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DAMNED IF YOU DO, DAMNED IF YOU DON'T... IF YOU'RE A GIRL: RELATIONAL AND NORMATIVE CONTEXTS OF ADOLESCENT SEXTING IN THE UNITED STATES

Julia R. Lippman and **Scott W. Campbell**

This study examines the relational, normative, gender, and age dynamics of adolescent sexting in the USA using open-ended questionnaires. Girls in the study were no more likely than boys to sext; however, they were more likely to experience pressure to do so, particularly from boys. Girls were commonly judged harshly whether they sexted (e.g., "slut") or not (e.g., "prude"), whereas boys were virtually immune from criticism regardless. Older adolescents described sexting as occurring primarily within the context of flirting, romance, or sex, whereas younger adolescents reported what might be described as "pre-sexting" behaviors, involving the joking exchange of sexually suggestive (but non-nude) photos with platonic friends. Although some adolescents expressed a fear that sexting might lead to reputational damage, the normative climate and desire for approval motivated some to sext regardless. Implications and avenues for future research are offered in the discussion.

KEYWORDS sexting; mobile communication; mobile phone; cell phone; adolescents; sexual double standard; gender; norms

Sexting may be broadly defined as the transmission via electronic means of sexually provocative or explicit images or videos featuring someone known to the sender and/or receiver (Lenhart, 2009). Although sexting has received a lot of attention in the popular press, scholarly work has only recently begun to provide an evidence-based understanding of the phenomenon. Scholarly work on adolescent sexting is particularly critical because the tone of mainstream media coverage of this issue has many features of a "media panic," in which discussion of a new media technology is informed primarily by social anxieties rather than reason (Draper, 2012). Notably, media panics tend to focus on the effect new technologies have on youth, who are portrayed as vulnerable and in need of protection.

Given the sensationalistic nature of much of the popular discourse on adolescent sexting, it is critical to understand the social contexts in which this behavior actually occurs. For orientation, we will first review what is known about the frequency and contexts of adolescent sexting. Building on this knowledge, we then review relevant research and theory that serve as a framework for guiding research questions about key contextual elements that shape adolescents' perceptions of and participation in sexting.

Descriptive Profile of Adolescent Sexting

For the purposes of this study, we use Lenhart's (2009) definition of sexting, which is "a picture or video involving the nudity of someone known to the sender and/or receiver sent using a mobile phone." A number of surveys in the USA provide a descriptive profile of adolescent sexting, although many of these surveys employ different definitions of "sexting." One nationally representative study of sexting found that 19 percent of teens in the USA (ages 13–19 years) have sent nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves to someone via electronic means, and 31 percent of teens have received such a message (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008). Another survey, focusing on a slightly older population (14–24-year-olds), produced lower figures, with 10 percent of participants claiming to have sent a sext of themselves, and 18 percent claiming to have received a sext that depicted the sender (MTV-Associated Press, 2009). However, these sets of figures likely overestimate the incidence of sexting as we define it (i.e., mobile-based sexting), because both surveys include images and videos transmitted electronically, more broadly. A report by The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, 2009), the source of our definition of sexting, supports this possibility. In that report, 4 percent of adolescents (ages 12–17 years) who owned cell phones reported having used their phones to send sexts, whereas 15 percent of cell phone-owning adolescents reported receiving sexts. A more recent nationally representative study of 10–17-year-olds provides even lower estimates, finding that 2.5 percent of participants had sent a sext, and 7.1 percent had received a sext (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012). In other words, few adolescents seem to be generating these types of messages, yet this behavior has nonetheless generated a firestorm of attention in the popular press.

Four findings are common among these national surveys. First, sexts are often redistributed without the permission or knowledge of the original sender. Second, sexts are commonly sent to desired or actual romantic and/or sexual partners. Third, sexting becomes more common as adolescents mature. Finally, despite the gendered media coverage, girls are actually no more (Lenhart, 2009)—or at best, only slightly more (MTV-Associated Press, 2009)—likely than boys to send these types of images of themselves. This last observation is particularly interesting, given that images involving girls have garnered the spotlight on this issue (Draper, 2012). Thus, there are gender dynamics surrounding adolescent sexting, but they seem to manifest not in terms of the frequency of this behavior, but instead through differential evaluations of sexting that hinge on the gender of the parties involved.

