


Being Under Pressure to Sext: Adolescents' Experiences, Reactions, and Counter-Strategies

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This study explored adolescents' experiences of being under pressure to sext (sending nude images), offering insights into what situations adolescents view as pressuring, how adolescents react to the pressure, and what counter-strategies they use. Written statements from 225 adolescents (age 13–16 years, $M = 14.4$ years, $SD = 0.93$) were analyzed using thematic analysis. Results indicated a range of situations including both explicit and implicit pressure. The pressure elicited different emotional responses, including severe physical and psychological reactions, becoming distressed, and being seemingly unconcerned. A majority of the adolescents reported successful strategies on how to ward off the unwanted sexual requests. This study provides insight into how young people cope with potentially harmful situations online.

Key words: sexting – sexual solicitation – pressure – young people's experiences – counter-strategies – unwanted sexual requests

Today's adolescents have spent their entire life with the digital arena as an integral part of their everyday life. This also means that the Internet and different smartphone applications are used for sexual activities and interactions. For instance, adolescents report using the Internet to search for information about sex (Daneback & Löfberg, 2011), watching porn (Svedin et al., 2021), or engaging in sexting—referring to the creating, sharing, and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images over a digital medium (Lenhart, 2009). The digital arena as a medium for sexual activities poses both opportunities and risks, and although most adolescents engage in sexting foremost within romantic relationships and have positive online sexual experiences (Burén & Lunde, 2018; Englander, 2019; Jonsson et al., 2019), unwanted sexual requests and sexual coercion also seem relatively commonplace. In a meta-analysis by Madigan et al. (2018), 11.5% of youth aged 12–16.5 years had received requests to engage in unwanted sexual activities or sexual talk online.

Studies indicate that many adolescents perceive online sexual requests as bothersome, and some may engage in sexting merely out of pressure (Jonsson & Svedin, 2017). In turn, studies show that pressured sexting is associated with a range of negative outcomes, for example, a greater risk of unauthorized spreading of nude images, depressive symptoms, self-harm, and emotional dysregulation (Englander & McCoy, 2017; Lu et al., 2021; Wachs et al., 2021).

Here, it should also be noted that as today's youth start to interact on the digital arena increasingly early on, accumulating evidence suggests that preadolescents, too, are exposed to unwanted and adverse online sexual interactions, including sexually abusive acts (Joleby, Landström, et al., 2021). In order to safeguard and support young people when they encounter unwanted online sexual requests and pressure, it is crucial to take steps toward an increased understanding of this phenomenon. In this quest, we argue that adolescents themselves have first-hand experience and expertise that need to be heard. Thus, this study was designed to investigate adolescents' own experiences of the situations and circumstances they perceive as pressuring, how they react in these

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situations, and the counter-strategies they use to cope with pressure to sext.

Adolescents' Sexual Development in a Digital Age

Facing pressure to engage in sexting needs to be situated within the context of adolescent development and adolescents' emerging sexuality. From a developmental psychological perspective, adolescents are in the advent of forming an adult sexual self and identity, a process that is biopsychosocial and occurs within the intersection between self and others, between self and more formal sources (e.g., sex education in school), and with an accrual of sexual lived experiences. As aforementioned, some of these experiences take place online—providing adolescents with an arena where they learn sexual norms, roles, and behaviors through observing and interacting with others (Maas et al., 2018). Arguing that adolescents' sexual learning experiences are an essential developmental basis for a healthy adult sexuality, Fortenberry (2014) points out that any sexual experience—whether positive or negative—is associated with sexual development. In view of this, adolescents' experiences of being under pressure to sext may have broader implications for healthy sexual development (Cacciatore et al., 2019).

In terms of unwanted sexual requests online, such as being asked to send nude or semi-nude images or videos, some adolescents describe being bombarded with a vast number of sexual requests from many different sources (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Thomas, 2018). Girls seem to be more often asked, coerced, or pressured to send sexting images (Englander & McCoy, 2017), although findings have been somewhat mixed (see e.g., Van Ouytsel, Lu, et al., 2021). Although quite a few adolescents perceive such requests as bothersome (Kerstens & Stol, 2014), a request to show one's body may also resonate with a need for attention potentially pushing some adolescents to overstep their boundaries (Burén et al., 2022; Joleby et al., 2020). Therefore, the ambivalent nature of being asked to expose oneself—feelings of affirmation and attention but at the same time objectification—should be acknowledged. Although we argue that adolescents are indeed experts on their digital worlds, limited sexual experience may make it difficult for adolescents to ward off unwanted sexual requests. Seeing that adolescents can be caught in a so-called maturity gap (Moffitt, 1993), referring to a mismatch between adolescents' physical, cognitive,

and emotional maturity, they may be extra vulnerable to sexual contacts, both offline and online, as people may take advantage of their sexual curiosity, naivety, and limited ability to risk assess.

