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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Psychopathological profile of sexting coercion perpetrators



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### KEYWORDS

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Profile

### Abstract

**Introduction:** In the past years, research regarding sexting behaviours and online sexual victimization has been rapidly growing, with literature examining the social, legal, psychological and psychopathological consequences of being coerced into sexting. However, up to date, there is little evidence exploring the psychopathological profile of sexting coercion perpetrators. The aim of this study was to examine differences in the psychopathological profile of sexting coercion perpetrators vs non-perpetrators, and, additionally, examining sex differences.

**Methods:** The original sample comprised 1370 college students (including 74% females, mean age = 21.40). The non-perpetrator subsample comprised 1247 participants (76% females, mean age 21.39) and the sexting coercion perpetration subsample comprised 75 participants (30% females, mean age = 21.38).

**Results:** Data indicated significant differences in the psychopathological profile between perpetrators and non-perpetrators, with the first group showing higher scores for different psychopathology scales. When examining sex differences intragroup, results showed significant differences between perpetrator males and non-perpetrator males for scales related with dysfunctional attachment, anger, frustration and social skills. Significant differences between female samples were only found for hostility. Finally, no differences were found between sexting coercion perpetrator males and females, with both groups showing similar psychopathological profiles.

**Conclusions:** People who engaged in sexting coercion perpetration show a different psychopathological profile than those who did not report coercing someone into sexting, however, males and females coercers show similar psychopathological profiles. Further results and implications regarding psychopathological differences between examined groups are discussed.

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**PALABRAS CLAVE**

Sexting;  
Sexting coercitivo;  
Victimización sexual  
online;  
Psicopatología;  
Perpetradores;  
Perfil

**Perfil psicopatológico de los perpetradores de sexting coercitivo**

**Resumen** En los últimos años, la investigación sobre *sexting* y victimización sexual online se ha ido incrementado rápidamente, con literatura que examina las consecuencias sociales, legales, psicológicas y psicopatológicas de la victimización causada por el *sexting* coercitivo. A pesar de ello, hasta la fecha no hay estudios empíricos que hayan examinado el perfil psicopatológico de los perpetradores de *sexting* coercitivo. El objetivo de este estudio ha sido examinar las diferencias en el perfil psicopatológico de los perpetradores de *sexting* coercitivo vs los no-perpetradores, y, adicionalmente, examinar las diferencias entre sexo. La muestra original estaba compuesta por 1.370 estudiantes universitarios (74% mujeres, media de edad: 21,40). La submuestra de no-perpetradores estaba compuesta por 1.247 participantes (76% mujeres, media de edad: 21,39) y la submuestra de perpetradores de *sexting* coercitivo contaba con 75 participantes (30% mujeres, media de edad: 21,38). Los resultados indican diferencias significativas entre los perfiles psicopatológicos de los perpetradores y los no perpetradores de *sexting* coercitivo con los del primer grupo, obteniendo puntuaciones mayores en las diversas escalas psicopatológicas. Cuando se examinaron las diferencias por sexo intragrupo, los resultados mostraron diferencias significativas entre hombres perpetradores y hombres no perpetradores para las escalas relacionadas con el apego disfuncional, la ira, la frustración y la ausencia de habilidades sociales. Entre mujeres perpetradoras y no perpetradoras solo se encontraron diferencias significativas en la escala de hostilidad. Finalmente, no se encontraron diferencias significativas entre perpetradores hombres y mujeres, indicando que ambos grupos presentan perfiles psicopatológicos similares. Resultados ampliados y las implicaciones de los mismos se discuten en más detalle en el artículo.

