID		0.06		0.05		-0.03		-0.09		0.01
4	RS x ANX x AVOID	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.08	.00	0.02	0.00	0.07	0.01*	0.13*
	Total $R^2$	0.10		0.06		0.09		0.04		0.07	

Note.  $n = 770$ . RS: Rejection Sensitivity; ANX = Anxious Attachment; AVOID = Avoidant Attachment.

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

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

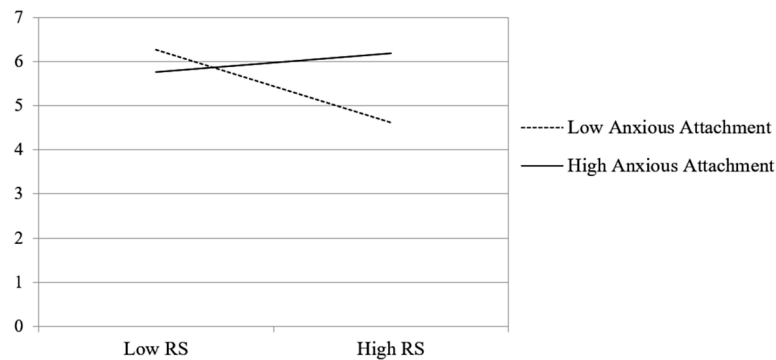
## Sexting Risk

Another multiple regression analysis explored whether any of the aforementioned predictors were associated with how risky participants perceived sexting to be. Results indicated that the third step of the model, which included all mean level predictors and two-way interactions, was significant ( $F(3,667) = 3.64, p < .05$ ). Of the demographic variables, only sexual orientation was a significant predictor, such that LGB participants are more likely to rate sexting as riskier (see Table 1 for coefficients). There also was a significant two-way interaction between rejection sensitivity and anxious attachment, such that for people with low rejection sensitivity, low anxious attachment is associated with higher ratings of sexting risk, whereas for people who are highly rejection sensitive, low anxious attachment is associated with lower ratings of sexting risk (see Figure 1).

## Sexting Regret

Finally, significant predictors of sexting regret, or how much an individual regrets engaging in sexting, emerged. The results for the multiple regression analysis were significant in the final model ( $F(1,660) = 6.35, p < .05$ ). Anxious attachment was as a significant predictor, such that participants with greater anxious attachment reported more regret after engaging in sexting (see Table 1 for coefficients). A 3-way interaction between rejection sensitivity, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment also emerged. As shown in Figure 2, at low levels of avoidant attachment, low anxious attachment was associated with low levels of regret in individuals low in rejection sensitivity, but high levels of regret for individuals high in rejection sensitivity. For individuals high in avoidant attachment, however, those with low anxious attachment were more likely to show sexting regret if they were low in rejection sensitivity, and less likely to show sexting regret when they were high in rejection sensitivity.

Figure 1. Sexting risk: 2-way interaction between rejection sensitivity and anxious attachment



