



Original research article

Sexting, unwanted online sexual solicitation, and internet-related anxiety among Slovak youth

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Abstract

Introduction: The digital environment poses new risks to young people, including sexting, unwanted online sexual solicitation, and the psychological strain associated with online victimisation.

Goal: To analyse the relationships between the frequency of sexting, the presence of strangers in online contact lists, the rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation, and anxiety while using the internet among Slovak youth.

Methods: A pilot cross-sectional quantitative study was conducted on a sample of 371 respondents from the Žilina Region (Slovak Republic). Respondents were recruited through convenience sampling in a school setting. Data were collected using a self-designed anonymous online questionnaire and analysed using Spearman's correlation, the Mann-Whitney *U*-test, and simple linear regression.

Results: A higher frequency of sexting was associated with a higher rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation. Respondents who had strangers in their list of online contacts reported a higher rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation than respondents without such contacts. Higher rates of unwanted online sexual solicitation were also associated with higher levels of anxiety while online and served as a significant predictor of it in the regression model.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the importance of preventing online sexual victimisation, managing online contacts safely, and identifying signs of anxiety early on in preventive and counselling practice. Given the pilot and cross-sectional nature of the study, the results should be interpreted as a starting point for further empirical validation.

Keywords: Anxiety related to internet use; Online sexual solicitation; Online victimisation; Sexting; Youth

Introduction

In recent years, digital communication has fundamentally changed the way young people form relationships, express their identity, and experience social interactions. According to Stachoň (2015), technology-mediated communication increases the frequency of contact, but does not in itself guarantee higher-quality interpersonal relationships. Šrobárová and Špánik (2025) point out that in the 21st century, the digital environment is becoming not only a space for social interaction but also a source of new risks, challenges, and opportunities for professional assistance and intervention. Members of Generation Z are characterised by a high degree of adaptability and an emphasis on social support (Buzalová et al., 2025; Treľová et al., 2023). With the growing use of smartphones and social media, sexting and unwanted online sexual solicitation are becoming significant issues that impact the mental health of young people. From a psychological perspective,

unwanted online sexual solicitation can be understood as a psychosocial stressor that may impair an individual's mental well-being (Holeková, 2020).

Since formal sex education and communication with parents often fail to meet the needs of adolescents, the online environment has become a significant source of information about sexuality, although this information is not always age-appropriate or professionally reliable (Badriah et al., 2023). Sexting is often perceived as a normative part of adolescence, yet it can also serve as a gateway to secondary victimisation, such as unsolicited requests for additional content, blackmail, or the distribution of materials without consent (Gassó et al., 2019, 2020; Madigan et al., 2018).

Research shows that adolescents who sext more frequently are also more likely to be exposed to unwanted online sexual contact or harassment (Gassó et al., 2019, 2020; Madigan et al., 2018; Mori et al., 2020). This relationship is also explained by routine activity theory, according to which higher online activity in a risky context increases the likelihood of contact

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with potential perpetrators (Feijóo et al., 2021; Van Ouytsel et al., 2019).

The risk is also heightened by the structure of social networks and digital disinhibition. The presence of strangers among online contacts expands the pool of potential initiators of unwanted communication, and adolescents with a larger number of unfamiliar contacts face a higher risk of unsolicited sexually explicit messages and other forms of harassment (Feijóo et al., 2021; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2022b; Salwa et al., 2025). Anonymity and physical distance in the online environment, meanwhile, lower perpetrators' inhibitions (Feijóo et al., 2021). Repeated exposure to unsolicited or harassing messages is associated with increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Champion et al., 2021; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2022a; Patel and Roesch, 2020; Reed et al., 2019). Systematic reviews and longitudinal studies show that adolescents exposed to technology-mediated sexual violence score significantly higher on measures of anxiety and other symptoms of psychological distress (Champion et al., 2021; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2022a; Patel and Roesch, 2020).

The importance of coordinated preventive and supportive measures is therefore growing, as young people who have experienced violence and victimisation are among the groups at increased risk of serious psychological consequences (Salimova and Rusnáková, 2024). From a social work perspective, these situations also raise ethical dilemmas related to client protection, confidentiality, prevention, and appropriate professional intervention (Bujdová et al., 2014). Girls and younger adolescents are particularly at risk (Gassó et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2019).