This descriptive profile may not be sufficient for developing specific hypotheses to explain adolescent sexting, but it does provide some points of entry for inquiry that may lead to testable hypotheses for future research. The findings highlighted in the previous paragraph indicate that deeper understanding of this behavior may be gained through insights into the relational contexts of adolescent sexting and the normative landscape surrounding it. There also appear to be gender dynamics at play in perceptions and evaluations of sexting, and the increased prevalence of sexting as adolescents mature suggests that there may be a developmental component to this behavior, as well. This study utilizes these observations as points of entry to guide our inquiry of the social contexts surrounding adolescent sexting.

Adolescent Sexting: Scholarly Perspectives

As mentioned in the opening paragraph, adolescent sexting has only recently started to attract scholarly attention. Several papers on the topic employ a risk frame, examining whether sexting is correlated with risk or negative health outcomes (Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2012; Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2012). One consistent finding in this work is that sexting is associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in other sexual behaviors (e.g., sexual intercourse) and having a higher level of sexual experience (e.g., number of sexual partners). Whether this is because both sexual activity and sexting are expressions of sexual interest and thus not causally related to one another, or because sexting is acting as a “gateway” to increased levels of sexual activity and experience, is unclear. Furthermore, findings on the relation between sexting and mental health outcomes are mixed: although Dake et al. (2012) find that sexting is associated with negative mental health outcomes (e.g., depression), Gordon-Messer et al. (2012) find that they are unrelated.

However, Levine (2013) questions the usefulness of a risk frame to understanding adolescent sexting, asking “why [are we] even starting from a place that sharing sexy pictures might be linked to unhealthy behaviors in young adults?” (p. 257). We share her concern, and we suggest that research employing a risk frame may obscure some of the more normative—and even beneficial—motives for and outcomes of adolescent sexting. As Hasinoff (2013) points out, in sharp contrast to the framing of adolescent sexting in popular publications, which focuses on the riskiness of the behavior almost to the exclusion of all else, publications targeting older adults promote sexting as a healthy form of sexual expression that can contribute to stronger sexual bonds and mention the risks of sexting only in passing.

From a developmental perspective, there are several potential explanations for why some adolescents sext. A healthy part of adolescent development includes a newfound interest in sexuality, and media and peers have traditionally been two of the primary resources for adolescents struggling to make sense of their nascent sexuality, in part because adolescents often do not feel they can approach adults with these concerns (Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002). As a result, both media and peers often play a significant role in shaping adolescents’ sexual attitudes, beliefs, and expectancies, and both information sources may contribute to an erroneous perception that “everyone is doing it” (Ward, 2003).

Adolescence is also a period during which individuals work to establish themselves as independent actors. This process is known as emancipation, and it is associated with increased peer engagement and decreased family engagement (Brown & Larson, 2009). Emancipation is also associated with changing patterns of traditional media use, with older adolescents moving away from family television viewing and embracing music, which better speaks to issues that are salient to older adolescents (e.g., independence, sexuality) (Larson, Kubey, & Colletti, 1989). Emancipation is also associated with changing patterns of new media use. The mobile phone, for example, provides adolescents with more control over and privacy in their communications with peers, and thus is ideally suited to facilitate adolescents’ emancipation from their parents (Ling, 2005). In support of an emancipatory explanation for adolescent sexting behavior, Campbell and Park (2014) find sexting is positively associated with using mobile communication for peer connectivity but negatively associated with its use for family engagement.

Adolescent Sexting: Normative Perspectives

Norms may also help explain sexting behavior. Lapinski and Rimal (2005) distinguish between collective norms, which refer to norms that apply to a social entity, and perceived norms, which refer to an individual's perception of what those collective norms are. There is often overlap between the two (i.e. an individual's perception that something is a collective norm might be accurate), but this is not necessarily the case (i.e., an individual might believe that something is normative when, in fact, it is not). The gulf between collective norms and perceived norms is typically greatest in domains in which the ability to gain insight into others' actual behaviors is limited, as is the case with sexual behaviors (Chia & Gunther, 2006).

Perceived norms are categorized as descriptive (beliefs about what is commonly done within one's social group) or injunctive (beliefs about what one *should* do in a given social context, reinforced through rewards and sanctions) (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Injunctive norms may be either social injunctive norms (beliefs about the extent to which members of a reference group approve or disapprove of a given behavior) or personal injunctive norms (individualized beliefs about the acceptability of a given behavior; also referred to as "moral norms"; Schwartz, 1968). A recent study suggests that adolescents' personal injunctive norms may partially explain their sexting behavior (Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaíta, & Rullo, 2013). Among teens who believed that sending sexts was acceptable, 28.7 percent had sent a sext; among teens who believed that sending sexts was "always wrong," only 4.9 percent had sent a sext. These findings indicate that (a) there is a relation between teens' personal injunctive norms concerning sexting and their own sexting behavior, such that those who express greater approval of the behavior are more likely to engage in it, but (b) some teens who believe sexting is wrong sext anyway. Indeed, 14.9 percent of teens who reported having sent a sext believed sexting was "wrong." In contrast to the effect of norms on sexting behavior, however, an awareness of potential legal consequences did not act as a deterrent to sexting; on the contrary, teens who indicated that they were aware that there could be legal consequences to sexting were *more* likely to have sent a sext than teens who did not.

