

Young People's Reasons for and Emotional Reactions to Sexting in Intimate Relationships

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Abstract for master's thesis

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Abstract: Despite sexting being a recognized phenomenon among youth, little is known about their experiences of sexting with an intimate partner. This study addresses this gap by examining reasons for sexting and emotional reactions to sending and receiving sexts in young people's intimate relationships, reported by 764 (48.7% girls) 15–20-year-olds in Finland. Both younger and older girls and boys reported mostly positive reactions to both sending and receiving sexts. Girls, however, reported more negative reactions than did boys. Girls' reasons for sending a sext were more often related to their own sexual expression, their needs for validation from their partner, or being pressured to sext by their partner, whereas boys' reasons more often indicated normative ideas of sexting as part of a romantic relationship, and responding to a sext first sent to them by their partner. The results suggest that although mostly consensual and reciprocal, sexting in intimate relationship may bear different meanings for boys and girls, reflecting gendered heterosexual norms.	
Keywords: Sexting, young people, intimate relationships, romantic relationships, digital media	
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Abstrakt: Trots att sexting är ett erkänt fenomen bland ungdomar finns det lite forskning om deras erfarenheter av sexting i romantiska relationer. I denna kunskapslucka placeras denna studie som syftar till att studera ungdomars orsaker till sexting, samt deras emotionella reaktioner på att skicka och ta emot sexuella meddelanden i intima relationer, rapporterade av 764 (48,7% flickor) 15–20-åringar i Finland. Både yngre och äldre flickor och pojkar rapporterade mestadels positiva reaktioner både på att skicka och att ta emot sexuella meddelanden. Flickor rapporterade dock mer negativa reaktioner än pojkar. Flickors orsaker till att skicka en sext var oftare relaterade till deras eget sexuella uttryck, deras behov av validering från sina partner eller press från sina partner, medan pojkars orsaker till sexting oftare indikerade normativa idéer om sexting som en del av ett romantiskt förhållande och att de svarade på en sext som deras partner hade skickat till dem. Resultaten tyder på att även om sexting sker i samförstånd och är ömsesidigt, kan det ha olika betydelser för pojkar och flickor i intima relationer, vilket återspeglar könsrelaterade heterosexuella normer.	
Nyckelord: Sexting, ungdomar, intima relationer, romantiska relationer, digitala medier	
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Introduction

In the past decade, digital technologies have changed social interaction between young people by providing many new platforms for online communication. These developments have raised novel opportunities, but also some concerns. *Sexting*, defined as sending or receiving sexually explicit text messages, pictures, or videos (*sexts* or *sexual messages*) via internet and/or mobile devices (Mori et al., 2020), has become one of the topics in these discussions. Several cross-sectional studies have associated sexting with mental health difficulties, impulsivity, substance abuse or risky sexual behaviors (e.g., Brinkley et al., 2017; Mori et al., 2019; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). While many studies have framed young people's sexting in terms of risks and negative outcomes, recent literature suggests a more nuanced understanding of sexting in terms of contextual factors such as reasons to sext, consensuality of sexting, and the relationship between *sexters* (i.e., the persons engaging in sexting) (Cooper et al., 2016; Englander, 2019; Reed et al. 2020). While non-consensual, pressured, or coerced sexting has been regarded as a threat to young people's safety and well-being (Choi et al., 2016; Kernsmith et al., 2018; Titchen et al., 2019), consensual sexting has been conceptualized as a part of digital intimacies for young people to explore and express their sexuality (Croft et al., 2015; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; van Ouytsel et al., 2019a).

Prevalence of Sexting among Youth

Studies on prevalence of sexting have provided varying results, not only due to methodological differences and variation in reference periods (asking about life-time prevalence, or varying time ranges, from recent month to past 12 months), but also due to differences in the operational definition of sexting (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). According to a systematic review of studies conducted mainly in the United States, experiences of sexting among 10–19-year-old youth ranged from 3% to 34% for sending and 7% to 42% for receiving sexual messages (Klettke et al., 2014). A recent meta-analysis of 39 studies in different countries reported the mean prevalence of 15% for sending and 27% for receiving sexts across studies (Madigan et al., 2018). Despite variation in prevalence rates, recent literature thus suggests that receiving sexts is more common than sending them.

Although sexting in adolescence may occur with strangers, acquaintances, peers, or casual dating partners, it most often happens between romantic partners in a relationship context (Reed et al., 2020; van Ouytsel et al., 2020). A nationally representative survey in the United States concluded that over half of the adolescents who sexted did so with their romantic partner (Mitchell et al., 2012). A more recent survey among 12–17-year-old students reported higher prevalence of sexting experiences (sending and receiving sexts) with

a boyfriend or a girlfriend than with other people (Patchin & Hinduja, 2019). Further, in the study *Safeguarding Teenage Relationships (STIR)* in five European countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, England, Italy, and Norway), 6–44% of young women and 15–32% of young men reported sending a sext (with differences in percentages depending on the country), whereas 9–49% of girls and 20–47% of boys reported receiving a sext in their romantic relationship. Therefore, there was more variability in girls than in boys in how many of them had sexting experiences. The highest rates of sexting (sending and receiving a sext) were in England and the lowest rates in Cyprus (Stanley et al., 2018). Moreover, among young adults aged 18 to 26, sexting was most prevalent in committed relationships, compared to casual sexual relationships and relationships where one partner cheated on the other (Drouin et al., 2013).

Sexting, Gender, and Age in Cultural Context

Many studies have investigated age and gender as predictors of young people's sexting. In terms of gender differences, the findings have been inconclusive. While many studies report no significant differences by gender (e.g., Madigan et al., 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2019a), some studies suggest higher prevalence of sexting (sending and receiving) for young women (Mitchell et al., 2012), or (sending) for young men (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017; Patchin & Hinduja, 2019). Moreover, some studies suggest that cultural context may contribute to the overall discrepancy of gender prevalence rates, suggesting that gender differences across countries could be partly explained by different levels of traditionalism and variation in gender norms between countries (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Ševčíková, 2017). For instance, Baumgartner et al. (2014) suggest that in more traditional countries with more restrictions for sexual behavior for girls, gender differences in sexting may be stronger, with more boys than girls engaging in sexting. In contrast, in less traditional countries, gender difference may be smaller, absent, or even reversed. Interestingly, Baumgartner and colleagues (2014) reported higher prevalence of sexting amongst girls than boys in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, and Finland), except for Sweden, where the rate was higher for boys. The Nordic countries are considered low in traditionalism.

In the Nordic countries, many young people have their first experience of a romantic relationship in adolescence (Bakken, 2017; Karsberg, 2019). According to a representative Finnish School Health Promotion Survey, 17% of secondary school pupils (grades 8–9), 26% of upper secondary school students, and 35% of students in vocational educational institutions were in a romantic relationship, girls more often than boys. Further, 19% of pupils in 8th and 9th grade (both girls and boys) have had vaginal or anal intercourse, while 38% of students in upper secondary school and 55% of students in vocational educational

institutions have had these experiences, with girls having had them more often than boys. (School Health Promotion Study, 2021). Hence experiences of intimate relationships and sexual intercourse become more common with age, also indicating some gender differences.

Moreover, several studies report increase in prevalence of sexting with age (Madigan et al., 2018; Patchin & Hinduja, 2019; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020a). These findings suggest that although younger adolescents have romantic and sexual interests, they still have fewer experiences of digital sexual communication than older adolescents. However, the likelihood of having had a romantic relationship increases with age, thus increasing the likelihood of having experiences of sexting with one's romantic partner (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Burén & Lunde, 2018; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Moreover, perceived social expectations and positive attitudes towards sexting by the peers may become social triggers for experimenting digital intimate communication at a certain age (Burén et al., 2022).

Sexting in the Context of Romantic Relationships

Previous research on sexting in young people's romantic relationships have addressed consensual and non-consensual sexting associated with positive and negative relationship patterns. Non-consensual sexting has been identified as one component of youth intimate partner violence (IPV) (Dake et al., 2012; Drouin et al., 2015). Several studies have found that young women are pressured or coerced into sexting in relationships more often than young men (e.g., Kernsmith et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2019; Titchen et al., 2019). In a European study, young people who reported experiences of emotional, physical, digital, or sexual IPV were at least twice as likely to report experiences of sexting compared to young people who had no experiences of victimization (Barter et al., 2015). Moreover, young people in the United States who engaged in sexting had more likely been hit or physically hurt by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the past year, compared to adolescents who were not involved in sexting (Dake et al., 2012). Hence, research demonstrates how modern digital technologies can be used for sexual victimization, but also how sexting can be part of violent intimate relationships in adolescence.

Several studies have reported positive reasons and consequences associated with consensual sexting. These studies report increased opportunities for young people to find a romantic partner (Walrave et al., 2014), to initiate sexual contact, and to foster or sustain intimacy (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; van Ouytsel et al., 2019b). Further, sexting enhances intimacy with one's long-distance partner (Drouin et al., 2013), and contributes to greater sexual and relational satisfaction (Drouin et al., 2017). Although there can be pressure and risks associated with sexting among young people, in many cases sending and receiving

sexual messages occurs voluntarily between romantic or sexual partners for fun, to be flirtatious, to feel sexy or as a sexy gift (e.g., Crofts et al., 2015; Reed et al., 2020). For instance, a survey in five European countries concluded that the most common reasons for girls and boys to send a sext to their romantic partner were that their partner asked them to, to feel sexy or be flirtatious, in response to a sext their partner had sent, and to joke (Wood et al., 2015). Analyzing contextual relational factors such as whether sexting occurs consensually or non-consensually between intimate partners in a romantic relationship, or whether this happens in some other context, may thus provide more specified understanding of reasons and outcomes of sexting.

Although sexting has been recognized and conceptualized as a form of sexual communication, research on the emotional consequences of sexting in romantic relationships, or by romantic partners compared to non-partners, is still scarce (Burén 2020; Drouin et al., 2013). In a recent Swedish survey for 12–16-year-old young people, girls had significantly more negative experiences of sending sexts than boys (Burén & Lunde, 2018). However, these experiences were not analyzed separately across the recipient groups identified in the study, one of which was romantic partners. Moreover, the experiences were examined on the level “positive” vs. “negative”, not allowing for more detailed analysis of what positive and negative experiences consisted of among girls and boys.