Contemporary models also suggest that sexting may be associated with both primary and secondary risks, for example in the form of repeated harassment by strangers, and that the concurrent experience of multiple forms of digital victimisation leads to a cumulative increase in psychological difficulties, including anxiety (Gassó et al., 2019, 2021).

The main objective of this paper is to examine how both the frequency of sexting and the presence of strangers in online contact lists are associated with the level of unwanted online sexual solicitation, and subsequently to assess the relationship between this solicitation and the level of anxiety experienced while using the internet among Slovak youth.

The present research has the character of a pilot cross-sectional study. We therefore view the findings as preliminary and indicative, intended for subsequent verification using larger and more diverse samples of respondents. In line with the main objective of this paper, the following sub-objectives were formulated:

1. To assess the association between the frequency of sexting and the rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation among Slovak youth.
2. To compare the prevalence of unwanted online sexual solicitation among respondents who do and do not have strangers in their list of online contacts.
3. To examine the relationship between the frequency of unwanted online sexual solicitation and levels of anxiety while using the internet.

Materials and methods

Procedure

This study was designed as a pilot cross-sectional quantitative study conducted in the Žilina Self-Governing Region of the Slovak Republic. Data collection took place from September

to December 2025 using an anonymous, self-designed online questionnaire. Respondents were recruited through convenience sampling via the school environment. A link to the online questionnaire was distributed electronically through representatives of secondary schools and universities in the region, who were asked to share it with potential respondents. This recruitment method was chosen due to the pilot nature of the research, the sensitivity of the topic under study, and the need to reach young people in an environment that is naturally accessible to them.

The study included respondents who belonged to the target group of young people, understood the Slovak language, had access to the online questionnaire, and gave their informed consent to participate in the study. Incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the analysis. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and without financial or other compensation. Before beginning the questionnaire, respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, the sensitive nature of some questions, the option to stop filling out the questionnaire at any time without giving a reason, and that data would be processed exclusively in aggregated form. Since the questionnaire was distributed through intermediary educational institutions, it was not possible to determine the exact total number of people who received the link to the questionnaire. For this reason, we do not report a response rate. This approach represents a methodological limitation of the research, particularly in relation to potential self-selection bias, uneven representation of respondent groups, and limited generalisability of the findings.

Characteristics of the research sample

The research sample consisted of a total of 371 respondents. In terms of gender, girls and women predominated (66.8%), while the largest age group was made up of respondents aged 15 to 18 (52.3%). Respondents living in urban areas were slightly in the majority (55.3%). Most participants identified as heterosexual (85.7%) and came from family backgrounds where their parents were married (76.0%). The detailed structure of the research sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the study sample

Observed variable and Category	N	%
Gender		
Girl/Woman	248	66.80%
Boy/Man	123	33.20%
Age		
15–18 years	194	52.30%
19–22 years	126	34.00%
23 years and older	51	13.70%
Place of residence		
City	205	55.30%
Rural	166	44.70%
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	318	85.70%
Other (bisexual, homosexual, other)	53	14.30%
Family background		
Married	282	76.00%
Divorced / Not living together	89	24.00%
Religion		
Religious (definitely + somewhat yes)	267	72.00%
Non-religious (definitely + somewhat no)	104	28.00%

Measurements and instruments

For the purposes of the study, an anonymous, self-designed online questionnaire was used, which was pilot-tested prior to data collection. Given the specific focus of the research, no standardised instrument was identified that would be appropriate for adolescents and simultaneously capture sexting, contact with strangers in the online environment, unwanted online sexual solicitation, and anxiety while using the internet. The development of items was based on relevant professional literature and theoretical foundations to ensure the content appropriateness of the instrument. The author-developed questionnaire contained a total of 35 items focused on the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents, the context of internet use, and variables relevant to achieving the established sub-objectives. In the analytical section, variables capturing the frequency of sexting, the presence of strangers in the list of online contacts, experience with unwanted online sexual solicitation, and anxiety while using the internet were primarily utilised for the purposes of this research. The *sexting* variable was measured using a five-point frequency item. The *presence of strangers in the list of online contacts* was assessed using a dichotomous item (yes/no). *Anxiety while using the internet* was tracked using a three-category self-assessment indicator. The variable *unwanted online sexual solicitation* was created from a set of frequency items focused on various forms of online sexual solicitation. Higher scores on the respective variables indicated a higher frequency or intensity of the phenomenon under study.