Unwanted sexual requests and pressured sexting may also be embedded into a broader context of socialization experiences and gendered norms, which in turn may affect young people's understanding of, and experiences of, the phenomena. Sexual script theory (Gagnon & Simon, 2005) postulates that, as adolescents become increasingly interested in sexual issues, they begin to assume expectations about sexuality. Receiving unwanted sexual requests may shape young people's expectations about sexual contact and interaction, and of their own role and position in these attempts. The prevailing sexual scripts are highly gendered (Wiederman, 2005), which is mirrored in attitudes and expectations toward female and male sexuality (De Ridder, 2019). Thus, it can be assumed that girls and boys may have different perceptions of unwanted online sexual requests and pressure, partly because the nature and extent of these requests may differ, but also because male and female adolescents may have internalized different notions of how they should feel and behave when being confronted by sexual pressure. For example, males are expected to have an avid, or at least amenable, role in sexual encounters (Wiederman, 2005). Girls, on the contrary, are prescribed an ambivalent role: They are expected to guard themselves yet be sexually submissive, and to be resistant yet available. Gender socialization processes also teach young women to self-sacrifice in relationships and to put others' desires first (Rossetto & Tollison, 2017). Thus, gendered norms may disempower girls' and women's assertiveness in sexual situations. Juxtaposing these gender role norms, a quantitative study by Van Ouytsel, Lu, et al. (2021) and Van Ouytsel, Walrave, et al. (2021) showed that early adolescent boys were more likely than girls to experience being pressured to sext within romantic relationships. Another recent quantitative study showed a different results pattern, indicating that girls perceived stronger pressure to sext than boys (Wachs et al., 2021). The link between negative outcomes and pressured sexting was also stronger for girls, and for minority adolescents. The latter finding mirrors yet another study showing that LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) youth report more pressure to sext than heterosexual youth (Van Ouytsel, Lu, et al., 2021; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, et al. 2021). These findings highlight how gendered and heteronormative norms

intersect with young people's experiences of pressured sexting.

What We Know and Do Not Know About Adolescents' Own Views About Pressured Sexting

Much of the research asking for adolescents' experiences of unwanted sexual requests relies on quantitative studies, thus precluding a more thorough understanding of young people's own experiences of these situations. Research, as well as the public debate, often emanates from the outlook of a worried adult world, who may think that all online sexual interactions are harmful, and that young people should be protected against them (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). We argue that to gain a nuanced understanding of the complexities of adolescents' digital encounters, it is crucial to listen to adolescents' own voices and experiences, as they are indeed experts on their own worlds. To date, some studies originating from the perspective of adolescents' perceptions or experiences have been conducted. As only a few of these have focused specifically on pressured sexting, we will next highlight findings from qualitative studies that deal with several related concepts, for example, unsolicited sexual requests online, online sexual harassment, and nonconsensual sharing of nude images (which has been suggested to be labeled as image-based sexual abuse, see Ringrose et al. for a discussion).

In a study by Thorburn et al. (2021), 16- to 17-year-old New Zealand girls' ($N = 28$) group discussions of pressured sexting were analyzed. The participants indicated two forms of competing pressures: on the one hand a (traditional, heteronormative) pressure to abstain from sexting, and on the contrary, a more contemporary "empowered female sexuality" leading to the idea that one should send nude pictures. These findings were mirrored by Ringrose et al.'s (2022) study including both girls and boys. The study defined pressured sexting as a form of online sexual harassment with boys asking girls for nude images. According to the authors, boys' experience of pressure did not encompass being pressured to send nudes themselves but instead as a pressure to "be ready to share" sexting images of girls' bodies. These practices were interpreted as being shaped by cis-heteronormative homosocial masculinity, with boys gaining social currency by the nonconsensual sharing of nude images. A similar line of reasoning was put forth in an interview study of

Swedish adolescents ($N = 41$) at one rural school (Hunehäll Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021), which showed that homosociality was expressed by boys' sharing of girls' images without their consent. Girls were exposed to nagging and threats to send images, whereas boys were not seen as perpetrators and "got away" with pressuring girls for sexts. Taking a somewhat different position, an ethnographic study including Danish adolescents and young adults (age 15–27) viewed nonconsensual sharing of sexting images as a form of "visual gossiping" that is affected by social dynamics across time and context and functions to strengthen social bonds as well as gendered power relations (Bindebøl Holm Johansen et al., 2019).

It should be noted that all the above studies tend to assume that adolescent boys exploit young women to gain sexual and social value, and that they themselves are at low risk of harm. In contrast to this common assumption, a study of Swedish adolescents showed that 10% of adolescent boys (vs. 36% of girls) reported being under pressure to sext (Burén & Lunde, 2018). In an interview study including male English adolescents, Setty (2020) explored how young men position themselves to a sexting culture marked by heterosexual masculinity, showing that their position was precarious. In line with other qualitative studies, the opportunity to seek value through homosocial masculinity and the nonconsensual sharing of nude images was emphasized, but participants also expressed an "inclusive masculinity" that eschew from the objectification of women. Participants also raised that boys, too, run a risk of harm and social shaming due to sexting. Thus, and in view of Setty's study, it can be argued that the preconceived idea of adolescent boys as only perpetrators and expectations on boys to be resilient in the face of adverse situations, may minimize the experiences of pressured sexting that some adolescent boys do have.