It is important to keep in mind that norms for sexual behavior can vary dramatically depending on the gender of the parties involved. These differing norms are referred to as the sexual double standard, which posits that men and boys are socially rewarded for higher levels of sexual experience, whereas women and girls incur social penalties for the same behaviors. Recent qualitative inquiries into adolescent sexting behavior suggest that this behavior may conform to a sexual double standard, at least in the UK and Australia (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012; Walker, Sancı, & Temple-Smith, 2013). In these contexts, girls who sexted were viewed as slutty (and responsible) when they sent sexts to boys, even when they only sent images of themselves in response to real or perceived pressure from male peers. For boys, by contrast, sexting was a path to increased social status. Perhaps because of this double standard, girls involved in the exchange of these types of messages report higher levels of distress than boys (Livingstone & Görzig, 2012). However, the scale of these studies is limited ($N = 33$ and 35), and it remains unclear whether the findings point to a pattern that translates into other cultural and media environments. Thus, this study offers an opportunity to confirm previously identified trends as well as to identify new ones that might be specific to the USA.

Research Questions

Although we know a bit about the prevalence and correlates of adolescent sexting, research providing in-depth insight into social contexts of this behavior is in its infancy. Much of the existing research on sexting has tended to focus on what is occurring rather than why, creating a need for scholarship aimed at building theory. Indeed, Chalfen (2010) argued that one important future direction for research on adolescent sexting was qualitative work that could provide insight into adolescents' motives for sexting. The present study takes a step in this direction with a qualitative analysis of the social contexts of adolescent sexting in the USA. The aim was to complement the existing US-based quantitative data on adolescent sexting, and to use these insights to inform the generation of hypotheses to guide future research in this area. Drawing from themes in the research discussed above, we entered this project with three research questions.

RQ1: What are the relational contexts of adolescent sexting?

RQ2: What are the normative contexts of adolescent sexting?

RQ3: Do gender or age intersect with the relational or normative contexts of adolescent sexting?

With RQ1, we sought to understand the types of relationships in which adolescents might send, receive, or exchange sexts, and to gain insight into the motives that inform sexting in these relational contexts. RQ2 was aimed at understanding the extent to which adolescents see sexting as acceptable, and at uncovering some of the rationales informing these opinions. Finally, RQ3 reflected our interest in examining possible gender and age differences in the relational and normative contexts of adolescent sexting.

Method

Procedure

Data for this study entailed responses to open-ended written questionnaires that were administered during focus groups in three different American cities as part of the "Teens and Mobile Phones" project by the Pew Internet and American Life Foundation and the University of Michigan (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). During the focus groups, participants were asked to spend 20–30 minutes privately, confidentially, and anonymously providing written responses to a number of open-ended questions about sexting, as well as other topics that were not part of the present study. This approach was taken in order to mitigate the risk of any discomfort that may arise from discussing sensitive matters openly amongst other adolescents, and to gain approval from Pew's research partner university's Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Participants were strategically recruited by a third-party firm to ensure an appropriate balance of age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, and population density. Fifty-one adolescents participated in these focus groups and therefore completed the questionnaire. Participants ranged in age from 12 to 18 years ($M = 14.55$, $SD = 1.83$), with a good balance of ages within this range (32 percent, 12–13 years; 37 percent, 14–15 years; 32 percent, 16–18 years). All questionnaires were completed between June and October of 2009.

The sample offers an even gender ratio with twenty-six males and twenty-five females. Twenty-two participants were from metropolitan Atlanta, fourteen were from metropolitan Denver, and fifteen were from metropolitan New York City.

Measures

The questionnaire items used for this study include the following:

Q: Have you ever sent or received a picture or video on your phone that involves nudity, also sometimes called “sexting”? Explain how often this happens and who sends these kinds of images (without providing names).

Q: In these messages, who are the people being portrayed? Is it someone you know, someone the sender is dating, or anonymous individuals? Again, please describe without providing names.