Given the pilot nature of the study and the sensitive nature of the items, some of the studied variables were measured using a single item, with the aim of reducing the burden on respondents and maintaining the clarity of the questionnaire. We therefore interpret the resulting indicators as rough indicators of the phenomena under study.

Psychometric properties of the instrument

Since the variable unwanted online sexual solicitation was created as a composite index from a set of multiple frequency items, we assessed its internal consistency. For this multi-item indicator, we calculated the following coefficients: Cronbach's alpha (α) = 0.82; McDonald's omega (ω) = 0.84. These values indicate good to very good internal consistency of the multi-item indicator. Single-item scales were chosen to minimise the cognitive load on respondents. Since these are individual items, it is not possible to mathematically express their internal consistency (coefficients α or ω). Accordingly, we interpret the obtained results as preliminary.

Ethics statement

The research was conducted in accordance with the fundamental ethical principles of research involving human participants and in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Before beginning to complete the online questionnaire, respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymous nature of data collection, and the option to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. Completing and submitting the questionnaire was considered an expression of informed consent to participate in the research. No direct identifying information about respondents was collected during data collection, and all data were processed confidentially and analysed exclusively in aggregated form for research purposes. For respondents under the age of 18, data collection was conducted through an intermediary institution with an emphasis on protecting anonymity and minimising any potential burden associated with participation in the research.

Statistical analyses

Given the nature of the data, a combination of parametric and nonparametric statistical methods was used. Since several of the analysed variables were ordinal in nature and normality tests confirmed significant deviations from the normal distribution, nonparametric methods were primarily used. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used to achieve the first sub-objective. To achieve the second sub-objective, the Mann-Whitney *U*-test was used, while the *t*-test for independent samples was included only as a supplementary indicative measure. To achieve the third sub-objective, correlation analysis and simple linear regression were used. The analyses were conducted at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

Results

Association between sexting and unwanted online sexual solicitation

We examined the association between the frequency of sexting and the rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation among Slovak youth. We proceeded from the assumption that a higher level of engagement in sexualised forms of online interaction may be associated with a higher rate of negative experiences in the online environment. To test this hypothesis, both Pearson's and Spearman's correlation coefficients were calculated. Given the significant skewness of the data, in which most respondents scored low and only a small proportion scored high, Spearman's coefficient (ρ) was considered the primary indicator, as it is methodologically more appropriate for this type of distribution. The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation analysis between sexting and unwanted online sexual solicitation

Statistical indicator	Value	Interpretation
Spearman's correlation coefficient (ρ)	0.542	Strong positive correlation
Pearson's correlation coefficient (r)	0.498	Moderately strong positive correlation
Significance level (p)	<0.001	Highly statistically significant

A higher frequency of sexting is statistically significantly associated with a higher rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation. Analysis using Spearman's correlation coefficient revealed a statistically significant strong positive relationship between the frequency of sexting and the rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation ($\rho = 0.542$; $p < 0.001$). The result suggests that a higher frequency of sexting is statistically significantly associated with a higher rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation in the study sample.

Differences in the prevalence of unwanted online sexual solicitation based on the presence of unknown online contacts

We compared the rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation among respondents who do and do not have strangers in their list of online contacts. The Mann-Whitney *U*-test was applied; we also present supplementary results from the *t*-test. The primary results of the analysis are presented in Table 3, and the supplementary results in Table 4.

Table 3. Results of the Mann–Whitney *U*-test based on the presence of foreign contacts

Statistical indicator	Value	Interpretation
Mann–Whitney <i>U</i> -test	11 402.50	Test statistic
Z-score	4.82	Significant difference between groups
Significance level (<i>p</i>)	<0.001	Highly statistically significant
Average rank (those with strangers)	212.4	Higher response rate
Average rank (those without strangers)	148.6	Lower response rate

Table 4. Comparison of groups based on the presence of foreign contacts

Statistical indicator	Value	Interpretation
<i>t</i> -statistic (<i>t</i>)	4.31	A statistically significant difference between the means
Degrees of freedom (df)	369	Number of degrees of freedom based on sample size
Significance level (<i>p</i>)	<0.001	Highly statistically significant
Mean (with strangers)	2.44	Higher rate of unwanted contact
Mean (without strangers)	1.72	Lower rate of unwanted contact
Mann–Whitney <i>U</i> -test	11 402.50	(Original value of the nonparametric test)
Z-score	4.82	(Original value of the nonparametric test)

Given the violation of normality in the “unwanted contact” variable, the nonparametric Mann–Whitney *U*-test was primarily used. To verify the results, a *t*-test for independent samples was also conducted, which confirmed the observed differences at a high level of significance ($t(369) = 4.31$; $p < 0.001$). Both statistical methods agree that respondents with strangers on their friends list face a significantly higher rate of online harassment.