One of the few studies of emotional reactions to sexting in youth intimate relationships in Europe was the previously mentioned STIR study in five countries (Wood et al., 2015). In this study, the responses were also grouped into three categories indicating positive, negative, and mixed reactions to sending a sext, thus excluding a more specific analysis of these responses. Of the young people who had experiences of sexting in a romantic relationship, 41–87% of girls and 75–91% of boys reported only positive emotional reactions after sending a sext to their partner (feeling loved, wanted, good about themselves, or thought it was funny). In England, Italy and Norway, boys were significantly more likely to give positive only responses than girls, while girls were significantly more likely than boys to report only the negative impact (feeling upset, unhappy, humiliated, annoyed, scared, angry, bad about themselves, shocked, or embarrassed). More specifically, as many as 27% of girls in England had sent a sext because their partner pressured them to, and they were much more likely to report negative emotional impacts of sexting compared to those who did not report pressure as a reason for sexting (Wood et al., 2015). Furthermore, the recent study by Reed and colleagues (2020) showed that young people's motivation to sext was most often to be fun and flirtatious, but girls were more likely than boys to be pressured to sexting and to report

negative emotional responses to sexting requests from their partner. These findings underline the importance of distinguishing between the consensual and non-consensual context of sexting as well as addressing gender differences in analyzing young people's qualitative experiences of sexting.

The Current Study

Although young people engage in sexting in their romantic relationships, relatively few studies examine experiences of sexting in this context. The aim of the present study was, therefore, to extend current knowledge on reasons for sending and emotional reactions to sending and receiving sexts in young people's romantic relationships. The study is based on a school survey for 15–20-year-old young people in secondary schools (ninth grade), upper secondary schools, and vocational educational institutions in different parts of Finland.

First, the current study examined the prevalence of sexting in young people's intimate relationships, and whether this prevalence varied by age or by gender. Drawing upon recent literature (e.g., van Ouytsel, 2020a; Wood et al., 2015), we expected sending and receiving sexts to be more common among older than younger adolescents (hypothesis 1). Moreover, we expected that female gender may be a significant factor in having these experiences (hypothesis 2), as existing research from the Nordic context would seem to suggest a higher prevalence of sexting among girls than boys (Baumgartner et al., 2014).

Second, we investigated young people's reasons for sending sexts in their romantic relationships. Based on previous research (e.g., Reed et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2015), we expected that reasons for sexting were most often consensual, indicating sexual expression and exploration, but also reciprocal sexual communication (hypothesis 3). Moreover, we expected that girls were pressured to sext by their partners more often than boys (hypothesis 4). In terms of possible differences in reasons for sexting between younger and older adolescents, our study was exploratory.

Third, we explored whether emotional reactions to sending or receiving a sext differed by gender. This part of the study examined positive, negative, and neutral reactions associated with the last incidence of sending and receiving a sext in an intimate relationship. Based on existing research on sexting in young people's intimate relationships (Barter et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2015; Stanley et al., 2018), we expected that positive emotional reactions to sexting may be common when sexting is consensual, and the sexts are only shared with one's partner (hypothesis 5). Drawing on previous research, we also expected girls to express negative emotional reactions to experiences of sexting in intimate relationships more often than boys (hypothesis 6) (Barter et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2015; Reed et al., 2020). In terms

of possible differences in emotional reactions between younger and older adolescents, our study was exploratory.

Method

Ethical Approval

The study followed the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity and was approved by The Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region. According to the ethical guidelines in Finland, young people over 15 can decide for themselves whether to participate in research studies. In this sensitive study, however, the parents/guardians of minors were allowed to opt out participation of their children, if they so wished.

Participants

The sample for the study consisted of 782 participants who had experiences of romantic relationships. Due to a small number of nonbinary participants ($n = 17$; 2.2%), their responses were removed from the analysis. Although this may be considered statistically justifiable, we acknowledged the problematic nature of excluding experiences of nonbinary young people from research reports (Widman et al., 2022). The respondents in the final sample ($n = 764$) were evenly divided by gender, predominantly Finnish speaking, and most of them had experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships. The mean age was 16.72 years ($SD = 1.24$), 16.72 years for girls ($SD = 1.26$) and 16.73 years for boys ($SD = 1.23$). See Table 1 for descriptive data regarding the sample of participants.

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (n=764)*

Characteristics	n	%
Gender		
Female	372	48.7
Male	392	51.3
Educational institution ^a		
Secondary school (9 th grade)	208	27.2
Upper secondary school	283	37.0
Vocational educational institution	270	35.3
Relationships ^b		
Heterosexual (other gender, binary)	743	97.3
Homosexual (same gender, binary)	48	6.3
With nonbinary partners	11	1.4
Age ^c		
15	153	20.0
16	176	23.0
17	232	30.4
18	155	20.3
19	26	3.4
20	21	2.7
First language (language spoken daily at home) ^d		
Finnish	713	93.3
Swedish	10	1.3
Other	126	16.5

Note.^a Percentages do not sum up to 100 due to missing data ($n = 3$)^b Percentages sum to over 100 due to participants who had both other-gender and same-gender partners.^c Percentages do not sum up to 100 due to missing data ($n = 1$).^d Percentages sum to over 100 due to participants who spoke more than one language. Finland has two national languages, Finnish and Swedish.

Measures

The school-based survey explored young people's social media use in romantic relationships as well as their online and offline experiences of intimate partner violence. The survey was originally administered as part of an extensive research project, *Safeguarding Teenage Intimate Relationships*, in five European countries: Bulgaria, Italy, Cyprus, Norway, and England (Barter, et al. 2015). The current study was based on the same methodological framework that was used in the original study, with some modifications to the survey instrument.

In the survey, sexts were defined as sexual messages or visual material (i.e., pictures and videos) which describe or show sexual activity or naked/partially naked bodies.

Participant's gender was reported by the participants by choosing one of the options to identify themselves: 1 = *girl*, 2 = *boy* or 3 = *I don't identify myself as a girl or a boy*. (Data

containing the third option was excluded from the analyses due to a small sample size.) The third option was added to the original STIR instrument.

Sending sexts to one's partner was measured with an item "Have you ever sent sexual messages, pictures, or videos of yourself to your partner during the relationship? Think about all your partners." Participants answered this question by choosing 1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *a few times* or 4 = *often*. This item was the same as in the STIR survey. The item was recoded to 0 = *never* and 1 = *at least once* to frame the analysis to those participants who had any experience of sexting at all.

Receiving sexts from one's partner was measured by asking "Has your partner sent you sexual messages, pictures, or videos of themselves during the relationship? Think about all your partners." Participants answered this question by choosing 1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *a few times* or 4 = *often*. This item was the same as in the original STIR survey, and it was dichotomized to 0 = *never* and 1 = *at least once* for the purposes of the present study.

Reasons for sending the last sext was measured with an item "Think about the last time you have sent a sexual message, a picture, or a video of yourself to your partner during your relationship. Why did you do it? You can choose several options." The options were (in the presented order): as a joke; to feel sexy/flirtatious; my partner asked me to; my partner pressured me to; my friends pressured me to; to show my feelings; to get attention; to show my body; to be liked; in response to a similar message my partner had sent me; it is part of being in a relationship; I don't know. This item had two additional options compared to the STIR survey: "to be liked" and "it is part of being in a relationship". Due to ambiguity of translations of the following two options, "to prove my feelings" in the original instrument in English was replaced with "to show my feelings", and "to show off" was replaced with "to show my body" (literal translations from Finnish).

Emotional reaction to the last instance of sending a sext was measured with an item "Think about the last time you have sent a sexual message, a picture, or a video of yourself to your partner during your relationship. How did this behavior make you feel? You can choose several options." The options were (in the presented order): upset; loved; unhappy; I felt sexy; sexually excited; hurt; wanted; annoyed; safe; betrayed; scared; embarrassed; good about yourself; bad about yourself; angry; thought it was funny; shocked; I regretted it; it had no effect. This item had six additional options compared to the STIR survey, which were: "I felt sexy", "sexually excited", "safe", "betrayed"; "I regretted it". In addition, "humiliated" in the original survey instrument was replaced by "hurt", because the Finnish translation of the

options “humiliated” and “embarrassed” (used in the original survey) had some overlapping meanings.

Emotional reaction to the last instance of receiving a sext was measured with an item “How did you feel last time when you received from your partner a sexual message, a picture, or a video of your partner during your relationship. You can choose several options.” The options were (in the presented order): upset; loved; happy; unhappy; sexually excited; hurt; wanted; annoyed; safe; scared; embarrassed; good about yourself; bad about yourself; angry; shocked; thought it was funny; it had no effect. This item was not included in the original survey.

Whether the last sext sent by the participant was shared with others by the partner was measured with an item “Was it shared without your consent?” The options were 1 = yes; 2 = no; 3 = I don't know. This item was not included in the original survey.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from 4 secondary schools, 4 upper secondary schools and 6 vocational educational institutions in different parts of Finland in 2021. Schools were selected to represent demographic variation in terms of regions (urban and rural), gender (comparable proportion of young men and women) as well as young people's language backgrounds (diverse instead of Finnish as the only language, to account for diverse sociocultural backgrounds). Information about these indicators were obtained mainly from Statistics Finland, while some regional and school-based information was also received from municipalities or directly from educational institutions (especially gender proportions in different vocational study programs to avoid underrepresentation of either girls or boys in the sample).

The research team visited each school and conducted the online survey during one school day. Before the visit, the team informed young people, their guardians, and the school personnel about the study by sending e-mail information letters to the head of the school, who forwarded these messages via Wilma, the internet-based communication tool used in schools. In addition to describing the purpose and content of the survey, the procedure was presented in advance in written form. It was clearly stated that participation was voluntary and could be terminated at any time during the survey, and that data would be anonymous and treated confidentially. In cases where students were under 18 years old, their guardians were informed about their possibility to prevent their child's participation by opting out. To our knowledge, none of them contacted the school personnel to do this.