Q: Did you think the image(s) or video(s) was/were “over the line,” or no big deal?

Q: Have you ever sent these types of pictures or video with your cell phone? If so, what was the situation?

Q: More broadly, do you think it is very common for people in your school to do this? Explain.

As noted earlier, these questions were part of a larger national Pew study (Lenhart et al., 2010). In that sense, the present study is a secondary analysis of existing data. Although the questions were not specifically crafted for this paper, they provide opportunities to address our core research questions.¹

Categories and themes were analyzed using elements of Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1995) framework for analyzing qualitative data. First, both authors carefully read and re-read all the transcripts to become familiar with them. After reading the transcripts, portions of the responses were reassembled and grouped according to two broad patterns reflecting elements of RQ1 and RQ2 described above. Then each pattern was examined and refined into tighter collections of consistencies. With these thematic categories in place, the first author looked for anecdotes and quotations that best illustrate them. Finally, a validity check was conducted by the second author, who examined the findings and offered a final round of fine-tuning.

Results

Of the forty-three focus group participants who gave an answer one way or the other, nine (21 percent; four males, five females) claimed to have sent sexts depicting themselves.² An additional male participant reported having forwarded sexts he received depicting other people. More participants reported they had received a sext. Of the forty-six participants who provided a response to this question, twenty-two (48 percent; fourteen males, eight females) said they had received a sext, and twenty-four (52 percent; ten males, fourteen females) said they had not. These reported occurrences suggest that although sexting is by no means universal among adolescents, it is still not entirely uncommon, and this is especially true of the number of adolescents who receive these images. These prevalence rates are higher than has been observed in nationally representative samples, including the Pew survey associated with the present study (Lenhart et al., 2010), but because of the small size of our sample, we caution against assigning this discrepancy too much weight.

Before reporting on the findings for relational and normative contexts of adolescent sexting, we will first present an emergent theme on which types of consequences adolescents take into consideration when deciding whether or not to sext. A few participants claimed they did not sext because of a fear of consequences from parents ["my mom goes through my phone" (M15)]³; the law or school ["I have never sent or received a picture involving nudity because I do know that it is illegal . . . and at my school you can get in trouble for it" (F16)]; or a generalized fear of "trouble" ["I could get in some trouble" (M15)].

However, responses highlighting consequences one might experience from peers were far more common, and they came from both adolescents who indicated that they did sext and adolescents who claimed they did not. These peer-based consequences mainly revolved around two themes. The first of these was that sexts could easily receive wider exposure than was intended ["you don't know who they will show it to" (M14); "these messages can be sent to anyone and everyone" (F17)]. These fears were not unfounded—participants in all three cities, and of all ages, relayed stories in which this had occurred. For example, one participant wrote, "I have . . . received a few pictures of naked girls. Not usually from the girl herself but from friends who have the picture. Naked pictures have a way of moving through the grapevine pretty quickly" (M18). The second major theme that emerged was a fear that sexting would cause harm to one's reputation [e.g., "I've been asked to send naked pics but I think that's stupid. You can ruin your reputation" (F13)]. Again, this was not an unrealistic fear, and it is a topic we revisit below in the section on gender dynamics. Thus, there was consideration of longer term consequences, but those considerations were driven primarily by concerns associated with peer culture rather than concerns about being caught and punished for breaking rules or laws.

Relational Contexts of Adolescent Sexting

Responses about the relational contexts of sexting primarily came from items on the questionnaire asking about who sends sexts and the nature of the relationship between the parties involved. Our data indicate that sexting is something that often occurred within the context of a desired or established romantic or sexual relationship with peers. Of the thirty-one participants who situated sexting within a relational context, twenty-one (68 percent) described only a romantic and/or sexual context, six described an explicitly non-romantic and non-sexual context (19 percent), and four (13 percent) wrote about both romantic/sexual and non-romantic sexual contexts in which sexting occurred. In other words, of those who described relational context, most wrote that sexting sometimes or always occurred in a romantic and/or sexual context. As one participant wrote, sexting occurs between "two people that like each other or are dating. I have never heard of two strangers 'Sexting'" (F16). This claim was consistent with the experiences with sexting that other participants described.

Some participants noted that sexting was a common way for people to make their sexual interest in one another known. As one participant explained, "if a girl and a guy want to have sex this is a somewhat normal thing to do" (M16). It was clear from our data that participants who received sexts were well aware of what they were meant to communicate. One girl wrote "if a guy wants to hook up with you he'll send pictures of his private parts or a naked picture of him" (F18); boys reported getting sexts from girls "I know I can get it

from" (M16) and "because they like me" (M14). These responses suggest that sexting is being integrated into adolescents' courtship rituals.