The results show that respondents with unknown individuals in their list of online contacts reported a significantly higher rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation in the study sample.

The association between unwanted online sexual solicitation and anxiety while using the internet

We examined the relationship between the frequency of unwanted online sexual solicitation and the level of anxiety experienced while using the internet. The study employed a combined analysis consisting of correlation analysis and simple linear regression. Given the non-normal distribution of the data, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (ρ) was interpreted as the primary indicator of the strength of the relationship.

The correlation analysis presented in Table 5 revealed a statistically significant positive association between the level of unwanted online sexual solicitation and the level of anxiety while using the internet ($\rho = 0.385$; $p < 0.001$). At the same time, simple linear regression showed that unwanted online sexual solicitation is a statistically significant predictor of anxiety in the sample. The regression model was significant ($F = 64.2$; $p < 0.001$) and explained 14.8% of the variance in

anxiety ($R^2 = 0.148$). The result suggests that a higher rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation is associated with a higher level of anxiety while using the internet in the study sample.

Table 5. The association between unwanted online sexual solicitation and anxiety

Statistical indicator	Value	Interpreting the strength of a relationship	Statistical significance (<i>p</i>)
Spearman's correlation coefficient (ρ)	0.385	Moderate correlation	$p < 0.001$

Discussion

The results of our research suggest that a higher frequency of sexting is significantly associated with a higher rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation, with respondents who have strangers in their contact list facing a significantly higher risk of such experiences. At the same time, it was found that the rate of unwanted online sexual solicitation is a significant predictor of anxiety while using the internet.

These findings can also be interpreted through the theory of routine activities and the concept of online disinhibition. From the perspective of routine activities theory, sexting, communicating with strangers, and a more open network of online contacts may increase young people's exposure to situations involving unwanted online sexual communication or online sexual victimisation (Dodaj et al., 2024; Vale et al., 2022; Wachs et al., 2020). The concept of online disinhibition also explains that anonymity, physical distance, and a diminished sense of responsibility can foster more impulsive or aggressive sexually oriented behavior in the online environment (Suler, 2004; Villa-Henao et al., 2025). These findings are consistent with several international studies. Reer et al. (2021) demonstrated that sexting and sexualised self-presentation online significantly increase the risk of online sexual victimisation; they also found a positive correlation between these experiences and symptoms of depression or anxiety. Similarly, Gassó et al. (2020) report that both sexting and online sexual victimisation are associated with poorer mental health, particularly among women. Gámez-Guadix and Incera (2021) also confirmed that sexting and unsolicited sexual advances are among the significant mediating factors in the relationship between belonging to a minority group and an increased risk of depression or anxiety. In the Slovak context, Izrael et al. (2024) found that approximately 17–20% of children and adolescents reported having been asked for intimate information online, despite not wanting to answer such questions. This confirms that unwanted online sexual solicitation represents a real and significant phenomenon in the online environment.

In contrast to our findings from the general youth population, Horváthová (2024) describes sexting in the setting of child and family centres in the context of cumulative risk behaviours and the need for timely multidisciplinary intervention. Our finding of a higher risk of harassment among respondents with strangers on their friends list is also supported by the results of Lahti et al. (2024). They identified communication with strangers as a significant predictor of exposure to threats on social networks, including sexual harassment. Reer et al. (2021) also note that more open networks increase the likelihood of encountering unwanted content.

The relationship between unwanted online sexual solicitation and anxiety is consistent with the findings of several studies. In the broader context of adolescents' digital behaviour, Šrobárová and Stachoň (2026) note that the quality of online interactions is more critical to young people's mental well-being than the sheer amount of time spent online, which supports the interpretation that burdensome forms of online contact can be a significant source of psychological distress. This interpretive framework is also supported by the findings of Almašiová et al. (2019), which point to a link between the negative consequences of problematic internet use and manifestations of mental health problems, suggesting that various forms of stressful online experiences can also have psychological impacts. A similar trend is also suggested by the findings of Kohútová et al. (2025), according to whom experiences of online victimisation in the form of cyberbullying caused fear and anxiety in most children and adolescents, pointing to the significant emotional impact of negative online experiences. Reed et al. (2019) demonstrated that adolescent girls exposed to cybersexual harassment are at increased risk of both depressive and anxiety symptoms; similar associations have also been confirmed in other populations (Gassó et al., 2020; Lahti et al., 2024; Reer et al., 2021). Furthermore, Mars et al. (2020) point out that receiving unsolicited sexual comments or material is associated with an increased risk of future mental health difficulties, including self-harm.