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**Introduction**

As smartphones and the Internet keep increasing their presence into our everyday lives, social interaction is being transferred to the online world, including online sexual interactions. In the past few years, sexting has become a common form of online sexual interaction, known as creating, sending and/or forwarding nude or sexually explicit images or videos through any electronic device.<sup>1,2</sup>

Sexting is considered by some authors as a threshold for victimization, and different types of cyber-victimization behaviours such as revenge porn, non-consensual dissemination of sexting, image-based sexual abuse or cyberbullying, have been associated with sexting engagement, especially with sexting coercion.<sup>3–11</sup> Sexting coercion is understood as the use of coercive tactics to solicit sexually explicit photos and videos from someone.<sup>9</sup>

Englander<sup>4</sup> showed that 70% of her college student sample was pressured to sext. It has been reported that 1 out of 5 young adults are victims of sexting coercion by their current partner or most recent partner.<sup>8</sup> With regards to gender, a study carried out with 885 undergraduate students reported that women were more likely to be coerced into sexting than men.<sup>9</sup> These results are in line with Englander,<sup>12</sup> who referred that females were more likely to report being pressured to sext than males. Research has shown that women experience more pressure than men to create and send sexting content and suffer more victimization from revenge porn from their partners or ex-partners than men.<sup>4,5,13</sup> In Spain, it has been reported that approximately

28.2% of adults have been pressured to sext, with females significantly being more pressured to sext than males.<sup>14</sup> Results using adolescent samples are in line with previous research.<sup>15</sup>

With regards to online sexual behaviour perpetration, there is scarce literature on general online sexual behaviour perpetration and, up to date, there are few studies examining sexting coercion perpetration. Examining general online sexual behaviour perpetration, in a sexting study of American adults aged between 21 and 75 years ( $n=5.805$ ), Garcia et al.<sup>16</sup> found that more than one in five participants (23%) reported sharing a 'sexy' photo with someone else without consent. Another recent study carried out in Australia with 4053 participants showed that 11% of their sample had reported engaging in image-based sexual abuse perpetration.<sup>17</sup> Results indicated that men were significantly more likely to report IBSA perpetration than women. With regard to the nature of perpetration, participants reported targeting men and women at similar rates, and were more likely to report perpetrating against intimate partners or ex-partners, family members and friends than strangers or acquaintances.<sup>17</sup> Findings also suggested that participants who had been victims of online sexual victimization were also more likely to report engagement in perpetration behaviours.<sup>17</sup> Finally, a recent study carried out in Spain reported that 6.4% of participants had engaged in sexting coercion perpetration, with males being 7 times more likely to be perpetrators than females.<sup>18</sup> Other studies examining adolescent samples indicated similar rates of online sexual behaviour perpetration.<sup>15,19</sup>

Furthermore, sexting and sexting coercion have been linked to depression, cyber victimization, feelings of sadness, suicide attempts, or anxiety.<sup>12,13,20,21</sup> Klettke and colleagues<sup>2</sup> reported that consensual but unwanted sexting (i.e. people who do not want to sext but consensually do it anyway) and sexting coercion are related to mental health issues, but not to consensual sexting, which has been supported by other studies.<sup>8,9,22</sup>

Up to date, most research on sexting coercion has measured mental health correlates of sexting coercion victimization. However, there is scarce data regarding the psychopathological profile of sexting coercion perpetrators. We hypothesize that the psychopathological profile of participants who have coerced others into sexting will differ from the profile of participants who have not coerced others into sexting. Thus, the aim of this study was to analyze the psychopathological profile of sexting coercion perpetrators and non-perpetrators.

## Materials and methods

### Participant

The total sample recruited for the research comprised 1370 Spanish college students (both undergraduate and postgraduate students, such as Master students), including 999 women (73.6%) and 359 men (26.2%). Ages ranged from 18 to 64 years old, with a mean age of 21.40 years (SD = 4.90).

### Procedure

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the International University of Catalunya (UIC Barcelona). Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous to promote openness and honesty. The survey was administered online, it included information about the nature and objectives of the study at the beginning of the questionnaire and informed consent was collected explicitly. The survey link was sent to university professors from Spanish universities with a request to pass it on to their students. The participating students then self-selected to take part in their own time, and no compensation was offered for participating. The questionnaire took approximately 20–25 min to complete, and once completed, students were given information on community resources in case of distress and the email address to contact the investigators in case of concerns. No participant contacted the investigators. The same online survey included all of the instruments mentioned in the following section.