Sexting also commonly occurred within existing romantic relationships. In some cases, sexting was merely another form of sexual expression between two people who were already sexually active with one another, as was the case for a participant who wrote, "I only do it with my girlfriend because we have already been sexually active with each other" (M16). In other cases, however, sexting served as a substitute for sexual intercourse. As another participant explained, "Once a week if me and my girl get into a hot discussion sometimes we sext . . . we are not having sex we are sexting. It is not against my religion or anything . . . sexting is not as bad" (M16). Others mentioned trading sexts with an established romantic partner ["if my girlfriend sends one she's expecting one from me" (M17)], suggesting that reciprocity was sometimes a motivation for sending sexts.

The findings reported above also show that these relational dynamics play out differently for girls and boys. We will set those observations aside for now and move on to the normative contexts of adolescent sexting, but we will return to this theme in a section that explicates gender and age trends in the relational and normative contexts of adolescent sexting.

Normative Contexts of Adolescent Sexting

Most of the data on adolescents' perceptions of sexting came from the portion of the transcripts addressing whether they saw sexts as "over the line" or "no big deal." Thirteen participants (25 percent) did not provide a response; twelve (24 percent) said they believed sexting was "over the line"; twenty-one (41 percent) believed that sexting was "no big deal," and five (10 percent) provided responses indicating that sexting was a big deal in some circumstances but not others.⁴ A majority of adolescents, then, believed that sexting was "no big deal," although a notable minority believed that it was "over the line."

Participants with strong judgments against sexting typically offered one of two reasons. The first was the fear that sexting could have negative consequences when distributed to unintended others. As one participant explained, sexts are over line "because someone could show someone else or post it to the web" (M13). The second reason participants gave to account for their belief that sexting was over the line was that sexting was "wrong," reflecting a personal injunctive norm about what individuals should or should not do. One participant, for example, believed that sexting was over the line "because they were doing something that was wrong even though they generally disregard the fact" (M14). These responses suggested a set of values or morals that led these participants to see the "wrongness" of sexting as self-evident.

Participants offered a more diverse array of explanations to account for the more commonly-held belief that sexting was no big deal. Some saw sexting as a fun diversion ["I love texting and making videos so it's not a big deal for me . . . it's really fun to show my pics" (F12), characterizing it as "silly and meaningless" (F15), or claiming that people who sext are "just joking around" (M13)]. Other participants provided accounts that suggested they did not distinguish between real-life nudity and pictorial depictions of it. As one wrote, sexts are "no big deal, because your (*sic*) probably just gonna see it anyway" (F15). Relatedly, some participants believed that if they were already physically intimate with somebody, receiving a sext from that person was not a problem because they had already seen the body depicted: as one participant explained, the sexts he receives from his

girlfriend are “not really a big deal because . . . we’re already sexually active with each other” (M16).

Another explanation participants provided to account for their belief that sexting was “no big deal” suggested that descriptive norms influence perceptions of how serious sexting is. As one participant explained, sexting “happens a lot, my friends do it all the time, it’s not a big deal” (F16). Another wrote, “I know people think this is dangerous but to me it’s not a big deal because I get them a lot” (M14). For both these participants, the belief that sexting was “no big deal” co-existed with awareness of potential consequences—the first wrote elsewhere in her response that exes “will send the nudes as blackmail” after a breakup; the second acknowledged that other people saw the behavior as dangerous. Therefore, in these cases, it appears that the descriptive norm that sexting is a common activity may be exerting a greater influence on evaluations of sexting than recognition of negative consequences.

Gender and Age Trends

Gender: Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don’t . . . If You’re a Girl

The most striking finding with regard to gender was the extent to which girls, but not boys, were judged for their sexting practices. There was only one exception to this trend, with a 15-year-old girl claiming the images she had received were “from perverted boys who have nothing better to do.” Other than this, the targets of these judgments were overwhelmingly female ($N = 15$; 29 percent of sample).⁵ We identified three types of judgments of girls’ sexting practices: negative judgments about girls who sext, expressions of the belief that only a certain “type” of girl sexts, and negative judgments of girls who do not sext.