Before beginning the survey in each class, young people were given information about the study both orally and in written form. The researcher read out loud the informed consent form in front of the class, and the same information was presented in a written form on the first page of the survey. It was stressed that participation was voluntary and answering the survey questions was considered as consenting to participate in the study. The researcher was present in the classroom during the survey, which took 25–30 minutes to complete with a laptop, a tablet or a mobile. After answering the survey, the students were given contact information to youth services, health care services and support services, which had been listed in advance on the research project web site. Moreover, the school student care personnel (i.e., school nurse, counsellor, and school psychologist) had been informed in advance about the survey in case some of the students wished to talk with them afterwards. Due to school visiting restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, the survey was administered remotely via Zoom connections with the classrooms in three schools. There was also an anonymous online chat available for young people for the whole day of the visit, with each question and answer being visible only to the researchers and the person asking the question.

Data analyses

Experiences of sexting are provided with distributions and frequencies of sexting for boys and girls and for younger and older adolescents (below and over 18 years old). Welch's two sample t-test was used to examine that gender and age were not related in the sample characteristics ($p = .88$). We used Pearson Chi-Squared test with Yates' continuity correction to examine whether there were differences in prevalence of sexting and in emotional reactions to sexting among boys and girls and among younger and older adolescents. We applied χ -tests also for analyzing reasons for sending the last sext by age and by gender. All the analyses were performed with the R software (R Core Team, 2022). Data were cleaned, organized, and restructured using the packages *tidyr* (Wickham & Girlich, 2022), *dplyr* (Wickham, et al. 2022), *forcats* (Wickham, 2022), and *stringr* (Wickham, 2019). To analyze data, we used the packages *psych* (Revelle, 2022) and *epitools* (Aragon, 2020). We used *ggplot2* (Wickham, 2016) and *RColorBrewer* (Neuwirth, 2014) to visualize data.

The results are reported by presenting odds ratios (*OR*), 95% confidence intervals for *ORs*, as well as relevant figures. Concerning reported gender differences, when *OR* is below 1, boys were more likely than girls to report experience surveyed with the item, whereas when *OR* is above 1, this was more likely for girls. Concerning reported age differences, when *OR* is below 1, younger individuals (aged 15–17) were more likely to report the

experience surveyed with the item, whereas when *OR* was above 1, this was more likely for older individuals (aged 18–20). The detailed Tables with chi-square results are presented in the Appendix.

Results

Prevalence of Sexting

Sexting experiences were common in young people's intimate relationships. Over half of the participants (55%) had received a sext from their partner, while less than half of them (44%) had themselves sent a sext to their partner. Younger and older adolescents were equally likely to send and receive sexts in their romantic relationships, thus lending no support for hypothesis 1 expecting sexting to be more common among older adolescents. Further, chi-square tests showed that girls were more likely than boys to have sent a sext to their partner (*OR* = 0.39; 95% *CI* = 0.28, 0.52), but not more likely to have received a sext from their partner. Our study thus provides partial support for hypothesis 2 which expected that girls engage in sexting more often than boys. Table 1 in the Appendix presents distribution and frequency of sexting experiences by gender and by age.

Reasons for Sending Sexts

As we expected, reasons for sexting were most often consensual (hypothesis 3). For girls, the most common reasons for sending a sext to one's partner were to feel sexy/flirtatious, because partner asked to, to show one's body, in response to a similar message, and to get attention. The most common reasons for boys were to send a sext in response to a similar message, because partner asked to, because it was part of being in a relationship, to show one's body, and to feel sexy/flirtatious. See Figure 1 and Table 2 in the Appendix for distributions and chi-square results of reasons for sending sexts.

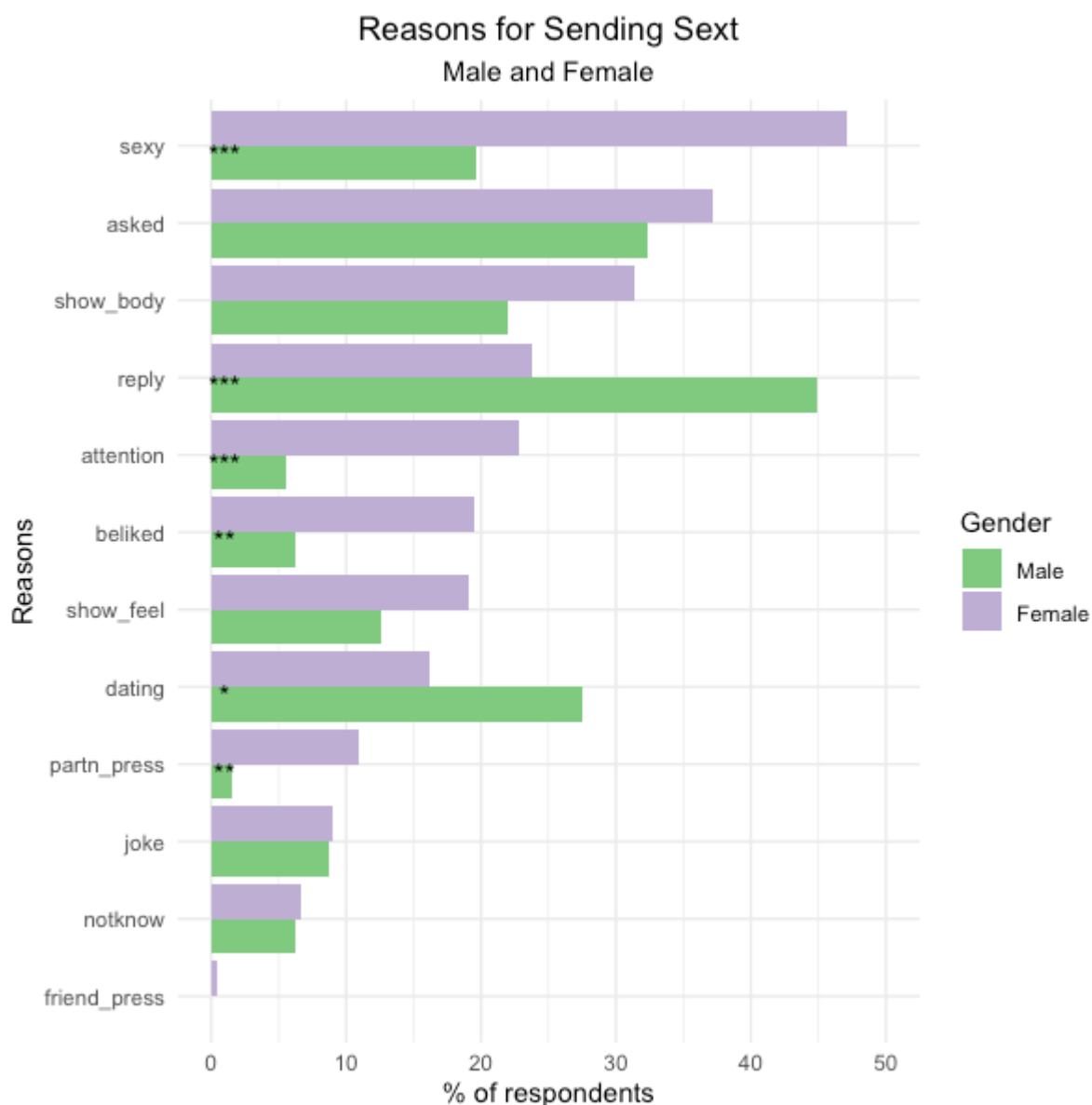
Significantly more girls than boys had sent a sext to their partner to feel sexy/flirtatious (*OR* = 0.28; 95% *CI* = 0.16, 0.46), to get attention (*OR* = 0.20; 95% *CI* = 0.08, 0.44), and to be liked (*OR* = 0.28; 95% *CI* = 0.12, 0.60). In support of hypothesis 4, we also found that girls reported more often than boys that their partner had pressured them to sext (*OR* = 0.14; 95% *CI* = 0.02, 0.49). For boys, sending a sext was significantly more common than for girls as a response to a similar message sent by their partner (*OR* = 2.60; 95% *CI* = 1.62, 4.18). Boys also reported significantly more often than girls that they sent a sext because it was part of being in a relationship (*OR* = 1.96; 95% *CI* = 1.15, 3.37).

Within age groups, the most common reasons for younger adolescents (aged 15–17) for sending the last sext were because partner asked to, to feel sexy/flirtatious, to show one's body, and in response to a similar message. For older adolescents (aged 18–20), the most

common reasons were to feel sexy/flirtatious, because partner asked to, and in response to a similar message. No significant differences were found between age groups in reasons for sexting.