### Instruments

#### Sexting coercion perpetration

We created a Sexting Scale based on the JOV-Q (Montiel and Carbonell, 2012) to assess different sexting behaviours. For the purpose of this study, only sexting coercion items were analyzed. We assessed sexting coercion perpetration by asking participants how many times they had pressured someone to sext in the past year. The question was formulated in the following way: ‘‘I have pressured someone to

send me their sexual content’’. This then was recoded as yearly prevalence (Yes, at least once in the past year/No, never engaged in this behaviour in the past year).

#### Mental Health questionnaire

In order to measure mental health, we used the Spanish version of LSB-50, which is a revised and shorter version of the SCL-90-R. This instrument consists of 50 items that assess psychopathological symptomatology. Responses to the items were collected on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = never and 4 = extremely). To analyze the presence or absence of mental health symptoms, the results obtained from the LSB-50 questionnaire were converted according to the authors guidelines.<sup>23</sup>

#### Statistical analysis

All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS V.25. Intergroup and intragroup differences in psychopathology scores were calculated using *t Student* analysis.

## Results

Out of the total sample ( $N = 1370$ ) 5.7% of participants perpetrated sexting coercion ( $n = 75$ ). Of those participants who were sexting coercion perpetrators, 66.7% ( $n = 50$ ) were males, 29.3% were females ( $n = 22$ ), and 3 participants did not disclose their sex, and thus were excluded from the analyses. Ages ranged from 18 to 55 years old, with a mean age of 21.38 years (SD = 4.75).

Results from comparing sex, age and the means of the psychopathology scores between participants who had not pressured someone to sext and those who had perpetrated sexting coercion are shown in Table 1. Males were significantly more likely to perpetrate sexting coercion, but no differences were found regarding age. Overall, sexting coercion perpetrators reported higher psychopathology scores in all of the measured items than non-perpetrators, with results showing significant differences in the mean scores of psychoreactivity, hypersensitivity, hostility, somatization and depression.

When analyzing differences by sex, results showed significant differences between male perpetrators and non-perpetrators. Specifically, men who had coerced someone into sexting showed higher psychopathology scores for hypersensitivity, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, hostility and depression than men who denied coercing someone into sexting. For women, significant differences between the two samples were only found for hostility scores. Results are shown in Table 2.

Finally, when comparing within the sexting coercion perpetrator sub-sample by sex, no significant differences have been found between male and female perpetrators. Results are shown in Table 3.

## Discussion

Literature has shown that sexting and sexting coercion victimization are associated with depression, feelings of sadness, suicide attempts, or anxiety.<sup>12,13,20,21</sup> However, so

**Table 1** Means and SD for psychopathology scores of the total sample.

| Demographic variables             | Non-perpetrators<br>(N = 1247; 94.3%) | Sexting coercion<br>perpetrators<br>(n = 75; 5.7%) | Sig. test                                       |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| <i>Gender</i>                     | 48 sex not reported                   | 3 sex not reported                                 |   |
| Male                              | 359; 23.40%                           | 50; 66.7%  | $p = .000$ , OR = 7.36,<br>95% CI [4.39, 12.36] |
| Female                            | 999; 75.90%                           | 22; 29.3%  |   |
| <i>Age</i>                        | M = 21.39 (SD = 4.73)                 | M = 21.38 (SD = 4.75)                              | $t(.199) = .012$ , $p = .990$                   |
| <i>Psychopathological profile</i> |                                       |  |   |
| Psychoreactivity                  | 74.96 (SD = 35.40)                    | 82.10 (SD = 18.92)                                 | $t(4.00) = -2.93$ , $p = .004$                  |
| Hypersensitivity                  | 70.53 (SD = 28.11)                    | 78.63 (SD = 20.25)                                 | $t(10.92) = -3.24$ , $p = .002$                 |
| Obsessive-compulsive              | 76.78 (SD = 22.14)                    | 81.82 (SD = 19.20)                                 | $t(3.33) = -1.90$ , $p = 0.57$                  |
| Anxiety                           | 75.21 (SD = 32.02)                    | 78.71 (SD = 22.57)                                 | $t(.224) = -.92$ , $p = .357$                   |
| Hostility                         | 65.95 (SD = 23.01)                    | 73.62 (SD = 23.50)                                 | $t(.000) = -2.76$ , $p = .006$                  |
| Somatization                      | 60.29 (SD = 25.99)                    | 66.79 (SD = 25.79)                                 | $t(.089) = -2.08$ , $p = .038$                  |
| Depression                        | 57.70 (SD = 28.97)                    | 71.14 (SD = 25.24)                                 | $t(4.31) = -4.38$ , $p = .000$                  |
| Sleep alteration                  | 55.77 (SD = 27.49)                    | 61.52 (SD = 26.97)                                 | $t(.201) = -1.74$ , $p = .083$                  |