Although the abovementioned qualitative studies have provided many valuable insights into young people's experiences and perceptions of (pressured) sexting, some important issues remain unexplored. First, we argue that we need to learn more about what types of situations adolescents themselves perceive as pressuring. The presumption that pressure merely includes male peers asking female peers for nude images may be too narrow, excluding other types of experiences and situations perceived as pressuring. Second, we know little about what adolescents feel about different situations perceived as pressuring. Third, we are also lacking basic knowledge about the

strategies that adolescents use when they face pressure to engage in sexting. We argue that it is an important step for research to shed light on these issues, as this knowledge would be helpful in developing preventive efforts based on adolescents' own expertise. Therefore, the present study was designed to explore adolescents' experiences of being pressured to sext. Specifically, the aim of the study was to explore what situations and circumstances adolescents describe when asked about their experiences of being pressured to sext, how adolescents reacted to the pressure, and what counter-strategies adolescents use to cope with the pressure.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

This study is based on data from the first wave of a longitudinal research project focusing on sexting experiences and behaviors among Swedish adolescents. Within the framework of this project, 1653 Swedish primary school students (age 12–16 years, $m = 14.20$ years, $SD = 0.92$; 49.7% girls) from 10 different primary schools (72.2% of enrolled students) in the western part of Sweden answered a questionnaire (see Burén & Lunde, 2018, for full procedure). Of these, 349 participants (21.1% of full sample, 10% of all boys, 35.7% of all girls) indicated that they had experience of someone trying to pressure them into sending sexting photographs or videos (data published in Burén & Lunde, 2018), and 225 participants (age 13–16 years, $m = 14.4$ years, $SD = 0.93$; 87.1% girls) provided additional information about these experiences in a free-text answer. These 225 written answers formed the basis for this study (see Figure 1 for sample selection and Table 1 for characteristics of study sample and full sample). All procedures were approved by the Central Ethics Review Board in Gothenburg.

Measures

The aim of the study was to explore what situations and circumstances adolescents describe when asked about their experiences of being pressured to sext, how adolescents reacted to the pressure, and what counter-strategies adolescents use to cope with the pressure. The question that was used for the present analysis read: "Has anyone tried to pressure you into sending sexting pictures or videos?" (dichotomously answered by yes or no).

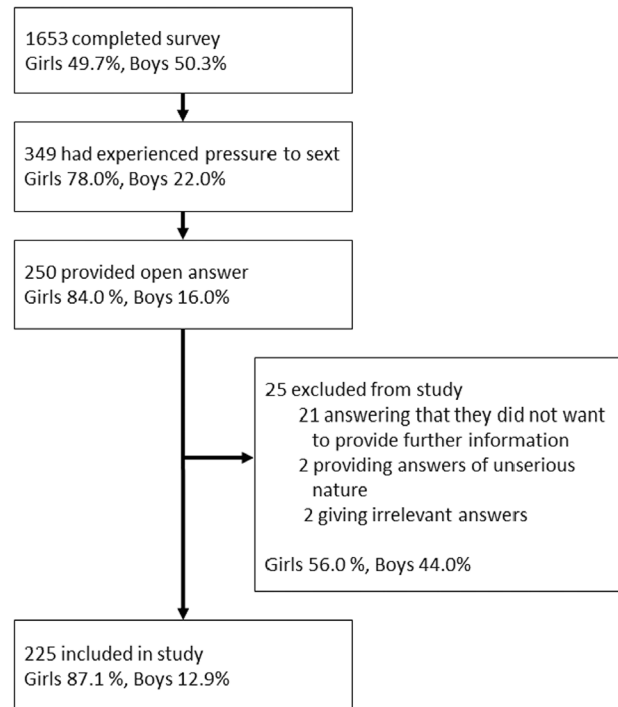


FIGURE 1 Sample selection.

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Study Sample and Full Sample

	Study sample	Full sample
Age M (SD)	14.40 (0.93) ^a	14.14 (0.05) ^b
Gender		
Girls (%)	87.1	49.7
Boys (%)	12.9	50.3
Living with two parents (%)	61	65
Life satisfaction M (SD)	2.99 (7.86) ^a	3.30 (7.57) ^b
Family support M (SD)	5.52 (1.40) ^a	6.08 (1.17) ^b

Note. Life satisfaction and family support range from 1 to 5 with higher scores indicating higher life satisfaction/family support. Superscripts denote significant mean differences as indicated by independent t -tests ($p < .001$).

Participants that answered yes were asked to provide additional information in a free-text answer including the following probe questions: "Do you want to tell us more about that? What happened? How old were you? How did it make you feel? How did you handle the situation?" These broad prompts were given to stimulate these relatively young participants into providing a comprehensive answer. The written answers differed noticeably in terms of the amount of information. Some participants gave thorough descriptions of what happened, how they experienced it, and how they handled the situation, while others only provided

answers to a few, or none, of these questions. Participants wrote on average 43 words (range 3–382 words).

For the purposes of comparison, we have also included a table (see Table 1) with information about the present sample versus the full sample. The table includes the following demographic measures: gender, age, and whether participants lived with two parents. In addition, a one-item life satisfaction item was used, and a scale measuring perceived family support (see Burén & Lunde, 2018, for full information on these measures).