The participants who made negative judgments of female sexters were largely male. As one succinctly put it, “I know of people who [sext]. Underground slut” (M17). These participants commonly paired their negative judgments of these girls with attempts to explain why girls send sexts:

One time this crazy girl who liked me sent me a nude picture of her for no reason . . . [she] was just insecure. (M12)

This is common only for girls with “slut” reputations. They do it to attract attention . . . [it’s inappropriate, but] it’s the fault of the girl who sent them. That she is being seen like that. (M18)

I have received some pics that include nudity. Girls will send them sometimes, not often. I don’t know why they think it’s a good idea but I’m not going to stop it . . . I like classy girls so I don’t like them as much anymore it makes them look slutty. (M14)

According to these accounts, then, girls who send sexts are—to use some of our male participants’ words—crazy, insecure, attention-seeking sluts with poor judgment. Nowhere in these responses did these participants stop to consider the ways in which forces external to the girls (including the boys themselves) might be contributing to girls’ decisions to send sexts. Indeed, one of these boys even wrote “I’m not going to stop it,” implying that on some level he enjoyed receiving sexts, even though he expressed no qualms about denigrating the girls who sent them.

Girls’ accounts of their own motives for sexting painted a different picture, suggesting that in some cases, they felt pressure from boys to send sexts and believed that

sending them was the undesirable price they had to pay for a desirable relationship. As one wrote, “my boyfriend or someone I really liked asked for them. And I felt like if I didn’t do it, they wouldn’t continue to talk to me” (F16). Another claimed “guys ask for them and if we don’t send them they will think we aren’t outgoing and get mad” (F14). It is possible that for this latter participant, who elsewhere in her response wrote “every teen does it. I usually send it to guys that ask,” her sense of the descriptive norm (“every teen does it”) and the social injunctive norm (that she would incur social sanctions if she did not sext) contributed to her sense that she had no option but to sext. Despite the fact that she acknowledged that “sometimes pictures get around the whole school. And rumors start that way,” she characterized her decision to send sexts as not “a big deal, it’s just a picture we are old enough to have seen it before.” These girls’ accounts suggest that it is not sluttiness or attention seeking that leads them to sext, but a desire for approval and social acceptance. However, the boys’ responses indicate that sending sexts is not likely to help girls reach these desired ends—even though the boys might be communicating that it will.

Boys were not the only ones to express negative judgments of girls who sext, although they did so more commonly than girls. While boys’ judgments focused on the perceived “sluttiness” of girls who sent sexts, girls were critical of female sexters for lacking self-respect. As one pondered, “sometimes I wonder how girls can send naked pics to a boy. I think it’s gross. They’re disrespecting themselves” (F13).

The second form of judgment we identified in participants’ responses was the belief that only a certain “type” of girl sends sexts. For example, one girl, when asked whether she had sent sexts, wrote, “I’m not really that type of person” (F17). Another girl said that although she was not sure how common sexting was in her school, “knowing the type of people at my school and how they act, I wouldn’t be surprised” (F14). Although these comments do not contain explicitly negative statements about sexters, it is conceivable that they implicitly communicate a negative judgment, a point we elaborate on in the discussion.

Given these judgments of female sexters, it would seem a girl’s best option might be to opt out. However, girls who did not sext were not immune from criticism. When asked if it was common for people at their schools to sext, one participant wrote, “yes, but not a lot because most girls are like goody girls” (M13); one answered “not really because most of the girls at my school are stuck up” (M16); and one responded, “yes, because my school isn’t very prude like other schools” (M15). In other words, these participants—all of whom were male—either believed sexting was not common because girls were “goody” or “stuck up” or that it was common because girls were not “prude.”⁶

Age: Pre-Sexting

Adolescents were increasingly likely to place sexting within a romantic and/or sexual context as they got older. To quantify this trend, we split the participants into three roughly equal groups based on age and coded each response that indicated that sexting sometimes or always occurs in a romantic and/or sexual relational context (romantic/sexual mentions (RMS)). Of the 12–13-year-olds, five (31 percent) made a RMS; of the 14–15-year-olds, eight (42 percent) made an RMS; and of the 16–18-year-olds, twelve (75 percent) made an RMS.

Although the majority of the oldest adolescents in our sample viewed sexting as something that often or exclusively occurred within a romantic and/or sexual context, younger adolescents often characterized sexting as something they did to joke around or

have fun with platonic friends. The nine participants who wrote about sexting in this way were all between the ages of 12 and 15 years, and no participants who were 16 years or older talked about sexting in these terms. Moreover, the nature of the incidents described by these younger adolescents was often qualitatively different from those described by their older counterparts. For example, one participant claimed, “my friends and I joke about [sexting] and send fake pictures to each other of our elbows looking like a butt, but it’s never serious” (F15). Another wrote, “some people send texts with like a cartoon boy shaking his butt. It’s not that serious though” (F15). In short, these younger participants may be engaging in a type of “pre-sexting,” sending sexually suggestive—rather than sexually explicit—messages and doing it as a form of joking around.