**Table 2** Means and SD for psychopathology scores of the total sample by sex.

| Men                               |                                    |   |                                 |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Demographic variables             | Non-<br>perpetrators<br>(N = 285)  | Sexting<br>coercion<br>perpetrators<br>(N = 49) | Sig. test                       |
| <i>Psychopathological profile</i> |                                    |   |                                 |
| Psychoreactivity                  | 76.69 (SD = 57.75)                 | 82.98 (SD = 18.51)                              | $t(1.84) = -.754$ , $p = .451$  |
| Hypersensitivity                  | 69.79 (SD = 23.15)                 | 77.53 (SD = 20.25)                              | $t(4.26) = -2.53$ , $p = .014$  |
| Obsessive-compulsive              | 75.74 (SD = 23.01)                 | 83.18 (SD = 18.24)                              | $t(4.57) = -2.53$ , $p = 0.13$  |
| Anxiety                           | 74.08 (SD = 22.92)                 | 79.06 (SD = 21.21)                              | $t(1.94) = -1.42$ , $p = .357$  |
| Hostility                         | 64.71 (SD = 24.15)                 | 72.20 (SD = 24.50)                              | $t(.026) = -2.00$ , $p = .046$  |
| Somatization                      | 60.74 (SD = 26.57)                 | 64.98 (SD = 26.92)                              | $t(.084) = -1.03$ , $p = .304$  |
| Depression                        | 61.33 (SD = 29.13)                 | 72.88 (SD = 22.38)                              | $t(11.69) = -3.18$ , $p = .002$ |
| Sleep alteration                  | 62.43 (SD = 26.32)                 | 64.43 (SD = 25.91)                              | $t(.810) = -.492$ , $p = .623$  |
| Women                             |                                    |   |                                 |
| Demographic variables             | Non-<br>perpetrators<br>(N = 1247) | Sexting<br>coercion<br>perpetrators<br>(N = 75) | Sig. test                       |
| <i>Psychopathological profile</i> |                                    |   |                                 |
| Psychoreactivity                  | 74.45 (SD = 24.91)                 | 80.24 (SD = 20.96)                              | $t(.816) = -1.06$ , $p = .291$  |
| Hypersensitivity                  | 70.80 (SD = 29.48)                 | 80.43 (SD = 23.54)                              | $t(2.25) = -1.49$ , $p = .138$  |
| Obsessive-compulsive              | 77.15 (SD = 21.90)                 | 79.62 (SD = 22.12)                              | $t(.005) = -.511$ , $p = .609$  |
| Anxiety                           | 75.76 (SD = 34.27)                 | 81.05 (SD = 22.58)                              | $t(0.17) = -.704$ , $p = .482$  |
| Hostility                         | 66.35 (SD = 22.72)                 | 76.95 (SD = 22.35)                              | $t(.557) = -2.12$ , $p = .035$  |
| Somatization                      | 60.19 (SD = 25.80)                 | 70.81 (SD = 23.78)                              | $t(.900) = -1.87$ , $p = .062$  |
| Depression                        | 56.66 (SD = 28.79)                 | 68.67 (SD = 30.82)                              | $t(.765) = -1.89$ , $p = .059$  |
| Sleep alteration                  | 53.61 (SD = 27.53)                 | 55.67 (SD = 29.22)                              | $t(.330) = -.339$ , $p = .735$  |

far no data has been reported on the association between sexting coercion perpetration and psychopathology. To our knowledge, this is the first study to compare the psychopathological profile of sexting coercion perpetrators and non-perpetrators, further assessing differences by sex.