Data Analyses

The written answers were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We employed an inductive (data-driven) approach, which generates themes that are strongly linked to the data, rather than overlaying a theoretical perspective. The themes were generated on a semantic level, focusing on the surface meaning of the data. The procedures undertaken to ensure a rigorous thematic analysis followed the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006). They emphasize that the analytical procedure involves a constant moving back and forth between the different steps, which include familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and revising themes, checking the fit with the original data, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The second author had the main responsibility for conducting the thematic analyses. The first author and another researcher with extensive experience of qualitative methods were involved in an iterative process of repeated discussions during the analytic process to ensure that the data were reliably interpreted and that findings were credible and dependable. The analytical process began with the second author carefully reading the data several times to identify meaningful units of text relevant to the research questions, and created some primary ideas about themes. The second author then encoded the data on a semantic level using ATLAS.ti software and then divided the codes into three different groups based on which research question they answered. Every code that was related to the type of situation they described as pressuring (e.g., a guy in school pressured me) was divided into one group, descriptions about how they reacted to the pressure (e.g., felt disgusted, was scared) were divided into one group, and every

code related to participants' counter-strategies (e.g., showing resistance, saying no) was divided into one group. After that, the second author organized the codes in each group into a thematic mind map and created initial candidate themes (four candidate themes for situation, six candidate themes for reactions, five candidate themes for counter-strategies). The second author discussed the candidate themes with the first author and another researcher. After the discussion, the second author went back to the original quotes for validation of the different themes. After that, the first and second authors conducted some changes and merged some candidate themes together (e.g., *Feeling pressured* and *It felt difficult for me* were merged into *Becoming distressed*). The final thematic analysis generated three main themes with three, three, and two sub-themes respectively, all presented in Figure 2 below.

RESULTS

We investigated what situations and circumstances the adolescents described as pressuring, how they reacted to the pressure, and how they handled the situation. The quotes have been translated into English and slightly edited (e.g., adding commas and correcting misspellings) to facilitate reading. Before presenting the results from the thematic analyses, we will provide some contextual descriptions about the situations that the adolescents mentioned in their answers.

It was most common that the adolescent described one specific event of receiving pressure to sext, indicating that it had been a one-time experience. A large group had, however, received pressure to engage in sexting on multiple occasions. Some explicitly described it happening a few times: "One time it was a guy from my school, and one time it was a guy that I did not even know who it was," while others described it happening more frequently: "Unfortunately it happens almost every day." Still others described their experiences in more general terms such as "It usually starts . . .," "People find you on social media . . .," and "They often get mad . . .," which indicates that being pressured to sext was a common experience for some adolescents. In about one-third of the descriptions, it was possible to disentangle who the perceived pressure came from, with strangers being the most commonly mentioned source of pressure ($n = 54$), followed by an acquaintance ($n = 17$), partner/ex-partner ($n = 12$), romantic interest ($n = 7$), friend ($n = 7$), and online friend ($n = 4$). For 79.6% of the statements, it was possible to discern whether the

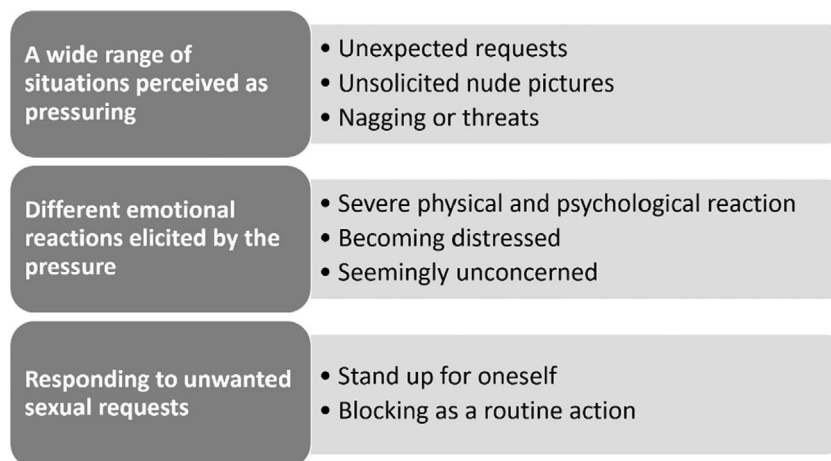


FIGURE 2 Themes and sub-themes from the thematic analysis.

adolescent had responded to the pressure with sending a picture or not. These descriptions showed that the vast majority of the adolescents did not send a sext as a response to the pressure (80.4% not sending, compared with 19.6% who indicated that they did send a sext). In most responses, the adolescent did not mention at what age they received the pressure to sext, but based on the 40.9% of the statements which included such information in their response, the mean age for the (the described) experience of being pressured was 13.4 years (range: 9.5–16, $SD = 1.17$).

A Wide Range of Situations Perceived as Pressuring

In their answers, the adolescents described a wide range of situations including both implicit and explicit forms of pressure. The descriptions are presented in the three themes: *Unexpected requests*, *Unsolicited nude pictures*, and *Nagging or threats*.