Discussion

Consistent with existing research (Mitchell et al., 2012; MTV-Associated Press, 2009), the adolescents in this study reported that much of the explicit sexting they and their peers engaged in took place in the context of a desired or established romantic and/or sexual relationship. Although some adolescents believed that sexting was “over the line” because sexts could reach a wider audience than the sender intended or because they saw sexting as “wrong,” a greater number believed that sexting was “no big deal” because “everyone” did it, because sexters were just having fun, or because the image depicted a body they would see or had already seen. Adolescents were cognizant of the potential consequences one could experience because of sexting, and the consequences of greatest concern to them were those involving their peers. Specifically, participants acknowledged that sexts were often forwarded to classmates without the sexter’s consent, and they expressed concern that sending sexts might cause reputational damage. However, an awareness of potential consequences did not necessarily translate to a decision not to send sexts. We found that although boys were virtually immune from criticism for their sexting practices, girls faced intense scrutiny for theirs. We also observed age differences in the way adolescents described their experiences with sexting, with younger adolescents describing what we term “pre-sexting” behavior that involved the transmission of suggestive, but not sexually explicit, images.

As noted earlier, a primary aim of this study was that its findings help identify avenues for future research and suggest testable hypotheses. Therefore, the ensuing discussion will emphasize the ways in which these findings point to avenues for future inquiry into adolescent sexting.

Although our study and others indicate that adolescent sexting is not, in actuality, a highly prevalent practice, our findings suggest that youth perceive it as fairly common. This apparent gap between the descriptive norm for sexting and the actual frequency of this behavior may help explain why some adolescents engage in it. It may be that a false consensus effect—which describes people’s tendency to “see their own behavioral choices and judgments as relatively common...while viewing alternative responses as uncommon” (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977, p. 280)—may account for at least some of the variance in this behavior. Future research will benefit from testing whether descriptive norms for sexting are significantly associated with this behavior, such that perceptions of it as common increase the likelihood of doing it.

Our study also suggests that social injunctive norms play a role in adolescent sexting. That is, some girls feel pressure to sext because they perceive it as something they *should*

do if they want to please, or capture the attention of, boys. In some cases, this pressure even overrides awareness of and concern over potential consequences for sexting. Follow-up work in this area should test the expectation that social injunctive norms expressed by girls—i.e., the belief that they should sext, and that there is a social cost for not sexting—increase the likelihood of this behavior.

On a related note, participants' responses indicated that a sexual double standard informs their opinions of fellow adolescents who sext. Boys in our study described girls who did send sexts as "sluts" or "insecure," whereas they characterized girls who did not send sexts as "prude" or "stuck up." This indicates that sexting is a lose–lose proposition for girls; regardless of whether or not they sext, their behavior is evaluated in harsh—and often sexist—terms. Based on these findings, one might hypothesize that sexting is evaluated differently depending on whether the sexter is a boy or a girl, with female sexters generating more negative assessments.

Another pattern of responses that may indicate judgment involves girls who claimed they did not send sexts because they were not that "type" of girl. Although more implied than overt, it is conceivable that referring to a certain "type" of person in this case has a negative connotation. At a minimum, these statements suggest a distancing, a disaffiliation with people who do sext. Given that perceiving oneself as similar to, or wanting to be like, people who engage in a given behavior increases the likelihood of engaging in that behavior (Rimal & Real, 2005), seeing those who sext as dissimilar to oneself may serve as a deterrent to sexting.

The age trends we observed indicated that younger adolescents were more likely to engage in what we term "pre-sexting," involving provocative, non-nude images exchanged with platonic friends for fun. By contrast, when older adolescents talked about sexting, they described sexually explicit messages most commonly sent to a desired or established romantic or sexual partner. This "pre-sexting" trend has not been identified in the research on sexting thus far, and it warrants further investigation. It would be particularly useful to examine whether this type of pre-sexting by young teens serves as a precursor to exchanging more sexually explicit messages later on, or if, rather, pre-sexting is distinct from sexting.