Our results confirmed the hypothesis that the psychopathological profile of participants who had coerced others into sexting would differ from the profile of participants who had not coerced others into sexting. Thus, results from comparing the psychopathological profile of

**Table 3** Means and SD for psychopathology scores of sexting coercion perpetrators by sex.

| Demographic variables             | Men<br>(N = 49)    | Women<br>(N = 21)  | Sig. test                   |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Psychopathological profile</i> |                    |                    |                             |
| Psychoreactivity                  | 82.98 (SD = 18.51) | 80.24 (SD = 20.96) | $t(1.95) = -.546, p = .587$ |
| Hypersensitivity                  | 77.53 (SD = 19.19) | 80.43 (SD = 23.54) | $t(.463) = -.540, p = .591$ |
| Obsessive-compulsive              | 83.18 (SD = 18.24) | 79.62 (SD = 22.12) | $t(1.33) = -.702, p = .485$ |
| Anxiety                           | 79.06 (SD = 21.21) | 81.05 (SD = 22.58) | $t(.180) = -.352, p = .726$ |
| Hostility                         | 72.20 (SD = 24.50) | 76.95 (SD = 22.35) | $t(1.29) = -.762, p = .449$ |
| Somatization                      | 64.98 (SD = 26.92) | 70.81 (SD = 23.78) | $t(.622) = -.859, p = .394$ |
| Depression                        | 72.88 (SD = 22.38) | 68.67 (SD = 30.82) | $t(7.70) = .565, p = .576$  |
| Sleep alteration                  | 64.43 (SD = 25.91) | 55.67 (SD = 29.22) | $t(1.21) = 1.25, p = .216$  |

non-perpetrators and sexting coercion perpetrators showed significant differences between both groups, with perpetrators reporting higher scores on all of the measured scales and significantly higher scores in psychoreactivity, hypersensitivity, hostility, somatization and depression, although they do not necessarily reach the diagnostic threshold for mental health disorders. According to Abuín and Rivera,<sup>23</sup> higher scores in psychoreactivity, hypersensitivity, obsessive-compulsive symptoms and hostility correlate positively with dysfunctional attachment, which could explain why participants with higher scores on those scales are the ones who have coerced others into sexting. Specifically, higher scores in psychoreactivity and hypersensitivity reflect mental and emotional distress due to vulnerability related with one-self and with others,<sup>23</sup> meaning that people who score high on this scale might have trouble establishing adaptive relationships with others. It has been previously suggested that poorer social skills might be associated with problematic internet use,<sup>24</sup> and that people who find it hard to establish relationships with others might find it easier to perform sexual activities online,<sup>25</sup> thus increasing the risk of becoming a perpetrator. This could also be related with higher depression scores, as previous research has found an association between sexting and depression, with results showing that people who are depressed engage more in sexting than those who are not depressed, probably because they need attention for others.<sup>25</sup> Following this line of reasoning, it could also be that those who show higher depression scores have less social skills, and end up pressuring someone to send them a sext. Additionally, higher scores in hostility indicate cholera and both verbal and non-verbal anger.<sup>23</sup> Anger might also be a triggering emotion for sexting coercion, since people who might start off as “just” asking for sexual content, might end up pressuring the victim as a frustrated response to rejection. These results are in line with previous literature, which found that males perpetrate sexual coercion more frequently than females, and that sexual coercion in both sexes was associated with antisocial traits and behaviours.<sup>26</sup>

