

Sexting, Subjective Well-being & Relationship Quality Research Brief

In 2020, we circulated a survey asking emerging adults about their experiences with electronically sending images and videos of a sexual nature to a romantic partner (i.e. sexting), their perceptions of their relationship, and aspects about their well-being. Thank you to those who participated! We analyzed data from 267 people who responded based on sexting with a committed partner. This research brief summarizes the main findings of this study, which aimed to understand how motivations for sexting related to relationship and well-being outcomes.

This project was guided by **Self-determination Theory**.

The theory suggests that **autonomous motivations** (e.g. *sexting because it is fun, meaningful, important to experiment sexually*) reflect behaviors consistent with a person's values and predicts *better outcomes*.

In contrast, **controlled motivations** (e.g. *sexting to prove sexual attractiveness and to avoid conflicts with a partner*) reflect engaging in behaviors out of internal or external pressures and predicts *poorer outcomes*.

Controlled Motivations

The negative impact of sexting for less self-determined motivations was reflected in all outcomes. Controlled motivations for sexting predicting **less positive emotions, more negative emotions, poor relationship quality, and poorer life satisfaction**.




Autonomous Motivations

Autonomous motivations for sexting was related to **more positive emotions and better relationship quality**. However, autonomous motivations for sexting was also related to **more negative emotions**, which may reflect the potential fear and anxiety that is related with the risks of sexting. There was **no relationship with life satisfaction** which suggests that sexting may be a fun activity within the relationship but does not positively impact overall life satisfaction.

Take Home Message:

Sexting can be beneficial if someone participates because they really want to! But if the person is trying to offset potential anxiety, guilt, and shame, or sext in attempts to receive a reward or avoid punishment from others, sexting is harmful to both individual and relationship well-being.



Even though sexting may be a specific activity that some people give little thought to, reflecting on motivations behind sexting may be important given it's potential impact at a broader level.