Policy Implications

Legal authorities have struggled to identify the appropriate response to underage sexting (see Calvert, 2009, for an excellent overview of the issues at stake). Calvert argues that a legal distinction should be drawn between primary sexters (i.e., minors who distribute images of their own bodies) and secondary sexters (i.e., minors who distribute images of others), and between volitional sexting (sexting that involves the consent of all sending and receiving parties) and non-volitional sexting. The findings from this study complicate these distinctions in that girls who consciously chose to sext were sometimes yielding to social pressures and expectations, particularly from boys they trusted. When that trust is violated and images are distributed by a secondary party, the girl is arguably more victim than "primary offender." Policy makers may also benefit from noting that our findings challenge Leary's (2008) claim that prosecuting adolescent sexters is in part justified because it will deter underage sexting. In this study, the fear of reputational damage loomed far larger in our participants' minds than the fear of legal consequences.

Educational campaigns might be a more effective means by which to minimize the harms associated with adolescent sexting. Rather than attempting to eliminate adolescent sexting entirely (an approach likely to be as (in)effective as abstinence-only education), these educational initiatives could instead focus on discouraging the unauthorized distribution of sexts (Hasinoff, 2013). This approach would treat breaches of consent, rather than sexual expression itself, as the problem in need of remedy.

Limitations

Some limitations of this study bear mentioning. First, these data are not—nor are they meant to be—representatives of all adolescents' attitudes toward sexting. Rather than generalizability, the strength of these qualitative data lies in their ability to provide deeper insights into adolescent sexting in the USA than has been possible through large-scale surveys. Throughout the discussion, we offer theoretical grounding for several areas of follow-up investigation that can be conducted through survey and experimental approaches, but that is not to suggest more qualitative work is not needed. As noted, data for this study entailed written questionnaires administered during focus group sessions. This ensured participants' privacy and confidentiality, but at the cost of the richness of interactive discussion. One potential approach for follow-up qualitative work in this area is one-on-one interviews, which offer the depth of interactive dialog and privacy. Another limitation worth mentioning is that the findings provide just one snapshot of a social phenomenon that is likely in flux, with regard to both the social circumstances in which it occurs and the technology that supports it. Recent survey research, for example, suggests that the prevalence of adolescent sexting may be on the decline (Mitchell et al., 2012). If true, this is likely to have implications for the extent to which adolescents perceive sexting as normative. Future work is needed to understand adolescent sexting in the context of social and technological change.

Concluding Remarks

The findings from this study provide new insights into the ways in which the relational and normative contexts of adolescents' lives shape both their sexting behavior and their evaluations of sexting. Age also played an important role, with sexting primarily occurring among older adolescents. However, some younger adolescents did report sending suggestive, but not nude, images as a way of joking around. In addition, gender played a pronounced role throughout the findings. Girls reported feeling pressured into sexting, if not overtly then more subtly through perceived injunctive norms. Girls were also evaluated in distinctive ways for sexting. Whereas boys' sexting practices were largely unremarked upon, girls were reduced to negative female stereotypes whether they did sext or not, indicating that when it comes to sexting, girls really are "damned if they do, damned if they don't."

NOTES

1. The relational component (RQ1) of our study was addressed through items asking for description and explanation of who sends sexts, who is portrayed in them, the nature of the relationship, and the situations in which sexting takes place. The normative (RQ2)

component of the study was addressed through items asking about participants' perceptions of how common this practice is and their judgments of it. Data for RQ3, regarding gender and age, were woven throughout all the questions and further addressed by sub-grouping participant responses along these lines.

2. In the consent form, we told participants not to respond to any questions that made them uncomfortable. Because the questions asked about sensitive topics, it is not surprising that some participants exercised this option. Non-responses did not clearly align with sex, age, or location differences. It is unclear what type of bias these non-responses may have introduced. For example, younger adolescents may not have fully understood the questions because they had not been exposed to sexting, whereas older adolescents with extensive sexting experience may have deliberately declined to respond because of social desirability concerns.
3. The information following each participant quotation in this paper indicates the sex and age of the participant to whom it is attributed. For example, this participant was a 15-year-old male.
4. Three participants did not answer this question directly but provided information elsewhere in their responses that allowed us to classify them as holding one of these views. Two of the participants were coded as believing that sexting is over the line, and one was coded as believing that sexting is no big deal.
5. We do not wish to imply that women are the only people who are negatively affected by beliefs about their gender, and we recognize that men experience significant pressure to live up to a masculine ideal. However, these themes were not—with the exception of this one response—present in our data.
6. Although this participant did not specifically refer to girls—he said the school was prude, not the girls at the school—we believe the term “prude” is sufficiently gendered to warrant the assumption that he was referring to girls.

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