



Popular Peer Norms and Adolescent Sexting Behavior

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BACKGROUND

- Sexting, sending sexually explicit photos or messages, can have consequences (Van Ouytsel et al., 2019).
- Sexting is associated with perceptions of peers’ sexting behavior (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017), peers’ positive attitudes towards sexting (Hudson & Fetro, 2015; Walrave et al., 2014), positive attitudes towards peers who sext (Walrave et al., 2015), and direct peer pressure to sext (Lee et al., 2016; Lippman & Campbell, 2014).
- Popular peers norms may increase risky sexual behaviors (Cohen & Prinstein, 2006; Choukas-Bradley et al., 2014).
- Studies have not yet considered the role of perceptions of popular peer norms in adolescent sexting behavior.

METHODS

Participants

- Students in grades 11 and 12 ($n = 626$, $M_{age} = 17.4$, $SD_{age} = 0.66$, 53.5% female) in the southeastern U.S. completed in-class surveys in April of 2016.
- 47.0% White, 23.1% Hispanic/Latinx, 22.3% Black
- 65.3% reported sexual activity in the past year.

Measures

- **Sexting Behavior and Perceptions of Popular Peers’ Sexting:** “In the past year, how often have the following people SENT a ‘sexy message’? By ‘sexy message,’ we mean a sexually suggestive message through text, IM, Snapchat, or other social media (also called a ‘sext’ or ‘sexting’)?” Participants reported on their own behavior and their perception of sexting behavior by the “typical” popular girl and boy in their class.
- **Peer-Perceived Popularity:** Students indicated the “most popular” and “least popular” peers in their grade. Students with standardized difference scores one standard deviation or more above the mean were considered “popular” ($n = 72$; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998).

RESULTS

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for study variables with comparisons by gender and popularity

	Gender				Popularity			
	Full Sample ($n=626$) n (%)	Girls ($n=335$) n (%)	Boys ($n=288$) n (%)	χ^2	Popular ($n=72$) n (%)	Non-Popular ($n=554$) n (%)	χ^2	
Sexually active	409 (65.3)	232 (69.2)	175 (60.8)	4.56*	60 (83.3)	349 (63.0)	10.75**	
Perception that popular girls had sexted	545 (87.1)	304 (90.1)	239 (83.0)	7.65**	65 (90.3)	480 (86.6)	0.46	
Perception that popular boys had sexted	539 (86.1)	306 (91.3)	231 (80.2)	15.21***	61 (84.7)	478 (86.3)	0.03	
Sent a sext	348 (55.6)	203 (60.6)	143 (49.7)	7.07**	45 (62.5)	303 (54.7)	1.23	

Note: Full sample includes adolescents who identify as female, male, and transgender ($n = 3$). Sexually active coded as 0 = no sexual activity in past year, 1 = some sexual activity in past year. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