## 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 (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.

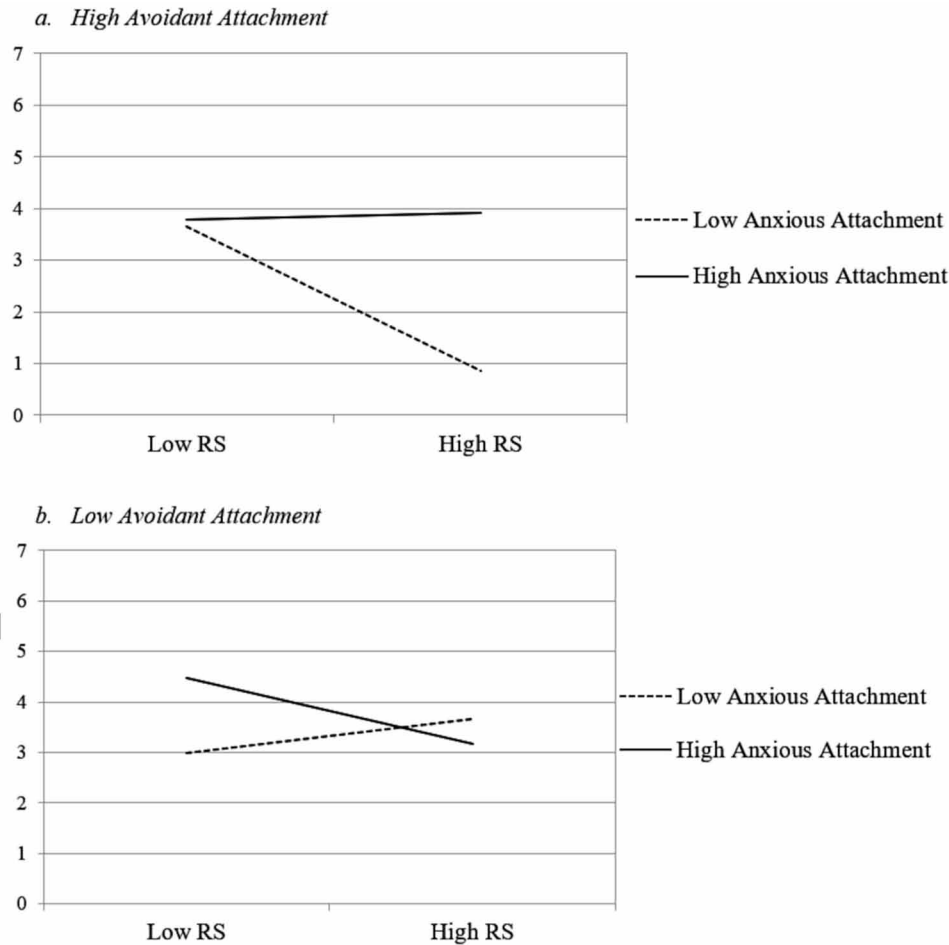
The Social Domain Theory conceptualizes social interactions as the quintessential context in which individuals coordinate three distinct domains of social thought: *the moral*, *the societal*, and *the psychological*. Research guided by the Social Domain Theory often employs the use of real or hypothetical 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.

## Send Nudes?

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



Finally, *psychological* constructs deal with person 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.

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 considered 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 directly relates to whether an act is even viewed as victim-

izing, 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, and what about the sexual orientation of those involved? The current study provides empirical assessment of participants' evaluations of hypothetical sexting victimization scenarios amongst heterosexual and LGB EAs.

## 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 two EA research assistants, multiple 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 hypothetical situations depicting scenes in which one male individual, while out with male friends, received a picture sext of a woman (different-gender scenario). The situations 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 friend 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."* These hypothetical situations were then presented told depicting scenes in which one female/male, while out with female/male friends, received a picture sext of a woman/man from another female/male (same-gender scenario). For all conditions, participants rated the acceptability (i.e., how good or bad) of two potential responses by the scenario protagonist: 1. showing the sext to his/her friends nearby, or 2. electronically forwarding the sext to others. Participants also justified their answers in open-ended responses. Responses were coded into five justification categories: 1. Authority sanctioning - concerns about societal consequences imparted for participating in the victimization (*"it's illegal"*; *"they could get in trouble"*); 2. Direct victimization - moral concerns about the personal harm that would come upon the victim (*"The photo could have devastating effects on the woman's future"*); 3. Relational and group functioning - societal concern about how the friendship or friendship group will/not be affected by the actions (*"They don't know this female, so it seems less bad..."*); 4. Rights violations - moral appeals to broader concerns about undeniable rights that should be afforded to all (*"It's not acceptable [to] promote this type of sexual objectification"*; *"It's an invasion of privacy."*); and 5. Risk of the Sexter and status quo - appeals to accepted societal rules that govern

## Send Nudes?

sexting and the sharing of sexts (*“The sexter put themselves in this predicament by taking the photo in the first place.”*; *“It’s just typical 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.”*).

A mixed within- and between- subjects design was used to investigate participants’ evaluations of sexting scenarios. A 2 (sexual orientation: heterosexual, LGB) x 2 (gender: female, male) x 2 (relationship status: single, in a relationship) x 2 (familiarity of target: known, unknown) x 2 (message type: show sext, forward sext) x 2 (scenario: different-gender, same-gender) 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. For analysis of participants’ justifications, an additional 5 (justification: authority sanctioning, direct victimization, relational & group functioning, rights violation, risk of the sexter & status quo) within-subjects factor was included with the analysis model described above.

