Field of 'sexting' research finds little to worry about

May 22 2017, by Matt Shipman

A recent analysis of research into how so-called "sexting" may affect sexual behavior finds that it has little impact on sexual activity – but highlights significant shortcomings in the research itself.
"There's a lot of work being done on the phenomenon of sexting and how it may influence sexual behavior, but the work is being done in a wide variety of populations by researchers from many different backgrounds," says Kami Kosenko, an associate professor of communication at North Carolina State University and lead author of a paper on the meta-analysis. "We wanted to analyze this broad body of work to see what, if anything, can be gleaned from all of these studies."

The researchers found 234 journal articles that looked at sexting, but then removed studies that didn't look at the relationship between sexting and behavior, as well as any studies that didn't include clearly defined quantitative measures of sexting or sexual behavior.

Ultimately, this process winnowed it down to 15 studies that looked at whether there was any link between sexting and: sexual activity; unprotected sex; and/or the number of sex partners one has.

The researchers found that there was a weak statistical relationship between sexting and all of those categories – and that was when looking solely at correlation. It was impossible to tell if sexting actually influenced behavior at all.

In fact, there's not even an agreed-upon definition for sexting. Does sexting consist only of sexually-oriented text messages? Does it include photos? Video? Definitions varied widely from paper to paper.

"There are two take-home messages here," says Andrew Binder, co-author of the review and an associate professor of communication at NC State. "First is that sexting does not appear to pose a public health threat to America's youth – so don't panic. Second, if this is something we want to study, we need to design better studies. For example, the field needs a common, clear definition of what we mean by sexting, as well as more robust survey questions and methods."


Provided by North Carolina State University

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