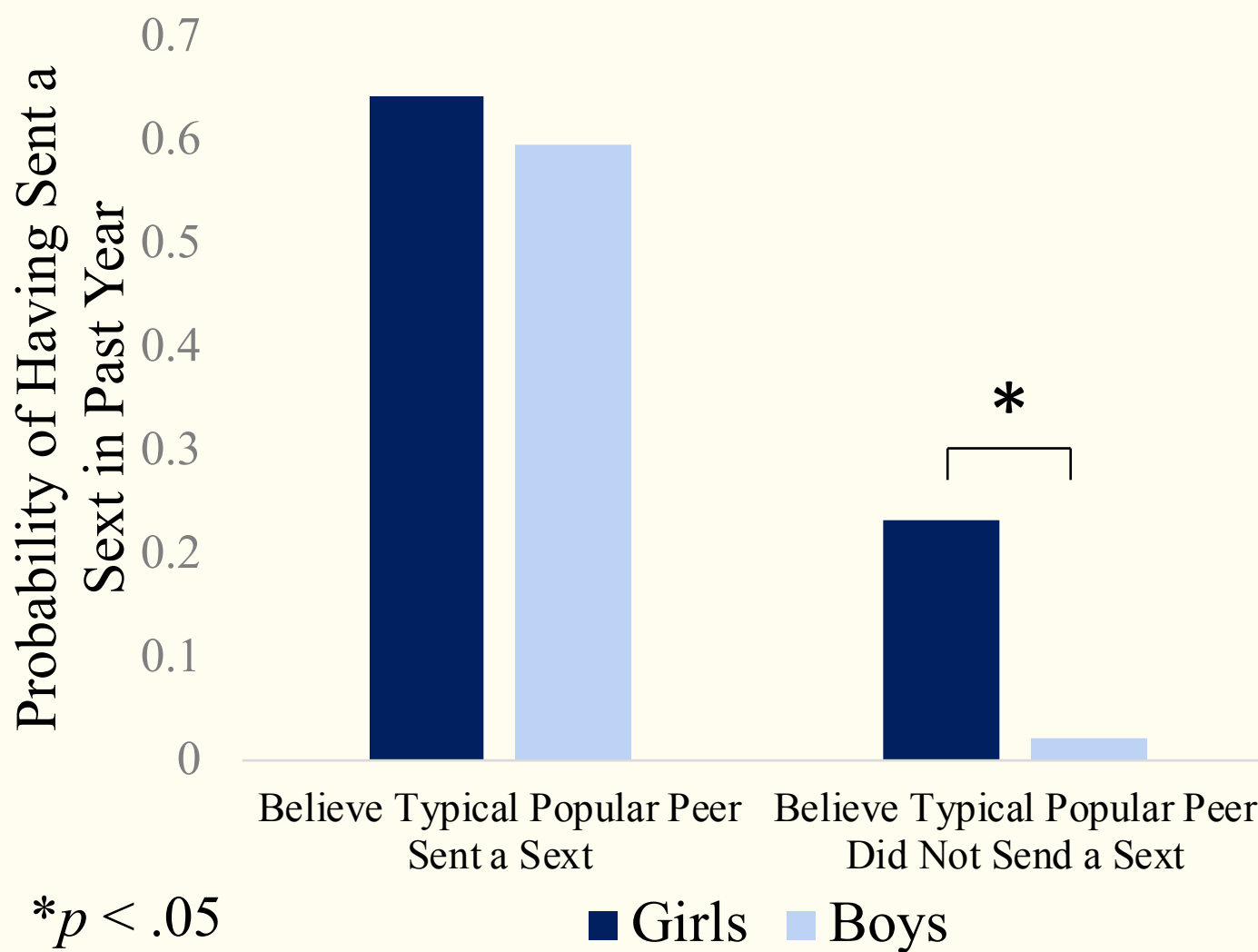
Table 2. Multivariate logistic regression analysis of associations with likelihood to have sent a sext in past year.

Predictors	b	SE	OR	95% CI	Model χ^2 (Nagelkerke R^2)
Step 1					182.25*** (.33)
Gender	-0.25	0.19	0.78	0.54 – 1.13	
Sexual activity status	1.87***	0.20	6.52	4.43 – 9.70	
Perception of popular peers’ sexting	2.32***	0.40	10.22	4.90 – 24.12	
Step 2					188.79*** (.34)
Gender	-2.87*	1.12	0.06	0.003 – 0.37	
Sexual activity status	1.89***	0.20	6.64	4.51 – 9.91	
Perception of popular peers’ sexting	1.30**	0.49	3.65	1.46 – 10.10	
Gender x Perception of popular peers’ sexting	2.76*	1.14	15.83	2.34 – 318.75	

Note. OR = Odds Ratio; CI = Confidence Interval. Coefficients are unstandardized. Perceptions of popular peers’ sexting behavior coded as 0 = believing neither the typical popular girl nor boy had sent a sext in past year, 1 = believing either the typical popular girl or popular boy (or both) had sent a sext in past year. Sexual activity status coded as 0 = no sexual activity in past year, 1 = some sexual activity in past year. Gender coded as 0 = female, 1 = male. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

RESULTS

Figure 1. Probability of having sent a sext in the past year, by gender and perceptions of popular peer sexting



* $p < .05$

■ Girls ■ Boys

DISCUSSION

- Adolescents may have an inaccurate understanding of popular peers’ sexting behavior, which may be related to their own more frequent sexting behavior.
- Girls may feel more pressure to send sexts than boys (Lippman & Campbell, 2014), perhaps regardless of their perceptions of popular peers’ behavior.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

- Future studies should investigate how effects may differ across various sexting behaviors (e.g., sending a nude photo vs. a sexually suggestive message).
- Interventions to reduce sexting behavior may consider perceptions of peer norms as a modifiable belief and expose adolescents to popular peers abstaining from sexting as a means of changing beliefs (as demonstrated in re-norming interventions for alcohol use; e.g., Teunissen et al., 2013).

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