Figure 1

Reasons for Sending a Sext to One’s Intimate Partner by Gender



Note. sexy = to feel sexy/flirtatious, asked = my partner asked me to, show_body = to show my body, reply = in response to a similar message, attention = to get attention, beliked = to be liked, show_feel = to show my feelings, dating = it is part of being in a relationship, partn_press = my partner pressured me to, joke = as a joke, notknow = I don’t know, friend_press = my friends pressed me to.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

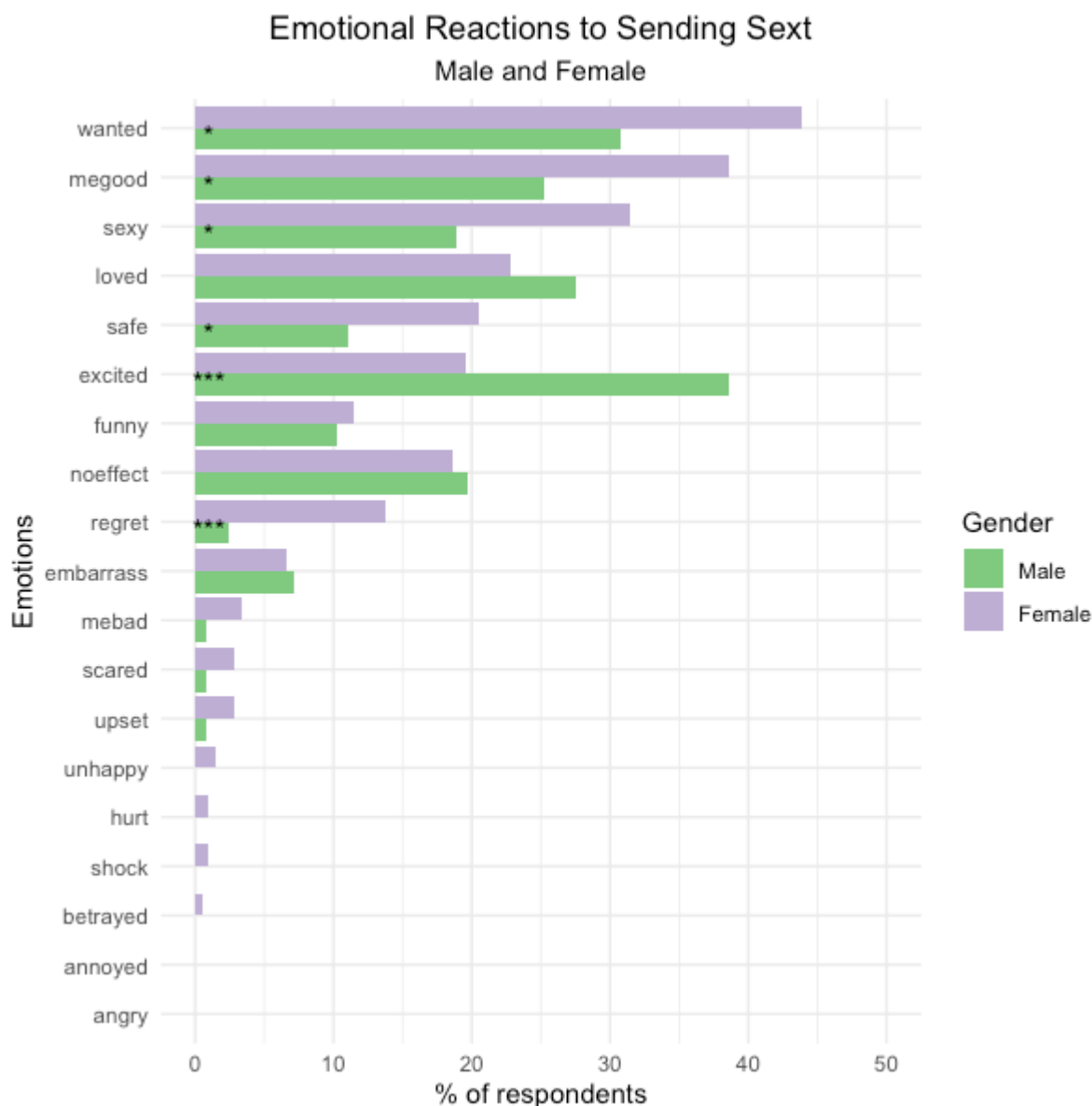
Emotional Reactions to Sending and Receiving Sexts

In support for hypothesis 5, the analyses showed that most reactions to sending and receiving a sext were positive both for girls and for boys, and for younger and older adolescents respectively. Overall, there were no significant gender differences in how often girls and boys reported at least one positive or at least one negative emotional reaction to sending a sext, providing no support for hypothesis 6. In partial support of hypothesis 6, however, we found that it was more common for girls (14.5%) than for boys (4.5%) to experience at least one negative reaction to receiving a sext ($\chi^2(1) = 10.79; p = .001; OR = 0.28; 95\% CI = 0.12, 0.59$). Further, boys (84.0%) were more likely than girls (70.1%) to report at least one positive reaction to receiving a sext from their partner ($\chi^2(1) = 10.54; p = .001; OR = 2.23; 95\% CI = 1.39, 3.62$).

For girls, the most common emotional reactions to sending the last sext to their partner were feeling wanted, good about themselves, sexy, loved, and safe. For boys, the most often reported reactions were feeling sexually excited, wanted, loved, good about oneself, and that it had no effect. Figure 2 and Table 3 in the Appendix present distribution and chi-square results of emotional reactions to sending the last sext to one's partner.

Figure 2

Emotional Reactions to Sending a Sext to One’s Intimate Partner by Gender



Note. megood = good about oneself, excited = sexually excited, funny = it was funny, noeffect = it had no effect, regret = I regretted it, embarrass = embarrassed, mebad = bad about oneself.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$

Certain reactions to sending a sext were more common for girls than for boys and vice versa. Significantly more girls than boys reported feeling wanted ($OR = 0.57$; 95% CI = 0.36, 0.92), good about themselves ($OR = 0.54$; 95% CI = 0.33, 0.87), sexy ($OR = 0.51$; 95% CI = 0.30, 0.86), and safe ($OR = 0.49$; 95% CI = 0.25, 0.91). Although girls reported feeling safe

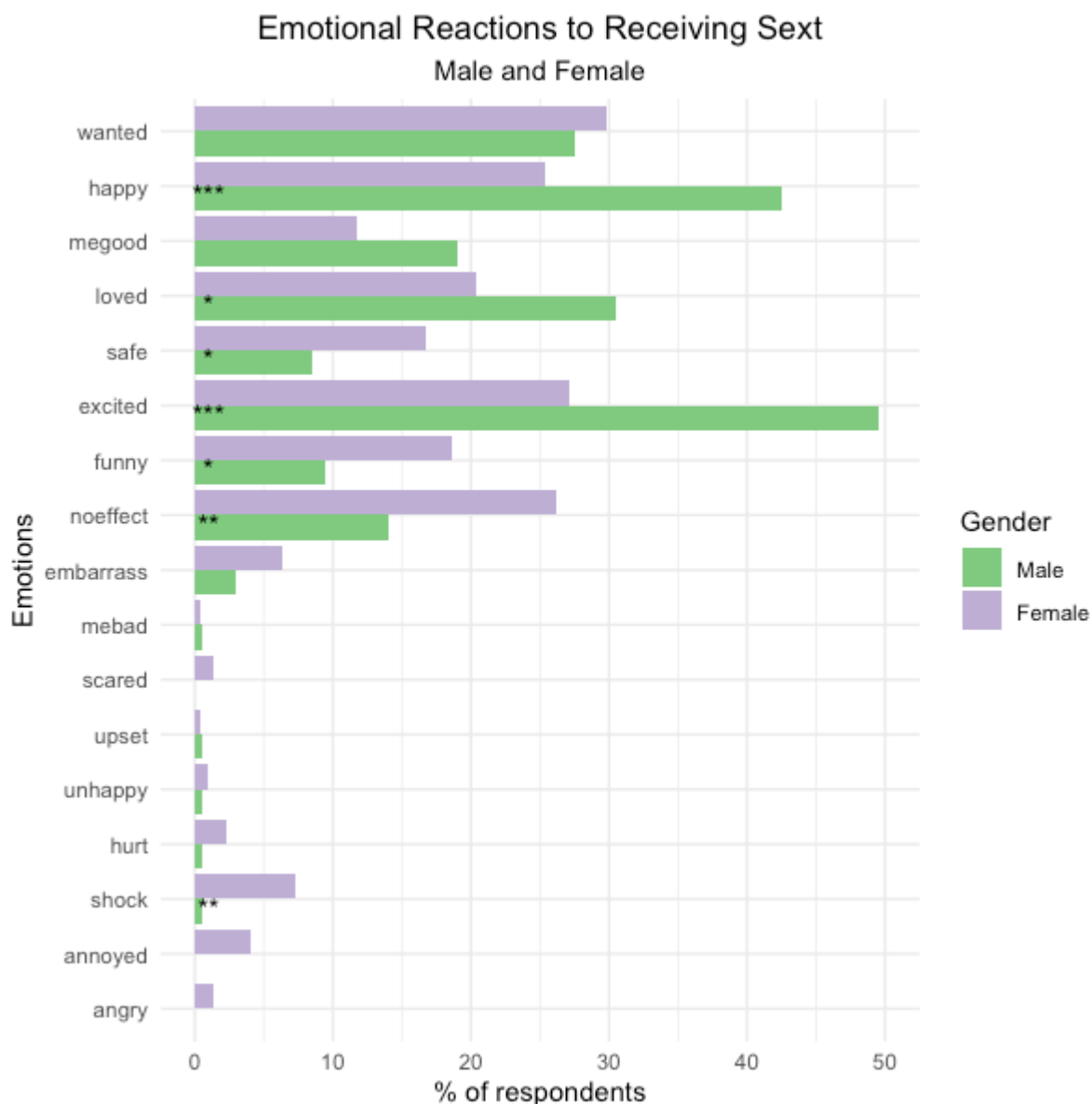
more often than boys, girls also more often reported that they regretted the last sext they had sent ($OR = 0.16$; 95% $CI = 0.04, 0.46$). This finding supports hypothesis 5 which stated that sexting may be more negative experience for girls than for boys. Boys reported feeling sexually excited significantly more often than girls ($OR = 2.58$; 95% $CI = 1.58, 4.25$).

For both age groups, the most common emotional reactions to sending the last sext were feeling wanted, good about oneself, sexy, and loved. Young people who were over 18 years felt significantly more often sexy than young people aged 15–17 ($OR = 2.12$; 95% $CI = 1.26, 3.55$).

In receiving a sext from one's partner, the most common emotional reactions for girls were feeling wanted, sexually excited, or that it had no effect (see Figure 3 and Table 4 in the Appendix). Girls also reported feeling happy or loved. Boys most often reported being sexually excited, happy, loved, and wanted. Chi-square test showed that it was more common for girls than for boys to report no effect ($OR = 0.46$; 95% $CI = 0.28, 0.75$), and that it was funny ($OR = 0.46$; 95% $CI = 0.25, 0.82$). Further, it was more common for girls to feel safe than for boys ($OR = 0.47$; 95% $CI = 0.25, 0.85$). In support for our hypothesis that sexting may be more negative experience for girls than for boys, girls also felt shocked more often than boys ($OR = 0.07$; 95% $CI = 0.00, 0.36$). Boys who had received a sext from their partner, reported significantly more often than girls that they felt excited ($OR = 2.62$; 95% $CI = 1.75, 3.95$), happy ($OR = 2.17$; 95% $CI = 1.44, 3.30$), or loved ($OR = 1.71$; 95% $CI = 1.10, 2.69$).