On the other hand, Morelli et al. (2016) did not find a clear relationship between the frequency of sexting and symptoms of anxiety or depression, but their study did indicate that sexting was associated with other problematic behaviours, such as intimate partner violence. This broader relational and intervention framework is also supported by Kimpanová et al. (2023), who emphasise the importance of awareness of crisis intervention when working with individuals exposed to violence. Homolová and Tišťanová (2018) add that every behaviour should be viewed as a form of communication; this fully applies to risky behaviours among youth as well. Similarly, in their longitudinal analyses of adolescent girls, Burič et al. (2020) and Mitchell and Štulhofer (2020) did not find a causal relationship between sexting and long-term changes in mental well-being, although short-term associations were confirmed.

From a social work perspective, our findings point to the need for early identification of risky forms of online behaviour and online victimisation among adolescents, as well as the need for preventive and supportive interventions aimed at safe functioning in the digital environment (Horváth and Hlásny, 2025), strengthening psychological resilience, and the early recognition of signs of psychological distress. In the Slovak context, Cifriková et al. (2024) also argue for the need to identify and monitor determinants that may lead to risky sexual activities among adolescents, which underscores the importance of early identification of risky forms of behaviour in the online environment as well. The interpretation of the results must be limited in light of the cross-sectional design of the study and the regional nature of the sample, which consisted of Slovak youth from the Žilina Region. These factors do not allow for the formulation of causal conclusions or the generalisation of findings to the entire population of Slovak youth. We therefore view the results as preliminary and indicative, and further verification should be conducted on larger and geographically more diverse samples.

Recommendations for social work practice

Based on the research findings, we formulate the following implications for social work practice:

- incorporate a brief digital risk screening into counselling and preventive work with youth, for example, by asking about the presence of strangers in their online contacts, experiences with unsolicited sexual messages, coercion, blackmail, or requests to send intimate content;
- identify sexting as a potential risk indicator, not automatically as problematic behaviour; in interventions, it is advisable to focus primarily on issues of safety, consent, boundaries, and the consequences of sharing intimate content;
- promote the safe management of online contacts, particularly by adjusting privacy settings, rejecting unknown contacts, and blocking and reporting problematic accounts or content;
- to identify signs of online sexual victimisation and related anxiety, particularly concerns about the internet, fear of content being made public, avoidance of online environments, or increased stress following a negative online experience;
- develop a simple safety plan when a risk is identified, which may include preserving evidence, ceasing communication with the aggressor, blocking contact, involving a trusted adult, and recommending psychological, educational, or legal assistance;
- to foster interdisciplinary collaboration among social workers, school psychologists, schools, other professionals, and parents; particularly in cases involving blackmail, the dissemination of intimate content without consent, or significant psychological distress experienced by young people.

We consider the main limitations of this study to be its regional scope, the convenience sample nature of the respondent selection, and the distribution of the questionnaire through intermediary educational institutions. These factors make it impossible to accurately determine the response rate and also limit the generalisability of the findings to the entire population of Slovak youth. Another limitation is the use of a self-designed questionnaire, with some of the variables under study captured through single-item indicators. We therefore interpret the results as indicative research indicators of the phenomena under study. Given the cross-sectional design of the study, it is also not possible to draw causal conclusions about the relationships between sexting, unwanted online sexual solicitation, and anxiety. For the same reason, it was not possible to reliably verify potential mediating relationships between the observed variables; the potential moderating role of gender and age requires verification in further research using larger and geographically more diverse samples.

Conclusion

As part of a regional pilot study, we have presented preliminary findings on the relationships between selected forms of risky online behaviour, unwanted online sexual solicitation, and anxiety while using the internet among Slovak youth. The identified associations suggest that sexting and the presence of strangers in online contacts may represent significant risk factors for unwanted online sexual solicitation, which also appears to be significantly linked to higher levels of anxiety. Despite the regional and cross-sectional nature of the research, we consider these results a relevant starting point for further empirical verification, as well as for preventive and supportive interventions in social work.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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