Unexpected requests. The most common description was unexpectedly being asked to send nude pictures, by either an unknown person or someone that the adolescent knew. The request about sending nude pictures sometimes followed a longer period of regular conversations, in which the adolescent was unprepared for the sudden sexualization of the conversation. As a way to entice the adolescent into sending, the request could be combined with compliments about the adolescent's appearance:

I often get the question about sending pictures of my body from people who are one to two

years older. I more often get the question now that I am older, because I have physically matured. Every time they ask, I send a picture of my face or a picture when I stand in front of my mirror (wearing clothes), and then people often say, 'You have such a f***** great body. Can you send pictures of your body without clothes?' and s*** like that. (14-year-old girl)

Other times the request appeared without any prior interaction at all. In the following quote, one adolescent described how unknown people usually find her through social media: "It happens quite often that a profile adds me on social media and writes like 'n4n' [nude for nude] or 'nudes?' and so on. It started about a year ago and is increasing more and more." (13-year-old girl).

Unsolicited nude pictures. Another pattern of experiences was receiving unrequested nude pictures, with the expectation to send one in return. Again, this could be from either an unknown person or someone that the adolescent knew: "It sometimes happens that strangers send nude pictures and ask about getting one in return, and start asking questions like how old I am or what my name is," (14-year-old girl). Although not having initiated any sexual contact or in any way invited to it, adolescents described how they were expected to participate. Refusing to do so could lead to reprisals, as described by one participant:

It happens all the time that you receive pictures from someone else, and automatically they think you owe them one picture in

return! It started around age 12–13 and has been going on ever since. It often results in you being called boring or useless, and then they block you.

(16-year-old girl)

Neither of the first two themes (Unexpected requests and Unsolicited nude pictures) include any forcing elements or explicit pressure. Still, these are situations described when the adolescents were asked whether they had ever experienced any pressure to sext. This highlights a more implicit type of pressure in the form of unwantedly being the object of someone else's sexual desire and how an expectation to respond is enough to cause pressure.

Nagging or threats. The last theme includes situations with a more explicit form of pressure. The descriptions range from seemingly mild forms (e.g., nagging) to more overt or aggressive forms of pressure (e.g., threats). The most frequent description in this theme was that the person asking for a nude picture kept nagging if the adolescent did not adhere to the request. "When I was 11, I was chatting with a girl that I met online and she tried to induce me to send nude pictures of myself by spamming me and asking, even though I refused to." (13-year-old boy). Adolescents also reported being threatened because they tried to refuse sending pictures. The threats could either be that revealing images of the adolescent would be disseminated unless they sent new ones (so-called sextortion, Wolak et al., 2018), or that a rumor about the adolescent would be started. Other threats were more general and aimed at inducing fear in the adolescent.

I was 12 years old. A guy that I did not know at all wrote to me. He knew exactly everything about me: where I lived, my name, and so on. At first, I refused, but then he wrote even more horrifying stuff, so I got scared and sent a picture.

(14-year-old girl)

Different Emotional Reactions Elicited by the Pressure

Ninety-one adolescents described how they reacted to the experienced pressure to sext. From their answers, it was evident that the pressuring situation elicited very different responses among the

adolescents. This is mirrored in the following three themes: *Severe physical and psychological reaction*, *Becoming distressed*, and *Seemingly unconcerned*.

Severe physical and psychological reaction. This theme is based on two-fifths of all descriptions and includes all adolescents who reported extensive negative impacts from the unwanted sexual requests. Some descriptions were short and simply stated that the situation had made them feel really bad, but overall, the answers that make up this theme were longer and content-wise richer than the answers in the other themes. This is reflected in the different nuances and wide range of experiences described here. In the following example, a 13-year-old girl described her reaction when a boy she knew pressured her. Although her answer was very short, it clearly manifests how she perceived the situation as so distressing that it evoked an intense physical reaction: "I panicked, felt sick, started cold sweating, and cried." This example did not provide any insight into exactly what aspects of the situation caused the intense reaction. In other answers, however, the fear and coercion were recognized as the cause of the negative reaction, as they felt that they had to adhere to the request. Still others experienced an intense emotional response despite being able to handle the situation (for instance by blocking the person). Moreover, it was not only situations with explicit pressure that caused distress. For some, the sheer unexpectedness of the unsolicited contact seemed to be causing anguish. An unknown man in his twenties contacted this adolescent when she was 12–13 years old:

He decided to send naked pictures/dickpics to me. He sent several. . . . I was so disgusted and shocked that I almost vomited. I did not know a lot about it at the time and never thought that I would be exposed to it. I got sad but mostly angry. I did not tell anyone until later, and then only to a few close friends.

(15-year-old girl)

In contrast to this type of immediate negative reaction, a few descriptions included responses of a more lingering psychological character: "I thought it was tough because I do not like my body, and it only got worse through this." (13-year-old girl).

For the adolescents that reported having sent naked pictures or videos in response to being pressured, additional feelings seemed to arise. This adolescent had been threatened into sending a

nude picture of her breasts when she was 12 years old, and that caused her anxiety for several weeks. "I was scared; I had a bad feeling in my stomach; I could not sleep at night; I was feeling all bad. But after a few weeks that feeling disappeared," (14-year-old girl). The anxiety after having sent a picture could also manifest itself as a fear related to not being in control of what would happen to the picture or who could see it:

I was writing with a guy and he nagged at me like h***, and eventually I gave up and sent him a picture on Snapchat [a social media app that deletes the picture after the receiver has watched it]. He saved it. That made me feel really bad, because it did not feel good to know that he had it and could look at it at any time, and that he could disseminate it to anyone. That really made me feel bad. ... I am so ashamed of it and feel bad every time I think about it.
(13-year-old girl)

Some adolescents described that their pictures in fact had been disseminated and explained the distress that this had caused them.