Figure 3

Emotional Reactions to Receiving a Sext from One’s Intimate Partner by Gender



Note. megood = good about oneself, excited = sexually excited, funny = it was funny, noeffect = it had no effect, regret = I regretted it, embarrass = embarrassed, mebad = bad about oneself.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

For younger participants aged 15–17, the most common emotional reactions to receiving a sext were to feel excited, happy, wanted, it had no effect, and loved. For older participants aged 18–20, the most common reactions were to feel excited, happy, wanted,

loved, and good about oneself. Young people who were over 18 years felt significantly more often loved than young people aged 15–17 ($OR = 1.67$; 95% CI = 1.03, 2.67).

Exploratory Analysis of Reasons and Emotional Reactions to Sending Sexts

Overall, chi-square tests showed that at least one positive emotion for sending a sext was more likely if the partner had not asked to send it ($\chi^2(1) = 3.92$; $p = .048$; $OR = 0.60$; 95% CI = 0.38, 0.97), or if partner had not pressured to send it ($\chi^2(1) = 14.95$; $p < .001$; $OR = 0.19$; 95% CI = 0.07, 0.45). At least one positive emotion in response to sexting was also more likely if sexting was reported to be part of a relationship ($\chi^2(1) = 5.69$; $p = .02$; $OR = 2.27$; 95% CI = 1.21, 4.54), or if the sext was sent to feel sexy/flirtatious ($\chi^2(1) = 22.51$; $p < .001$; $OR = 3.78$; 95% CI = 2.2, 6.79), to show one's body ($\chi^2(1) = 27.55$; $p < .001$; $OR = 6.16$; 95% CI = 3.1, 13.8), or to show one's feelings ($\chi^2(1) = 14.58$; $p < .001$; $OR = 5.55$; 95% CI = 2.34, 16.6). At least one positive emotion was also more likely if participants knew why they sent the sext (i.e., did not answer "I don't know"), however, the cell sizes were small ($\chi^2(1) = 4.73$; $p = .03$; $OR = 0.36$; 95% CI = 0.14, 0.86).

Moreover, chi-square tests showed that at least one negative emotion was more likely when the sext was sent because partner asked to ($\chi^2(1) = 12.62$; $p < .001$; $OR = 0.34$; 95% CI = 0.18, 0.61), or if the partner had pressured them to send it ($\chi^2(1) = 87.35$; $p < .001$; $OR = 0.02$; 95% CI = 0.01, 0.07). At least one negative emotion was more likely also if the sext was sent to be liked ($\chi^2(1) = 7.84$; $p = .005$; $OR = 0.36$; 95% CI = 0.18, 0.73), if sending a sext was not considered being a part of relationship ($\chi^2(1) = 4.18$; $p = .004$; $OR = 2.78$; 95% CI = 1.16, 8.41), or if it was not sent to show one's body ($\chi^2(1) = 10.03$; $p = .002$; $OR = 4.36$; 95% CI = 1.83, 13.1).

Only six of the respondents reported that their sext had been shared to others by their partner, thus no further statistical analysis was used to examine these observations.

Discussion

In the current study, we studied young people's experiences of sexting in intimate partner relationships, addressing the prevalence of, reasons for, and emotional reactions to sexting. We found that sending and receiving sexts was a common experience in young people's romantic relationships. Over half of participants in the present study had received a sext and over forty per cent had sent a sext to their partner. These experiences were perceived positively by most young people across genders and age groups. The results suggest that although not all young people engage in sexting with their partners, sexting is a salient and normalized part of sexual communication, expression, and exploration in young people's

romantic relationships. These findings are compatible with recent literature on prevalence of sexting in Anglo-American and European contexts (Stanley et al., 2018; van Ouytsel et al., 2019b; van Ouytsel et al., 2020), and even suggest slightly higher prevalence rates in Finland.

In contrast to previous studies (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Burén & Lunde, 2018), we found no age difference in the prevalence of sexting. A possible reason for this may be that we focused on sexting among 15–20-year-olds, thus excluding relationship contexts involving individuals belonging to younger age groups. Among younger adolescents, sexting may not be as prevalent. Further, this lack of association between age and prevalence of sexting may be partly explained by perceived peer expectations to sext in intimate relationships across the age groups in the sample. Moreover, these findings may partly reflect relatively non-restrictive attitudes to sexual exploration among youth in the Nordic cultural context (Baumgartner et al., 2014). However, caution must be exercised with these interpretations, given that associations with peer expectations to sext or with attitudes towards sexting were not particularly investigated in the present study. Moreover, as predicted, young people who identified themselves as girls were more likely to have sent a sext to their partner than young people who identified themselves as boys. This finding suggests some gendered practices concerning sexting, even if we found no gender differences in prevalence of receiving sexts from one's partner.

Reasons for Sexting in Intimate Relationships

Consistent with our predictions and existing research on youth romantic relationships (Stanley et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2015), sexting was most often consensual and reciprocal. However, we found several gender differences in given reasons for sexting. In our sample, it was more common for girls than for boys to send a sext to feel sexy/flirtatious, and to be liked. Moreover, as in the previous study in England and in Norway (Wood et al., 2015), girls in this study were more likely than boys to send a sext to their partner to get attention. Further, in line with our expectations based on previous research (Reed et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2015), girls were pressured to sext by their partner significantly more often than boys, approximately every tenth of the girls reporting these experiences. Moreover, as in the previous study in England (Wood et al., 2015), boys were more likely than girls to send a sext as a response to a similar message. Boys were also more likely than girls to send a sext because they thought sexting was part of a relationship. Taken together, girls seemed to have reasons which were more often related to sexual expression, needs for external validation, or pressure from their partner. For boys, reasons were more often related to normative ideas of sexting as part of a romantic relationship, and themselves being the ones who responded to

the message their partner first sent to them. Consequently, these reasons may demonstrate gendered sexting scripts (Symons et al., 2018) in the context of young people's romantic heterosexual relationships, in which boys more often ask for sexts and girls more often send them by request.

Emotional Reactions to Sending and Receiving Sexts in Intimate Relationships

Moreover, we examined potential gender differences in young people's emotional reactions to sexting. Most emotional reactions were overwhelmingly positive to both sending and receiving sexts, both for girls and boys, and among younger and older adolescents. These findings are consistent with previous research (Wood et al., 2015), suggesting that consensual sexting in young people's intimate relationships may contribute to positive sexual experiences and trustful intimacy. Overall, we found few age differences in emotional reactions to sexting: older adolescents had more often than younger adolescents felt sexy/flirtatious after sending a sext, and more often loved after receiving a sext. As hypothesized based on previous research (Reed et al., 2020), our study also shows that when experiences of sending or receiving a sext were negative, this was more often the case for girls than for boys. Further, boys had at least one positive emotional reaction to receiving a sext more often than girls, suggesting some gender differences also in the likelihood of positive experiences.

After sending a sext, it was more common for girls to feel wanted, sexy, and safe, whereas boys more often felt sexually excited and good about themselves. This finding implies some gendered differences in emotional reactions to sexting, suggesting differences in the focus of reported sexual experiences, i.e., is it me who becomes sexually excited, as in boys' common responses, or is it me who sexually excites the other, as in girls' common responses. These findings may be explained by social role theory of sex differences (Eagly & Wood, 2016) as well as by the already mentioned gendered sexual scripts and normative understandings of sexual interaction (Symons et al., 2018). In line with this interpretation is also our finding that even if girls' emotional reactions were mostly positive, they also regretted sending a sext more often than boys. Double standards in sexting, such as girls exposing themselves to greater risks than boys, have been discussed in recent research by Burén and colleagues (2022). Our observation that girls more often felt safe may also suggest that they had considered trustworthiness and safety of sending a sext to their partner more explicitly than boys before sending it, due to acknowledged risks for non-consensual sharing of girls' intimate sexts to others, as well as gendered stigmas of shame associated with this. These stigmas may, for instance, relate to blaming girls for sending one-to-one sexts to their

partners (Croft et al., 2015) instead of blaming their partners for breaking confidence in non-consensual sharing of these messages to others.

After receiving a sext from their partner, boys more often felt sexually excited, happy, and loved than girls, although these were among the most common responses for girls, too. Girls, on the other hand, more often reported no effect of receiving a sext from their partner, which may suggest that sexting as such, with a certain partner at the time, or regarding the content of the message, was not particularly exciting or important to them. They also more often felt that it was funny, or they were shocked – but also that they felt safe, as when sending a sext to their partner. Congruent with previous research (Wood et al., 2015), at least one positive emotional response to receiving a sext was more common for boys, and at least one negative emotional response was more common for girls, providing further support to the already presented views on gendered experiences of sexting between young romantic partners.

Limitations

The current study has some limitations that should be considered. First, all the young people included in the sample identified themselves as girls or boys, and had relationship experiences mostly with boys or girls, respectively. Thus, the present study does not provide knowledge on reasons for and emotional reactions to sexting by non-binary or sexual minority youth. These experiences, which should be analyzed in further studies, could differ from findings presented in the current study. Second, it was not possible to have a control group or to apply a more extensive survey instrument to investigate prevalence, reasons, and emotional reactions to sexting between romantic partners and non-partners respectively. In addition, the procedure did not allow for a detailed analysis of the number of no-show students in groups which conducted the survey in class in different schools. Third, the survey instrument with multiple choice answers was limited in terms of providing an extensive list of all possible reasons or emotional reactions concerning sexting. To grasp more vast and variable meanings given to sexting by young people, some other method for data gathering such as interviews or less structured questionnaires would be more appropriate. Fourth, the survey covered reasons and emotional reactions concerning the most recent sexting experiences, thus excluding other sexting experiences. Due to varying time range of “the most recent” experience among respondents, this may also influence the breadth and depth of recall of self-reported reasons for and emotional reactions to sexting.