Comparable to rates found by Brenick et al., (2017), the vast majority of participants considered sharing sexts through methods of both showing the sext to friends close-by (72% when the sext depicts someone in a different-gender dyad unknown to the group, 73% when same-gender dyad unknown, 85% when different gender known, and 88% when same-gender known) and forwarding the sext to others electronically (91% different-gender unknown; 96% different-gender known; 91% same-gender unknown; 96% same-gender known) to be wrong and unacceptable. However, the actual ratings of acceptability differed significantly by familiarity ( $F(1,471)=6.39, p<.05; \eta_p^2=.01$ ), indicating that participants rated it as more wrong for the protagonist to share a sext when the target was known to the group than when the target was unknown. The main effects for message type ( $F(1,471)=30.44, p<.001; \eta_p^2=.06$ ), and gender ( $F(1,471)=19.83; p<.001; \eta_p^2=.04$ ) were qualified by a more complex understanding of EAs’ evaluations of sexting victimization. A significant 4-way interaction between scenario, message type, gender, and sexual orientation ( $F(1,471)=5.60, p<.05, \eta_p^2=.00$ ) revealed that whereas all participants rated it equally un/acceptable to share a sext in the same-gender scenario, heterosexual male participants rated it significantly more acceptable to show a sext in the different-gender scenario than all other participants and to forward a sext in the same-gender scenario than the GB participants (see Table 2).

To justify their evaluations of the sexting victimization scenarios, the participants most often appealed to moral concerns about general rights violations, in particular gross invasions of privacy and consent. Next, participants voiced concerns about the direct victimization and potential harm that would be brought upon the victim, ranging from harassment, to bullying, to a completely ruined life. Participants similarly appealed to societal concerns about group and relational functioning that addressed how the victimization may or may not affect the group of friendship dynamic. Participants said that the victimization *“wasn’t as bad if they didn’t know the person in the sext,”* but it could harm their friend group if the sext got around to people they all knew. Alternatively, participants also talked about friends expecting others to share sexts with them and how not sharing could harm their own relationships. Less frequently, participants brought up social norms regarding sexting to justify potential victimization, claiming that the sexter knows they are at risk for their message being shared as soon as they send it, and that most peers have the mentality that once *“they have the photo on their phone [they] can do what they want with it,”* and *“It’s typical to share without thinking twice.”* Moreover, with the addition of the same-gender scenario a new justification emerged reflecting the societal concern about being mistaken as gay; *“Possession of content may call into question perceived orientation, making it less likely to share.”* Participants used authority sanctioning significantly least frequently of all justification, indicating they did not prioritize

Table 2. Means and standard errors of participants' evaluations of sexting victimization across between- and within-subjects factors

Relationship Status	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Different Gender Scenario				Same Gender Scenario			
			Unknown Victim		Known Victim		Unknown Victim		Known Victim	
			Show	Forward	Show	Forward	Show	Forward	Show	Forward
Single	Male	Heterosexual	2.47 (.10)	1.64 (.08)	2.60 (.10)	1.57 (.06)	2.01 (.11)	1.54 (.08)	1.64 (.09)	1.36 (.06)
		GB	2.03 (.16)	1.35 (.13)	1.47 (.15)	1.18 (.10)	1.83 (.18)	1.37 (.13)	1.43 (.14)	1.21 (.10)
	Female	Heterosexual	1.75 (.09)	1.29 (.07)	1.39 (.09)	1.08 (.06)	2.00 (.10)	1.29 (.07)	1.53 (.08)	1.12 (.06)
		LB	1.74 (.12)	1.14 (.09)	1.27 (.11)	1.10 (.07)	1.69 (.13)	1.35 (.10)	1.48 (.10)	1.16 (.07)
Partnered	Male	Heterosexual	2.20 (.14)	1.67 (.11)	1.88 (.13)	1.49 (.09)	2.04 (.16)	1.71 (.12)	1.71 (.13)	1.49 (.09)
		GB	2.39 (.28)	1.76 (.22)	2.02 (.26)	1.46 (.18)	2.48 (.31)	1.74 (.23)	1.73 (.25)	1.46 (.17)
	Female	Heterosexual	1.81 (.10)	1.30 (.08)	1.36 (.09)	1.12 (.06)	1.95 (.11)	1.28 (.08)	1.50 (.09)	1.17 (.06)
		LB	1.82 (.13)	1.41 (.10)	1.48 (.12)	1.21 (.08)	2.00 (.14)	1.54 (.10)	1.53 (.11)	1.23 (.08)

potential consequences of the action as a major detriment for carrying out the victimization (main effect for justification:  $F(4,1664)=15.65, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.04$ ).