A guy my age that I kind of knew ... he nagged and nagged and sent me a lot of pictures. Eventually, to make him stop nagging, I sent him one. He screenshotted it and sent it to my friends and his friends. I was 14 at the time. Of course it was very humiliating and it did not feel good.
(15-year-old girl)

Becoming distressed. This theme is based on another two-fifths of all descriptions and contains all answers that described negative responses, but of a milder degree compared with the previous theme. Many adolescents expressed feelings of disgust, but of a relatively mild intensity (as judged from the context of their full answers). Most of them gave no further explanation as to why they were disgusted, while others seemed to attribute it to the fact that the sexualization of the conversation was unwelcome: "It happened the other week. I said that I would not send him anything, and that is what happened. I felt disgusted that some people can't keep a normal conversation without occasionally writing 'send something;'. (15-year-old girl).

The most commonly described reaction was that it felt "strange," as many adolescents appeared to be puzzled about receiving unsolicited sexual invitations in situations that they did not view as sexual: "I was about 14 when I got the question, it came from nowhere. ... I thought it felt strange," (15-year-old girl). Apparently, for some adolescents, the feeling of strangeness was due to the sexual contact being unexpected and sudden. Others explained not appreciating it because they did not think that unwanted sexual requests are okay, thus viewing it as an invasion of privacy. Someone taking the liberty to ask for sexualized material made them feel uneasy:

It happens every now and then that guys ask for pictures. It makes me feel uncomfortable because my body is mine, and I decide who I want to share it with. I usually block or not answer people who ask for pictures because it makes me think less of them, since I believe it is wrong.
(15-year-old girl)

Seemingly unconcerned. The third theme was less extensive and included the adolescents that did not experience any emotional reaction due to the unwanted sexual request. According to their descriptions, they appeared as if they were not bothered by the contact, often expressed as "I don't care," It seemed as if their unconcern stemmed from not experiencing the pressure as threatening. Most of these adolescents described that it was easy for them to say no to the request of sexting: "I don't think it's difficult for me, and I can easily say no. It's not that hard to say no, I think." (15-year-old girl).

For some, the normalization of being pressured to sext seemed to add to their indifference. This is illustrated in a quote describing being used to people asking for nude pictures: "It did not feel strange at all because there are so many people who ask both me and my friends, so I just say no," (13-year-old girl).

For transparency, five adolescents' answers did not fit into any of the abovementioned themes (and were not extensive enough to create a fourth theme). The answers included three adolescents describing receiving pressure to sext as a positive experience ("It was kind of good," "It is fun and you feel a bit sexy," and "Well, it did not feel weird? Good or what?"), with one adolescent describing it as laughable ("I mainly thought it was

a bit funny because he seemed pretty stupid”) and one adolescent describing the situation as being within a relationship and therefore okay.

Responding to Unwanted Sexual Requests

In all, 123 adolescents described how they handled receiving unwanted sexual requests or pressure to sext. From their answers, it was apparent that many of the adolescents had developed strategies on how to respond. The strategies are grouped into the two equally common themes: *Stand up for oneself* and *Blocking as a routine action*.

Stand up for oneself. This theme depicts strategies where the adolescents responded to the unwanted sexual request by standing up for themselves in different ways. The most common strategy was to speak up, saying no, and explaining that one did not want to take part in what the person asked for. Some adolescents described how they patiently repeated their decision in response to the nagging: “... they ask, you say no, they continue to try but it is just “no” in my brain,” (15-year-old boy). Others tried to argue and explain why they did not want the sexual contact:

It is usually a person that I have never met in real life that starts sending a lot of nude pictures, and then I usually say that I don’t think it is very nice and tell him to stop. ... Or I write to them that I do not want to see these kinds of pictures because I get disgusted.
(14-year-old girl)

Based on these accounts, it is clear that some adolescents felt confident in their right to resist. Other descriptions highlighted that resisting or bluntly saying no was not an obvious way out for everyone. Some described it as a skill one could develop over time: “I have learned to stand up for myself,” while others described it as an inner strength that one either possessed or not. After posting her social media name on a website, one girl received hundreds of requests and nude pictures, but she refused to send any pictures herself:

I never sent a picture, because if I don’t want to, I simply just don’t send any. I think it is good that I am lucky enough to be able to say no, because there are a lot of people who do not dare to and send pictures, although they do not really want to.
(14-year-old girl)

Some answers showed how the knowledge about bodily integrity, and that no one has the right to do something with your body without consent, worked as a resistance to the unwanted sexual contact.

I stood up for myself and said, “No! I make decisions about my body, and I only show it if I want to, which I do not want to and do not feel comfortable doing. Goodbye! And then I blocked the person.
(13-year-old girl)

A few adolescents, in different ways, fired back at the person behind the unwanted sexual request. One way of doing this was by taking control of the situation by threatening the person that pressured them. In this example, the person threatened to reveal previously sent sexting images unless the girl sent new ones “I sent pictures and he threatened to upload them on Instagram. I threatened him with coming to his house and killing him.” (14-year-old girl).