Implications

These findings have implications for educators and practitioners in the field of adolescent sexual health. Experiences of sexting constitute a salient part of intimate sexual behavior between young partners, associated mostly with positive emotional reactions. This is not to mitigate negative experiences of those young people, especially girls, who had been pressured to sext, had regrets after sending a sext, or were shocked after receiving a sext from their partner. Moreover, the existing research on pressured or coerced sexting as part of victimization experiences in violent intimate relationships should not be overlooked. However, the present study highlights the positive emotional experiences of consensual sexting in romantic relationships, providing little support for non-consensual sharing of intimate sexts to others. Nevertheless, the current study also reveals that sexting may bear different meanings for boys and girls, which may mirror heteronormative norms and gendered scripts for sexual behavior and communication. Our study shows that for boys, reasons for sext may more often relate to defining their intimate relationship in these terms (what a proper intimate sexual relationship should be like). The reasons for girls may more often relate to needs for validation or pressures to meet their partner's actual or perceived expectations of sexual behavior and sexual appearance (what they themselves "should" be like to be liked and accepted as partners). These normative aspects should be acknowledged and critically discussed with young people in sex education and clinical work.

Future Directions

The current study highlights the prevalence of consensual and positively experienced sexting between young romantic partners. It also suggests directions for further research in the context of young people's romantic relationships. Our observations have three main implications for research into sexting. First, in studying reasons for and responses to sexting among young people, it is relevant to identify the relationship context, i.e., whether sexting takes place between intimate relationship partners, casual dating partners, persons who know each other, or new acquaintances. Second, a more detailed analysis of reasons for and emotional reactions to sending different types of sexts, such as text messages, photos of intimate body parts, or video clips of sexual acts (Maes & Vandebosch, 2022) would provide more knowledge on reasons for and emotional reactions to sending and receiving these messages. Third, as Maes and colleagues (2022) also suggest, young people's social media use, such as sexting in trustful relationships, may contribute to experiences of positive sexuality and sexual well-being. Further studies will need to be undertaken to examine these possible associations in young people's romantic relationships. Moreover, the formation of

digital sexual trust in these relationships as such requires more empirical and conceptual attention (Fortenberry, 2019).

Conclusions

The current study highlights the positive emotional experiences of consensual sexting in young people's intimate relationships, providing little support for non-consensual sharing of intimate sexts to others. However, our investigation also reveals that sexting may bear different meanings for boys and girls, which may mirror gendered heterosexual norms and scripts in need of critical attention in sex education. Future research should aim to better understand how sexting in trustful intimate relationships may contribute to young people's experiences of positive sexuality and sexual well-being.

Summary in Swedish – Svensk sammanfattning

Ungdomars orsaker till och emotionella reaktioner på sexting i intima relationer

Studiens syfte

Det nya digitala landskapet ger många möjligheter för ungdomar att skapa och upprätthålla romantiska relationer och att digitalt utforska och uttrycka sin sexualitet i dessa relationer. Under senare år har sexting uppmärksammats i forskningsdiskussioner om ungas sexuella beteende både som en möjlighet och som en risk för deras sexuella välmående. Med sexting menas att man skickar eller tar emot sexuella meddelanden (sexter) i form av texter, bilder eller videor via internet eller mobiltelefon (Mori et al., 2020). Medan många studier har undersökt ungdomars sexting i samband med riskbeteende, tyder aktuell forskning på en mer nyanserad analys av sexting som tar i beaktande kontextuella faktorer, så som relation mellan sändare och mottagare samt deras samförstånd att sexta (dvs. skicka och ta emot meddelanden av varandra) (Cooper et al., 2016; Englander, 2019; Reed et al., 2020).

Uppskattningar på prevalensen av ungdomars sexting varierar beroende på definition av sexting och metodologiska skillnader mellan studier (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). En metaanalys av 39 studier i olika länder rapporterade en genomsnittlig prevalens på 15 % för att skicka och 27 % för att ta emot sexuella meddelanden (Madigan et al., 2018). Studier visar att sexting mellan ungdomar oftast sker mellan romantiska partner i ett relationssammanhang (Mitchell et al., 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2019).

Medan många studier inte rapporterar några signifikanta könsskillnader i sexting (till exempel Madigan et al., 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2019a), tyder vissa studier på högre förekomst av sexting bland unga kvinnor (Mitchell et al., 2012) och andra studier bland unga män (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017; Patchin & Hinduja, 2019). Dessutom rapporterar vissa studier att den kulturella kontexten kan bidra till könsskillnader i prevalens av sexting (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Ševčíková, 2017). Till exempel Baumgartner et al. (2014) argumenterar att i länder där kulturen är mer konservativ med fler begränsningar för sexuellt beteende för flickor än pojkar kan könsskillnader i sexting vara starkare, med fler pojkar än flickor som ägnar sig åt sexting. Däremot kan könsskillnader i länder med en mindre konservativ kultur så som i nordiska länder vara mindre, saknas, eller till och med vara omvända. Intressant nog rapporterade Baumgartner och kollegor (2014) högre förekomst av sexting bland flickor än pojkar i Danmark, Norge och Finland. Dessutom rapporterar flera studier att sannolikheten att ha erfarenheter av sexting ökar med åldern (Madigan et al., 2018; Patchin & Hinduja, 2019; Van Ouytsel et al., 2020a).

Även om ungdomar skickar och mottar sexuella meddelanden speciellt i sina intima relationer, har relativt få studier analyserat deras erfarenheter av sexting i denna kontext. En av de få europeiska studier som har undersökt orsaker till och emotionella reaktioner på sexting i 14–17-åriga ungdomars romantiska relationer var den internationella studien *Safeguarding Teenage Relationships* (STIR) som genomfördes i Bulgarien, Cypern, England, Italien och Norge (Wood et al., 2015). Studien visade att av de unga som hade erfarenheter av sexting rapporterade 41–87 % av flickorna och 75–91 % av pojkarna bara positiva emotionella reaktioner efter att ha skickat en sext till sin partner (variation i procenttal tyder på variation mellan länder). De mest rapporterade reaktionerna var att känna sig älskad och önskad, att ha en bra självkänsla och att det var roligt. I England, Italien och Norge rapporterade pojkar positiva emotionella reaktioner betydligt oftare än flickor, medan flickor rapporterade endast negativa reaktioner betydligt oftare än pojkar (upprörd, olycklig, nedstämd, irriterad, rädd, arg, chockad, generad, eller en dålig självkänsla). (Wood et al., 2015.) I denna studie grupperades svaren i tre kategorier som indikerar positiva, negativa och blandade reaktioner på att skicka en sext, vilket utslöt en mer specifik analys av ungdomarnas emotionella reaktioner och möjliga köns- och ålderskillnader.

Den aktuella studien har som syfte att undersöka ungdomars orsaker till sexting samt specifika emotionella reaktioner på att skicka och ta emot sexuella meddelanden i ungas intima relationer mera specifikt än i tidigare studier. Studien bygger på en enkät för 15–20-åriga ungdomar i grundskolor (nionde klass), gymnasier och yrkesutbildningsinstitutioner i olika delar av Finland. Baserat på tidigare forskning formulerade vi följande hypoteser: Vi förutspår att sexting (att skicka och ta emot sexuella meddelanden) är vanligare bland äldre (18–20-åriga) än bland yngre (15–17-åriga) ungdomar (hypotes 1) och att flickor har erfarenheter av sexting oftare än pojkar (hypotes 2). Baserat på tidigare forskning förutspår vi också att sexting oftast sker i samförstånd, som indikerar sexuellt uttryck och ömsesidig kommunikation (hypotes 3) och att flickor pressas till att skicka sexuella meddelanden av sina partner oftare än pojkar (hypotes 4). Gällande möjliga orsaksskillnader till sexting mellan yngre och äldre ungdomar är vår studie explorativ. Ytterligare förutspår vi att det är sannolikt att ungdomar har positiva emotionella reaktioner på sexting då de sextar med samtycke, utan press till sexting, samt utan att deras meddelande delas med andra (hypotes 5) och att flickor rapporterar negativa emotionella reaktioner på sexting i intima relationer oftare än pojkar (hypotes 6). Gällande möjliga skillnader i emotionella reaktioner mellan yngre och äldre ungdomar är vår studie explorativ.

Metod

Studien följde Forskningsetiska delegationens (TENK) etiska riktlinjer och studiens forskningsplan godkändes av Forskningsetiska nämnden vid Tammerfors universitet. Den aktuella studien baserades på samma metodologiska ramverk som användes i STIR-enkäten i fem europeiska länder, med några modifieringar (Wood et al., 2015).

Studiens deltagare rekryterades från fyra grundskolor, fyra gymnasieskolor och sex yrkesutbildningsinstitutioner i olika delar av Finland år 2021. Forskargruppen besökte varje skola och genomförde en webbenkät under en skoldag. Samplet bestod av 764 deltagare som hade erfarenheter av romantiska relationer (49 % flickor, 51 % pojkar). Deltagarnas medelålder var 16,72 år (SD = 1,24). De flesta av deltagare hade haft heterosexuella relationer. Data presenteras i tabell 1.

Deltagarnas kön identifierades genom att de valde ett av följande tre alternativ: flicka, pojke, jag identifierar mig inte som en flicka eller en pojke. Data som innehöll det tredje alternativet uteslöts från analyserna på grund av en för liten urvalsstorlek för statistisk analys i den aktuella studien. Att skicka sexuella meddelanden till ens partner mättes genom frågan ”Har du någonsin skickat sexuella meddelanden, bilder, eller videor av dig själv till din partner under ert förhållande? Tänk på alla dina partner.” Att ta emot sexuella meddelanden från sin partner mättes via frågan ”Har din partner skickat dig sexuella meddelanden, bilder, eller videor av sig själv under ert förhållande? Tänk på alla dina partner.” I båda dessa frågor var svarsalternativen aldrig, en gång, några gånger och ofta, vilka före analysen omkodades till en binär variabel aldrig/minst en gång.