Below we describe two higher order interactions that qualify this main effect for justification. First, there was a 3-way interaction between justification, message type, and gender ( $F(4,1664)=2.89, p<.05, \eta_p^2=.01$ ). Females, as compared to males, used more rights violation and fewer risk of the sexter and status quo justifications for both show and forward message types and less relational and group functioning justifications for the forward message type. Second, there was a 4-way interaction between justifications, sexual orientation, relationship status, and scenario ( $F(4,1664)=4.04, p<.05, \eta_p^2=.01$ ), such that all participants used authority sanctioning and relational and group functioning justifications more in the different-gender scenario than the same-gender scenario, whereas the reverse was true of the risk of the sexter and status quo justifications. However, the direct victimization justification was used less frequently across scenarios but only by partnered LGB participants in comparison to single heterosexual participants. At the same time, partnered and single LGB participants used rights violation justification significantly more often than single heterosexual participants.

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 decency. At the same time, 98% of our participants agreed to having shared or forwarded a sext they received. In relation to the scenarios, 27% of participants believed it was likely or very likely that the scenario protagonist would forward the sext of an unknown woman in the different-gender scenario; 30% in the same gender scenario. Incredibly, 75% of participants believed it was likely or very likely the scenario protagonist would show their friends the sext of an unknown person in the different-gender scenario and 42% in the same gender scenario—50% for a known person in the different gender scenario and 41% in the same-gender scenario. 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 extend Brenick et al.'s (2017) findings 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, and explored the viewpoints of marginalized communities in regard to sexting and sexting victimization. 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 Brenick et al. (2017), but also further expanded upon here 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 rejection sensitivity found sexting to be less entertaining and those with anxious attachment styles were more likely to endorse the idea that sexting is typical and expected. 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). However, people with anxious attachment styles also were more likely to report regret from engaging in sexting. Further interactions between insecure attachment and rejection sensitivity revealed more complex relations; rejection sensitivity related to ratings of sexting as more risky only when an individual also was high in anxious attachment. Similarly, a significant 3-way interaction suggests that individuals high in rejection sensitivity, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment, report the least sexting regret. These results are important to frame and understand in the context of LGB adults, who have largely been absent from such studies, and cannot contribute to the overall impact of these results. Future research should explore these findings in relation to the previous research showing heightened levels of anxious attachment among the LGB population as well as increased rates of sexting participation. It is possible that a significant interaction did not emerge in our data because we did not have an adequate range of representation for anxious attachment among our limited LGB sample. 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 and should be examined further with heterosexual and sexual minority samples.

Additionally, the current study made significant contributions to the literature by emphasizing demographic perspectives often missing from this literature. Larger samples of male and LGB participants

allowed for gender and sexual orientation findings to be fully explored. Males were more likely to perceive sexting as entertaining and expected, and also were more likely to share sexts that they received than females. Heterosexual individuals, on the other hand, rated sexting as less entertaining and less risky than their non-heterosexual peers, but also reported a greater likelihood of sharing sexts. LGB individuals also rated sexting victimization as less acceptable than their heterosexual peers. In an interaction of gender and sexual orientation, heterosexual males were found to be the most accepting of sharing and forwarding sexts than all other participants. LGB participants viewed sexting victimization as a matter of rights violation that is applied equally to everyone, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Heterosexual participants, however, viewed it as a matter of direct victimization that resulted in personal harm inflicted primarily on women by men—an act that is gendered. This mindset is, in and of itself, harmful to women and sexual minorities. This set of findings adds a multifaceted layer of complexity in the study of how people experience 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? Does all this apply equally for heterosexual and LGB scenarios? 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

## ***Send Nudes?***

effects of these individual characteristics across a larger spectrum. Furthermore, our sample targeted male and LGB youth but future research would benefit from including greater ethnic diversity, relationship diversity, as well as including a larger sample of males, and expanding the literature to include transgender, gender diverse, or asexual participants. This may necessitate widening the age range in future samples with more diverse participants as sexting may begin at different ages for youth and young adults who are on different gender and sexual identity developmental trajectories. 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.

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? Do these evaluations change when victimization involves gender of sexual minorities? 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.

## 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 is warranted. The current chapter explored how often EAs reported engaging in different modes of sexting (e.g., text, image, or video) and their evaluations 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 chapter also took an exploratory look into the previously untouched lens of sexting victimization in relation to sexual orientation. Our findings revealed that those who identify as LGB are less accepting of instances of sexting victimization than their heterosexual peers, despite being more frequent participants in sexting behaviors in an effort to keep their sexual identities a secret. Individuals who identify as LGB may have more knowledge and sensitivity to the dangers that can come with sexting victimization due to their own risk of being victimized or harassed due to their sexual orientation. This same risk does not exist with heterosexual participants, specifically heterosexual males who are typically the perpetrators, and not the victims of sexting victimization. We believe our results are indicative of underlying sexual and gender dynamics that perpetuate the victimhood of women and sexual minorities.

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

**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.