Another way of firing back was by using humor as a way to disarm the situation: “One person wanted me to send an ass picture, but I sent a picture of Donald Duck’s a**,” (14-year-old girl).

In contrast to the large group of adolescents standing up for themselves, three answers revealed another somewhat less confident, but successful strategy: lying to escape the pressure. Instead of bluntly saying no, they came up with a faked excuse, such as having a boyfriend or being at a friend’s house, and thus not being able to send a picture.

Blocking as a routine action. This theme refers to the strategy of deleting or blocking the person behind the unsolicited sexual request and is based on a large number of answers with a noticeable resemblance in content. Some adolescents described it as something they did regularly: “... the same thing has happened many times now, but I just block them and don’t care about it,” (14-year-old girl), while others described a specific event:

It was when I was 14, almost 15, and I got snaps from a guy who was nagging me about pictures. I said no, just no. I thought he would understand, but after saying no three times I blocked him, so it was easy.
(15-year-old girl)

Most adolescents described the blocking in a way that indicated that it was an instinctive and

obvious act that they did not have to contemplate, indicating that many adolescents have well-functioning strategies to address threats they may encounter online.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to explore experiences of being pressured to engage in sexting, building on the viewpoints of adolescents themselves, and provides novel insight into the specific type of situations that adolescents perceive as pressuring. The results show that beside more obvious forms of explicit pressure (such as nagging and threats), which has also been described in previous studies (Hunehäll Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; Joleby et al., 2020), adolescents also described feeling pressured in situations in which they felt an implicit expectation to engage in sexting, for instance, because someone else had sent a sexually explicit image first. The latter finding aligns with previous work showing that unsolicited sexting images may be used to initiate an exchange of nude images (see e.g., Ringrose et al., 2022), which can create an implicit expectation among young people to “return the favor.” In adolescence, fitting in and being accepted by others are central concerns (Steinberg, 2011), which may add extra pressure on adolescents when confronted with unwanted sexual requests. It should also be noted that the number of adolescents who indicated being pressured to engage in sexting (21.1%) was much higher in this study compared with the figure (11.5%) reported in the meta-analysis by Madigan et al. (2018). This may have to do with our participants being asked about their perceptions of pressure, rather than actual unwanted sexual requests. Given the fact that some of the described situations indicated more indirect forms of pressure, this discrepancy may not be surprising.

Receiving unwanted sexual requests online is common, perhaps even normalized in adolescent populations (Ringrose et al., 2022) and although some young people in this study described being seemingly unconcerned about being pressured, the majority reported being negatively affected. Being negatively affected by pressured sexting has also been reported in previous research (e.g., Hunehäll Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; Klettke et al., 2019; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Mishna et al., 2021; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016; Thomas, 2018). Our study further showed that the severe reactions often seemed to be due to the shock of unwantedly and unexpectedly becoming the object of someone

else’s sexual desire, which violates sexual autonomy and privacy (McGlynn & Johnson, 2020), especially when being thrown into a sexual context outside of one’s own maturity (Cacciatore et al., 2019). Some of the statements describing strong negative reactions also included reports of the adolescent having been threatened and scared. For the adolescents that had sent sexts following the pressure, additional feelings such as shame, regret, and anxiety about what would happen to the picture arose. Some described having their images spread, and the humiliation that followed. Previous research has shown that having sexualized pictures of oneself distributed online can have serious negative consequences on well-being (Jonsson & Svedin, 2017), especially for girls who are even more strongly exposed to victim-blaming and social shaming in the aftermath of nonconsensually shared images (Ringrose et al., 2022). Even, the fear that the pictures *might* be spread can have a negative effect (Jonsson & Svedin, 2017), which was also evident in some of the adolescents’ descriptions. For adolescents, being exposed to explicit forms of pressure may be extra challenging, as their brains are not yet fully developed (Kolb & Whishaw, 2001). This may make tasks such as foreseeing and adequately assessing potential threats, contemplating long-term consequences, or making well-considered decisions difficult. At the same time, hormonal changes make adolescents more likely to engage in reward-seeking and sensation-seeking behavior, become more easily emotionally aroused, and more responsive to stress (Van Leijenhorst et al., 2010). Thus, these developmental prerequisites may make situations involving pressure and unwanted sexual requests extra challenging for adolescents.

On a positive note, a large number of the statements within the study described concrete techniques that could be helpful in warding off unwanted situations, including confident ways to say no, or by blocking the person. Although it is possible that adolescents that had handled the pressure in an agentic way might be more prone to sharing their experiences in a free-text answer, resulting in a possible bias in our data, these insights are new and may provide valuable starting points for developing educational initiatives to strengthen young people’s agency, empowerment, and how to protect themselves online. It also opposes the idea of young women living their “digital life being powerlessness” (Meehan, 2022). It should be kept in mind, however, that the nature of the relationship between the one asking, and the

one being asked for sexual pictures, may be a complicating factor for how the situation is perceived and how it can be dealt with. It may be much more difficult to say no to a request or blocking someone whether there is a friendship or a romantic relationship (ECPAT, 2021; Mishna et al., 2021). Thus, discussions and educational efforts about sexual consent in relationships should stress that the same principles apply to the online sphere. As proposed by others (e.g., Bindesbøl Holm Johansen et al., 2019; Huneåll Berndsson & Odenbring, 2021; Setty, 2020), such efforts also need to stress the impact of social dynamics, masculine norms, and gendered power relations.