Orsaker till att skicka det sista sexuella meddelandet mättes genom frågan ”Tänk på den sista gången du skickade ett sexuellt meddelande, en bild eller en video av dig själv till din partner under ert förhållande. Varför gjorde du det? Du kan välja flera alternativ.” (Se fotnoten i figur 1 för svarsalternativ.) Emotionella reaktioner på den sista incidensen av att skicka ett sexuellt meddelande mättes genom frågan: ”Tänk på den sista gången du skickade ett sexuellt meddelande, en bild, eller en video av dig själv till din partner under ert förhållande. Hur fick detta beteende dig att känna dig? Du kan välja flera alternativ.” (Se fotnoten i figur 2 för svarsalternativ.) Emotionella reaktioner på den sista incidensen av att ta emot ett sexuellt meddelande mättes via frågan: ”Hur kände du dig den sista gången när du fick ett sexuellt meddelande, en bild, eller en video av din partner under ert förhållande? Du kan välja flera alternativ.” (Se fotnoten i figur 3 för svarsalternativ.) Denna fråga ingick inte i den ursprungliga STIR-enkäten. Huruvida det sista sexuella meddelandet som skickades av

deltagaren delades med andra av partnern utan samtycke mättes via frågan: ”Delades det utan ditt samtycke?” Denna fråga fanns inte i den ursprungliga STIR-enkäten.

Vi använde Pearson Chi-Square test med Yates kontinuitetskorrigering för att undersöka om det fanns skillnader i förekomst av sexting, i orsaker till sexting och i emotionella reaktioner på sexting mellan pojkar och flickor och mellan yngre och äldre ungdomar. Alla analyser utfördes med R (R Core Team, 2022).

Resultat

Sexting var allmänt i ungdomars intima relationer. Över hälften av deltagarna hade fått en sext från sin partner, medan lite mindre än hälften av dem själv hade skickat en sext till sin partner. I motsats till hypotes 1, hittades inga signifikanta skillnader i förekomsten av sexting mellan yngre (15–17-åriga) och äldre (18–20-åriga) ungdomar. Flickor hade betydligt oftare än pojkar skickat en sext till sin partner, men det fanns inga signifikanta skillnader mellan flickor och pojkar i hur ofta de hade fått en sext från sin partner. Vår studie ger därför bara delvis stöd för hypotes 2. Förekomsten av sexting enligt kön och åldersgrupp presenteras i tabell 1 i Appendix.

I linje med hypotes 3 var deltagarnas orsaker till sexting oftast baserade på samtycke och indikerade uttryck av sexualitet samt ömsesidig kommunikation. Endast sex deltagare rapporterade att deras sext hade delats till andra av deras partner och därför användes ingen ytterligare statistisk analys för att undersöka dessa observationer. För flickor var de vanligaste orsakerna till att skicka en sext till sin partner att känna sig sexiga eller flirtiga, eftersom partnern bad om ett meddelande, för att visa sin kropp, som svar på ett liknande meddelande och för att få uppmärksamhet. De vanligaste orsakerna för pojkar var att skicka en sext som svar på ett liknande meddelande, eftersom partnern bad om att skicka ett meddelande, eftersom det var en del av att vara i ett förhållande, för att visa sin kropp och för att känna sig sexig eller flirtig.

Betydligt fler flickor än pojkar hade skickat en sext till sin partner för att känna sig sexig eller flirtig, för att få uppmärksamhet och för att bli omtyckt. Det var betydligt vanligare för pojkar än för flickor att skicka en sext som ett svar på ett liknande meddelande som hade skickats tidigare av deras partner. Pojkar rapporterade också betydligt oftare än flickor att de skickade en sext eftersom det hörde till i ett förhållande att sexta. Till stöd för hypotes 4 fann vi också att flickor oftare än pojkar rapporterade att deras partner hade pressat dem att sexta. Inga signifikanta skillnader i orsaker till att sexta hittades mellan åldersgrupper. Se figur 1 och tabell 2 i Appendix för detaljerade resultat till orsaker att skicka det senaste sexuella meddelandet.

I linje med hypotes 5 visade analyserna att de flesta emotionella reaktionerna på att skicka och ta emot en sext var positiva både för flickor och för pojkar. Betydligt fler flickor än pojkar rapporterade att efter att de hade skickat en sext kände de sig önskade, bra, sexiga och trygga. Flickor rapporterade också oftare än pojkar att de ångrade den sista sexten de hade skickat. Detta resultat är i linje med hypotes 6 om att sexting kan vara en mer negativ upplevelse för flickor än för pojkar. Pojkar rapporterade att de kände sig sexuellt upphetsade betydligt oftare än flickor.

Flickor som hade fått en sext från sin partner rapporterade oftare att de inte upplevt någon effekt, men också att det var roligt och att de kände sig trygga. Flickor kände sig också chockade oftare än pojkar, vilket ger stöd för vår hypotes 6. Pojkar som hade fått en sext från sin partner rapporterade betydligt oftare än flickor att de kände sig sexuellt upphetsade. Se figurerna 2 och 3 och tabellerna 3 och 4 i Appendix för detaljerade resultat gällande emotionella reaktioner på att skicka och motta det sista sexuella meddelandet.

Diskussion

I den aktuella studien fann vi att skicka och att ta emot sexuella meddelanden var vanligt i ungdomars intima relationer. Sexting upplevdes positivt av de flesta ungdomar oberoende av kön och åldersgrupp. Till skillnad från tidigare studier (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Burén & Lunde, 2018) fann vi ingen åldersskillnad i förekomsten av sexting. En möjlig orsak till detta kan vara att vi fokuserade på sexting bland 15–20-åringar och därmed uteslöt yngre åldersgrupper. Dessutom kan dessa resultat delvis återspegla relativt icke-restriktiva attityder till digitalt sexuellt beteende bland ungdomar i den nordiska kulturella kontexten (Baumgartner et al., 2014).

I linje med våra hypoteser och tidigare forskning visar vår studie att sexting oftast skedde i samförstånd mellan partner och tolkades positivt (Stanley et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2015). Vi hittade dock flera könsskillnader i angivna orsaker till sexting. Flickor rapporterade orsaker som oftare var relaterade till sexuellt uttryck, behov av validering, eller påtryckning. För pojkar var orsakerna oftare relaterade till idéer om sexting som en normal del av ett romantiskt förhållande och att de svarade på meddelande som deras partner först hade skickat till dem. Följaktligen kan dessa skillnader tyda på könsrelaterade heterosexuella skript i sexting (Symons et al., 2018).

Efter att ha skickat en sext, kände flickor sig oftare än pojkar önskade, sexiga och trygga medan pojkar oftare än flickor kände sig sexuellt upphetsade och bra. Detta resultat innebär vissa könsskillnader i emotionella reaktioner på sexting, dvs. är det jag som blir sexuellt upphetsad, som i pojkarnas svar, eller är det jag som sexuellt upphetsar den andra, så

som flickors vanliga svar åtminstone delvis kan tolkas. Dessa resultat kan förklaras av de redan nämnda könsrelaterade sexuella skripten samt heteronormativa föreställningar om sexuell interaktion i ungdomars intima relationer (Symons et al., 2018). I linje med denna tolkning är också det att även om flickors emotionella reaktioner mestadels var positiva, ångrade de också oftare än pojkar att de hade skickat en sext. Dubbelmoral inom sexting, i betydelsen av att flickor utsätter sig för större risker av skam än pojkar om deras meddelande sprids, kan förklara dessa resultat. Vår observation, att flickor oftare än pojkar rapporterade att de kände sig trygga, kan också tyda på att de hade övervägt sin partners pålitlighet och den intima relationens trygghet noggrannare än pojkar innan de skickade en sext till sin partner.

Efter att ha fått en sext från sin partner kände sig pojkar oftare än flickor sexuellt upphetsade, lyckliga och älskade. Flickor, å andra sidan, rapporterade oftare ingen effekt, vilket kan tyda på att sexting som sådant, med en viss partner, eller angående innehållet i meddelandet, inte var särskilt spännande eller viktigt för dem. De rapporterade också oftare än pojkar att det var roligt och att de var chockade – men också att de kände sig trygga.

Den aktuella studien belyser positiva emotionella upplevelser relaterade till sexting i ungdomars intima relationer, utan att underskatta ungdomars, särskilt flickors, negativa upplevelser av sexting. Studiens resultat betonar att sexting kan ha olika betydelser för pojkar och flickor, vilket kan spegla könsrelaterade heterosexuella normer och skript som kräver kritisk uppmärksamhet i sexualundervisningen. Framtida forskning bör syfta till att bättre förstå hur sexting i förtroendefulla, intima relationer kan bidra till ungdomars upplevelser av positiv sexualitet och sexuellt välmående.

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Appendix

Table 1

Distribution and Frequency of Sexting Experiences in Intimate Relationships by Gender and by Age

	Gender				$\chi^2 (df=1)$	<i>p</i>	OR [95% CI]	Age				$\chi^2 (df=1)$	<i>p</i>	OR [95% CI]
	Girl		Boy					15–17		18–20				
	%	Total n	%	Total n				%	Total n	%	Total n			
Sent a sext	56.8	370	33.7	377	39.21	< .001	0.39 [0.28, 0.52]	44.2	548	48.0	198	0.71	.400	1.17 [0.84, 1.62]
Received a sext	59.9	369	53.2	376	3.13	.077	0.76 [0.57, 1.02]	55.5	548	59.4	197	0.75	.386	1.17 [0.84, 1.64]

Note. Total n: total number of the survey respondents, of which a reported percentage had sent or received a sext.