When analyzing intergroup sex differences, results showed significant differences both in males and females. For the male participants, results showed that men who had coerced someone into sexting reported significantly higher scores for hypersensitivity, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, hostility and depression. These results would

again be supported by the idea that these scales are related with dysfunctional attachment,<sup>23</sup> and that people in general, and men in particular, might engage in sexting coercion perpetration as a result of frustration, anger and a lack of social skills, in line with previous research.<sup>26</sup> Although the psychopathological profile could be considered similar, male sexting coercion perpetrators did not differ in psychoreactivity and somatization, which was significant for the general comparison between sexting coercion perpetrators and those who had not coerced others. Yet, according to our results, those men who perpetrate sexting coercion scored significantly higher regarding obsessive-compulsive symptom. It has been previously reported that internet sexual offenders are lonelier and more obsessive-compulsive than physical sexual offenders.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding female samples, results are different. Female participants from both groups only differed in hostility scores, with female perpetrators reporting higher scores in this scale than non-perpetrators. Previous research has found that female sexual offenders report higher scores for dominance and aggression.<sup>28</sup> These results might indicate that anger-related issues are preeminent for female engagement in sexting coercion perpetration, whilst more complex psychological variables would be modulating male sexting coercion perpetration. Furthermore, when comparing sex differences within the sexting coercion perpetrator group, results indicate that there are no significant differences in psychopathology scores between males and females. These results indicate that sexting coercion perpetration might be sex-related in terms of prevalence (males are more likely to be perpetrators than females), but that perpetrators share a similar psychopathological profile independently of their sex. Our results regarding similarities between sexting coercion perpetrators, no matter their sex, and about hostility-based differences between females who coerced and those who did not, differ with previous knowledge about sex-related differences in offenders. It has been reported that prevalence of psychopathological conditions is higher among female offenders.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, it has also been previously highlighted that there is significant heterogeneity amongst the population of female sexual offenders. According to our results, a gender-specific approach should be made the rule not only for victims but also for offenders.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the sample used

was non-probabilistic and relied on self-reported data, and the sample was composed of only university students, rather than the general population, so generalization of results should be cautiously done. In this sense, the sample used was self-selected using an online survey, which would explain why the total sample is unbalanced regarding female and male participants. Furthermore, it should be taken into account that the subsample of sexting coercion perpetrators was small ( $n=75$ ) thus some of the findings might not be extrapolable, due to the small size of the sample. Additionally, the sexting coercion perpetration was measured by a direct question, which can create defensivity and rejection to answer the question with openness and honesty. Finally, this study is a cross-sectional investigation, and not longitudinal, so no temporal relationships can be established between the examined variables.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, we believe this to be the first study examining the psychopathological profile of sexting coercion perpetrators, and examining sex differences between and within samples. We hypothesized that the psychopathological profile of participants who had coerced others into sexting would differ from the profile of participants who had not coerced others into sexting and our results confirm our hypothesis. Overall, significant differences were found between both groups, with sexting coercion perpetrators showing higher psychopathology scores for all of the scales related to interpersonal and social vulnerability, and attachment dysfunctionality, which might explain why they become perpetrators of such behaviour. Yet, hostility scores were also significantly higher. Furthermore, significant differences in sex were found intergroup, with male perpetrators showing higher psychopathology scores than non-perpetrators, with the same scales as the total sample, again reinforcing the idea that anger, frustration, dysfunctional attachment and lack of social skills might be modulating variables for sexting coercion perpetration. However, significant differences between the female samples were only found for hostility, suggesting anger-related motivation in sexting coercion by women. Finally, when examining sex differences between sexting coercion perpetrators, results indicate that male and female perpetrators have similar psychopathological profiles. These overall results contribute to a deeper understanding of sexting coercion dynamics in the adult population, and more specifically, of sexting coercion perpetration. These findings should be taken into consideration when designing prevention and intervention strategies, for the educational community and mental health practitioners. When interacting with young men with psychopathological symptoms, dysfunctional attachment or lack of social skills and both men and women with high hostility, mental health professionals should inquire about online sexual perpetration experiences and the engagement in sexting behaviours. Further research should also explore the reasons for these psychopathological differences and what additional factors might be influencing psychopathological differences in sexting coercion perpetration practices.

## Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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