It is noteworthy that almost none of the participants in this study described help- or support-seeking strategies, such as turning to a trusted adult or a peer, despite the large number of situations described as adverse or emotionally stressful. This could be because support- or help-seeking was not explicitly asked for. However, here it could also be noted that the present sample reported significantly lower life satisfaction and lower family support compared with the full sample (see Table 1). On a speculative note, this may indicate that some adolescents may be more vulnerable to adverse situations online due to poor family support and, therefore, even less inclined to seek support from adults. In Burén and Lunde's study (Burén & Lunde, 2018), adolescents with poor family support were somewhat more likely to engage in sexting with people met only online or complete strangers. On a more general note, we also propose that the absence of support-seeking from the adult world might be due to the gap between adults' (lack of) understanding of adolescents' digital world, and adolescents' experiences. While it may seem easy for adults to simply tell adolescents never to share personal information or explicit images online, it may risk contributing to feelings of shame and guilt and making adolescents reluctant to ask for help whether they end up in an abusive situation due to sharing private images (Wolak et al., 2018). In addition, online offenders can exert pressure even without any personal information, for instance by threatening to spread a rumor or through manipulated photographs (Joleby, Lunde, et al., 2021). Thus, and if adults want adolescents to seek support and guidance when faced with unsettling experiences, we argue that conversations about what happens online need to move beyond prohibitions and exhortations. Although adolescents may not be willing to share personal experiences and

potentially sensitive information (i.e., about sexual issues and interactions), even with someone trusted, keeping an open and nonjudgmental dialogue about the online milieu and sexuality will aid adolescents' support-seeking, if needed.

In this study, girls were more likely to share their experiences by answering the open-ended question, which is mirrored in the relative proportion of boys who reported that they had felt pressure, and then wrote about their experiences (37.7%), versus the proportion of girls who had felt pressure to engage in sexting and then wrote about it (72.1%). In this study, boys also wrote shorter statements, and only five boys provided answers about how they experienced the pressure. The fact that girls are more often subjected to sexual pressure online (Englander & McCoy, 2017) may make conversations about these types of situations more commonplace for girls, and thus, girls may be more prone to reporting their experiences of being pressured to sext. Arguably, gender role expectations, ascribing men with sexual initiative and willingness (Wiederman, 2005), may mean that boys are not expected to feel under pressure to sext, which in turn may make boys less inclined to share their experiences (see also Setty, 2020). Ringrose et al. (2022) showed that perceived pressure among adolescent boys may involve sharing images of girls "bodies, and this practice may be difficult to disclose given mechanisms of social desirability. Yet another possible explanation of the different proportion of responses between boys and girls is that participants with strong negative reactions may be more inclined to share their stories (these responses were much longer and more detailed), which would indicate that girls in general had experienced the situation as more negative. Although this study aligns with the bulk of literature showing the crass reality of girls being subjected to more frequent sexual pressure and coercion (Burén & Lunde, 2018; Englander & McCoy, 2017; Lippman & Campbell, 2014), it should be acknowledged that adolescent boys may also have these experiences – but gendered norms may make boys' stories less likely to be voiced and heard.

Although this study provides unique insights into adolescents' own experiences of being under pressure to sext, there are limitations. First, the results are based on written free-text answers in the context of a quite extensive questionnaire. The prompts used to stimulate participants' statements were quite broad, as we wished to ask about pressure in an open-ended way and still stimulate disclosure. Another method, for example, individual-

or focus group interviews, would have yielded richer data and allowed for follow-up questions, and thus deeper investigation of individual experiences. However, by using free-text answers, we could instead collect a larger number of statements. It may also be easier for adolescents to share their experiences under the protection of anonymity. Second, this study, too, originates from the prevailing “risk frame” surrounding adolescents’ sexuality and online sexual behaviors (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Even though this is highly relevant when addressing adolescents’ experiences of being under pressure to sext, we call for future studies that further the understanding of adolescents’ positive skills and experiences when navigating in the online sphere. Third, this study omits the experiences of more mixed and cross-cultural samples and it was not designed to capture the viewpoints of sexual minority youth, a group that may be more vulnerable online but whose experiences are still under-researched.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study was designed to explore adolescents’ experiences of being pressured to sext, how they reacted to the pressure, and what counter-strategies they used to cope with the pressure. First, the study showed a wide range of situations perceived as pressuring, including both explicit and implicit forms of pressure. As regards to the reactions to the pressure, some adolescents seemed relatively unconcerned about receiving unwanted sexual requests, which is often attributed to the fact that it was so common that they had become blasé, or because of the fact that they thought it was easy to say no. However, most of the participants within the study reacted negatively, including a large group who reported strong physical and psychological reactions. The study showed that many adolescents had developed well-functioning strategies to cope with the unwanted sexual requests, which seemed to add a sense of security that meant that the situation felt manageable. However, almost none described seeking support or guidance from adults or peers. In sum, we argue that it is crucial to prepare young people for potential online threats and provide them with knowledge, confidence, and strategies to handle them.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

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