Table 2

Distribution and Chi-Square Results of Reasons for Sending a Sext to One's Intimate Partner by Gender and Age

Reason	Gender		χ^2 (df = 1)	p	OR [95% CI]	Age		χ^2 (df = 1)	p	OR [95% CI]
	Girl (%) (n = 210)	Boy (%) (n = 127)				15–17 (%) (n = 242)	18–20 (%) (n = 95)			
To feel sexy/flirtatious	47.1	19.7	24.49	< .001	0.28 [0.16, 0.46]	33.9	44.2	2.7	.100	1.54 [0.95, 2.51]
My partner asked me to	37.1	32.3	0.62	.431	0.81 [0.50, 1.28]	35.5	34.7	0.00	.991	0.97 [0.58, 1.59]
To show my body	31.4	22.1	3.01	.083	0.62 [0.37, 1.03]	30.6	21.1	2.62	.105	0.61 [0.34, 1.06]
In response to a similar message	23.8	44.9	15.26	< .001	2.60 [1.62, 4.18]	30.1	33.7	0.12	.728	1.13 [0.68, 1.87]
To get attention	22.9	5.5	16.19	< .001	0.20 [0.08, 0.44]	16.1	16.8	0.00	1.000	1.06 [0.55, 1.98]
To be liked	19.5	6.3	10.1	.001	0.28 [0.12, 0.60]	15.7	11.6	0.63	.427	0.71 [0.33, 1.42]
To show my feelings	19.1	12.6	1.93	.164	0.62 [0.32, 1.14]	16.1	17.9	0.05	.816	1.14 [0.59, 2.11]
It is part of being in a relationship	16.1	27.6	5.60	.002	1.96 [1.15, 3.37]	19.8	22.1	0.10	.753	1.15 [0.63, 2.04]
My partner pressured me to	11.0	1.6	8.81	.003	0.14 [0.02, 0.49]	8.3	5.3	0.51	.475	0.63 [0.20, 1.63]
As a joke	9.0	8.7	0.00	1.000	0.96 [0.42, 2.07]	8.3	10.5	0.20	.657	1.31 [0.56, 2.88]
I don't know	6.7	6.3	0.00	1.000	0.95 [0.37, 2.31]	7.4	4.2	0.70	.404	0.56 [0.16, 1.58]
My friends pressured me to			n.c.	n.c.	n.c.			n.c.	n.c.	n.c.

Note. n.c.: not calculable.

Table 3

Distribution and Chi-Square Results for Emotional Reactions to Sending a Sext to One's Intimate Partner by Gender and by Age

Emotional reaction	Gender		χ^2 (df = 1)	p	OR [95% CI]	Age		χ^2 (df = 1)	p	OR [95% CI]
	Girl (%) (n = 210)	Boy (%) (n = 127)				15-17 (%) (n = 242)	18-20 (%) (n = 95)			
Wanted	43.8	30.7	5.18	.023	0.57 [0.36, 0.92]	38.8	39.0	0.00	1.000	1.01 [0.61, 1.63]
Good about myself	38.6	25.2	5.77	.016	0.54 [0.33, 0.87]	34.7	30.5	0.36	0.546	0.83 [0.49, 1.37]
Sexy	31.4	18.9	5.73	.017	0.51 [0.30, 0.86]	22.3	37.9	7.68	.006	2.12 [1.26, 3.55]
Loved	22.9	27.6	0.71	.401	1.28 [0.77, 2.13]	21.9	31.6	2.94	.086	1.65 [0.96, 2.79]
Safe	20.5	11.0	4.38	.036	0.49 [0.25, 0.91]	15.7	20.0	0.62	.432	1.35 [0.72, 2.46]
Excited	19.5	38.6	13.73	< .001	2.58 [1.58, 4.25]	24.8	31.6	1.28	.258	1.40 [0.82, 2.35]
It was funny	11.4	10.2	0.03	.873	0.89 [0.42, 1.80]	11.2	10.5	0.00	1.000	0.95 [0.42, 1.99]
No effect	18.6	19.7	0.01	.913	1.08 [0.61, 1.88]	20.7	14.7	1.20	.274	0.67 [0.34, 1.25]
Regret	13.8	2.4	10.77	< .001	0.16 [0.04, 0.46]	10.7	6.3	1.08	.298	0.57 [0.20, 1.36]
Embarrassed	6.7	7.1	0.00	1.000	1.07 [0.43, 2.55]	8.3	3.2	2.05	.152	0.38 [0.08, 1.15]
Bad about myself	3.3	0.8	1.25	.263	0.26 [0.01, 1.52]	2.5	2.1	0.00	1.000	0.89 [0.12, 4.08]
Scared	2.9	0.8	0.80	.370	0.30 [0.01, 1.86]	1.7	3.2	0.20	.655	1.96 [0.36, 9.54]
Upset	2.9	0.8	0.80	.370	0.30 [0.01, 1.86]	1.7	3.2	0.20	.655	1.96 [0.36, 9.54]
Unhappy	1.4		n.c.	n.c.	n.c.	0.8	1.1	n.c.	n.c.	n.c.
Hurt	0.9		n.c.	n.c.	n.c.	0.8		n.c.	n.c.	n.c.
Shocked	0.9		n.c.	n.c.	n.c.		1.1	n.c.	n.c.	n.c.
Betrayed	0.5		n.c.	n.c.	n.c.	0.4		n.c.	n.c.	n.c.
Annoyed			n.c.	n.c.	n.c.			n.c.	n.c.	n.c.
Angry			n.c.	n.c.	n.c.			n.c.	n.c.	n.c.

Note. n.c.: not calculable.

Table 4

Distribution and Chi-square Results for Emotional Reactions to Receiving a Sext from One's Intimate Partner by Gender and by Age

Emotional reaction	Gender		χ^2 (df = 1)	p	OR [95% CI]	Age		χ^2 (df = 1)	p	OR [95% CI]
	Girl (%) (n = 221)	Boy (%) (n = 200)				15-17 (%) (n = 304)	18-20 (%) (n = 117)			
Wanted	29.9	27.5	0.18	.669	0.89 [0.58, 1.36]	26.3	35.0	2.73	.099	1.51 [0.95, 2.38]
Happy	25.3	42.5	13.12	< .001	2.17 [1.44, 3.30]	32.6	35.9	0.29	.594	1.16 [0.74, 1.81]
Good about myself	11.8	19.0	3.72	.054	1.75 [1.02, 3.05]	13.8	18.8	1.27	.260	1.45 [0.81, 2.54]
Loved	20.3	30.5	5.20	.023	1.71 [1.10, 2.69]	22.4	32.5	4.06	.044	1.67 [1.03, 2.67]
Safe	16.7	8.5	5.66	.017	0.47 [0.25, 0.85]	12.2	14.5	0.24	.627	1.23 [0.65, 2.26]
Excited	27.2	49.5	21.37	< .001	2.62 [1.75, 3.95]	35.2	44.4	2.69	.101	1.47 [0.95, 2.27]
It was funny	18.6	9.5	6.32	.012	0.46 [0.25, 0.82]	14.8	12.8	0.13	.715	0.85 [0.44, 1.57]
No effect	26.2	14.0	8.95	.003	0.46 [0.28, 0.75]	22.7	14.5	2.98	.084	0.58 [0.32, 1.02]
Embarrassed	6.3	3.0	1.90	.169	0.47 [0.16, 1.20]	5.9	1.7	2.45	.118	0.30 [0.04, 1.05]
Bad about myself	0.5	0.5	0.00	1.000	1.11 [0.03, 43.3]	0.3	0.9	0.00	1.000	2.61 [0.07, 102]
Upset	0.5	0.5	0.00	1.000	1.11 [0.03, 43.3]	0.3	0.9	0.00	1.000	2.61 [0.07, 102]
Unhappy	0.9	0.5	0.00	1.000	0.59 [0.02, 7.29]	0.7	0.9	0.00	1.000	1.38 [0.04, 17.2]
Hurt	2.3	0.5	1.24	.266	0.24 [0.01, 1.59]	1.3	1.7	0.00	1.000	1.35 [0.17, 7.45]
Shocked	7.2	0.5	10.63	.001	0.07 [0.00, 0.36]	4.9	1.7	1.51	.219	0.36 [0.05, 1.31]
Annoyed	4.1		n.c.	n.c.	n.c.	2.3	1.7	n.c.	n.c.	n.c.
Angry	1.4		n.c.	n.c.	n.c.	0.7	0.9	n.c.	n.c.	n.c.
Scared	1.4		n.c.	n.c.	n.c.	0.3	1.7	n.c.	n.c.	n.c.

Note. n.c.: not calculable.

Pressmeddelande

Resultaten från en pro-gradu avhandling vid Åbo Akademi visar att sexting i ungdomars intima relationer är vanligt och upplevs positivt

Pro-gradu avhandling i psykologi

Fakulteten för humaniora, psykologi och teologi, Åbo Akademi

Studien undersökte 15–20-åriga ungdomars orsaker till sexting samt emotionella reaktioner på sexting i intima relationer. Med sexting menas att man skickar eller tar emot sexuella meddelanden (sexter) i form av texter, bilder eller videor via internet eller mobiltelefon. Nästan 800 ungdomar i grundskolor, gymnasier och yrkesläroanstalter deltog i studien i olika delar av Finland. Över hälften av deltagarna hade fått en sext från sin partner, medan mindre än hälften av dem själv hade skickat en sext till sin partner. Flickor hade skickat ett sexuellt meddelande till deras partner oftare än pojkar.

Sexting upplevdes positivt av de flesta ungdomar oberoende av kön. Flickor hade oftare än pojkar skickat en sext till sin partner för att känna sig sexig eller flirtig, för att få uppmärksamhet och för att bli omtyckt. Det var betydligt vanligare för pojkar att skicka en sext som ett svar på ett liknande meddelande som hade skickats till dem av deras partner. Pojkar tänkte också oftare än flickor att det hör till i ett förhållande att sexta. Betydligt fler flickor än pojkar rapporterade att de efter att ha skickat en sext kände sig önskade, bra och sexiga. Pojkar rapporterade oftare än flickor sexuell upphetsning.

Ungdomars negativa upplevelser av sexting var vanligare hos flickor än hos pojkar. De rapporterade oftare än pojkar att deras partner hade pressat dem att sexta, att de ångrade den sista sexten de hade skickat och att de var chockade efter att de hade fått en sext från sin partner. Flickor rapporterade också oftare än pojkar att de kände sig trygga efter sexting, vilket kan tyda på att de hade övervägt sin partners pålitlighet och den intima relationens trygghet mer noggrant än pojkar innan de började sexta med sin partner.

Studiens resultat visar att sexting kan ha olika betydelser för pojkar och flickor, vilket delvis kan spegla könsrelaterade heterosexuella förväntningar och normer för sexuellt beteende. Detta borde diskuteras med unga i samband med sexualundervisning, konstaterar magisterstuderande Anu Isotalo.

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