What's your 'sext' drive? Examining female emerging adults' experiences of sharing visual sexual content through communication technologies

by

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Abstract

Sexting describes transmitting sexual material through communication technologies such as cell phones. Despite the commonplace nature of sexting among young people and the popularity of the topic in the media, few studies have examined sexting from the perspectives of young people. This exploratory study examined three female emerging adults' lived experiences of sharing visual sexual content of self through communication technologies. Participants completed individual interviews with the researcher regarding their perspectives, motivations, and experiences of sexting. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was employed and results were analyzed according to the procedure outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Five themes emerged: (1) characteristics of relationship, (2) recognizing risk, (3) taking control, (4) enjoying sexting, and (5) juggling different personal perspectives. The results are discussed in terms of implications for sexual health education and mental health practitioners.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Lily Le. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, "What's your 'sext' drive? Female young adults' experiences of sharing sexual content through communication technologies", No. Pro00045889, May 14, 2014.

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What's your 'sext' drive? Examining female emerging adults' experiences of sharing visual sexual content through communication technologies

The emergence of communication technologies has provided young people with new modes of relating with one another. Particularly in the last decade, great interest has arisen in the exchange of sexual messages, images, and videos through communication technologies, known as sexting, among this population. Given the accessibility and convenience of technologies such as text messaging on cell phones, sexting is not uncommon among young people. This exchange can result in negative repercussions, potentially serving an alternate platform for men to commit violence against women. As the media was saturated with stories of problematic instances of sexting, primarily sexting visual content among minors, and female participants' images being exposed without consent, the research on sexting also followed with aims to understand this new phenomenon.

To date, the majority of the literature has focused on the prevalence and risks of sexting, few of which examine sexting from the perspectives of those who engage in it. These topics are important for those working with young people, such as mental health professionals and educators, however, and understanding of what young people are experiencing is essential to providing adequate care for those who may be encountering difficulties. Additionally, gaining insight into the motivations and perceived benefits to sexting among young people can provide information to inform the promotion of positive sexting relationships. As young females are a population of focus for risky sexting, this exploratory, qualitative study aims to understand the experiences of sexting visual content among female emerging adults.

Literature Review

Definition of Sexting

A term coined by the media, sexting combines the word 'sext' and 'text' to describe the act of sending sexual messages, images, or videos through cell phones and other communication technologies. However, there is an inconsistency in the definition of sexting, which is evident within the literature. As Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, and Stills (2013) indicate, there is an inconsistency between how researchers outline the content (e.g. sexually suggestive, sexually explicit, nude, semi-nude), medium (e.g. text messaging, instant messaging, social networking site), and relationship contexts (e.g. significant other, romantic interest, cheating partner) of sexting. Interestingly, despite researchers' aims to differentiate these contexts and come to terms with a comprehensive definition of sexting, not all young people label or define their behavior as sexting (Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013).

The Prevalence of Sexting

The varying definitions of sexting is a primary reason why the prevalence of sexting among young people is difficult to determine, despite several studies having aimed to do this (Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaíta, & Rullo, 2013; Lenhart, 2009; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Drouin et al., 2013; Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2012; Dake, Price, Mazriaz, & Ward, 2012). Moreover, the ages of participants and how these developmental stages are defined make comparison across these studies a challenge (Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014).

In their literature review on adolescents 10-19 years old, Klettke et al. (2014) reported a mean prevalence of sexts containing photo content to be 11.96% among representative random

samples, and slightly higher at 15.45% among non-representative non-random samples. Comparably, the prevalence of receiving sext messages with photo content was 15.64%. The numbers were much higher for young adults 18-30 years. For this age range, the estimated mean prevalence of sexting photo content was 33% among a representative and random sample, and 48.56% among non-representative and non-random samples. Even higher, the prevalence of receiving sext messages with photo content was 56.59%. Although inconsistent definitions of sexting make prevalence rates difficult to compare and determine, studies illustrate that sexting is a commonplace activity among young people and a globalized phenomenon (Agustina & Gómez-Durán, 2012).

Theoretical Frameworks

As sexting research remains in its infancy, little theory exists on the topic. The two predominant frameworks, as Döring (2014) determined in an examination of 50 sexting papers, are a predominant deviance discourse, and an emerging normalcy discourse. I will group my review of the literature as they fit under these two frameworks.

Deviance discourse. This discourse views sexting as a deviant and risky behavior, seeing it as problematic or unhealthy (Döring, 2014). The majority of the sexting research has concentrated on these potential problems.

Sexual risk-taking. Sexting and its correlation with other forms of risk-taking behavior has been a large area of interest. Youth who engage in sexting are more likely to have had sex (Rice et al., 2012; Temple, Paul, Le, McElhany, & Temple, 2012), and a range of sexual behaviors, such as oral sex (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014; Dake et al., 2012). They are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors such as not using protection, having sex with multiple partners, (Dake et al.; Rice et al., 2012) and having concurrent sexual partners (Ybarra & Mitchell). Temple et al.

found that sexting was associated with having multiple partners for girls. Youth who send visual sext messages are more likely to engage in a range of sexual behaviors in comparison to those who only send written sext messages (Houck et al., 2014). Benotsch et al. (2013) found that sexting amongst young adults is also robustly associated with high-risk sexual behaviors, like having unprotected sex and intercourse with multiple partners. Almost one third of participants reported having sex with a new partner after sexting with them (Benotsch et al.). However, some studies have not found any association between sexting and sexual risk-taking behavior (Bauermeister, 2013; Ferguson, 2010; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013).

Substance abuse. There is some evidence that sexting is associated with recent substance abuse (Benotsch et al., 2013) and greater use of alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana in comparison to young people who do not sext (Dake et al., 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Temple et al. (2014) found that in regards to ever using alcohol, marijuana, or other illicit substances, 55.9% of youth who have never sexted reported experience with these substances in comparison to 78.8% of youth who have sexted. In another study, there was a significant association to using drugs and alcohol before sex among girls (Temple et al., 2012).

Psychological well-being. Studies examining the relationship between sexting and psychological well-being are mixed. Dake et al. (2012) found that sexting amongst young people has shown to be associated with psychosocial mental health issues, such as depression, contemplating/attempting suicide, victimization of bullying/cyberbullying, and coercion within a dating relationship. On the other hand, another study investigated the association between sexting and sexual behavior, as well as psychological well-being (anxiety, depression, or self-esteem) and found no relationship (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013). Similarly, Perkins, Becker, Tehee, and Mackelprang (2014) found little difference in risk behavior and mental health

problems when comparing young adult sexters and non-sexters, suggesting that sexting may not be cause for concern. Temple et al., (2014) concluded that although sexting may contribute to other forms of risky behavior, it is not an indicator of poor mental health.

Attachment. In terms of attachment, sexting has been correlated with attachment anxiety (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011). Whereas securely attached couples were more likely to send text messages in one study (Drouin & Landgraff), those who were insecurely attached tend to send sext messages that encompassed texts and images, and avoidant men were more likely to send sext messages and images to their partners in comparison to avoidant women.

Legal implications. The legal implications of sexting have been especially emphasized among minors. Creating, sending, and possessing these images have resulted in child pornography charges among some youth (Willard, 2010). However, Lee, Crofts, Salter, Milivojevic, and McGovern (2013) argue that most of the sexting situations that occur are not in the context of child pornography, and thus legal implications against youth who sext does more harm than good. In Canada, child pornography laws do not intend to target teens who engage in consensual sexting among one another, as long as images are not circulated (Slane, 2009).

For both youth and adults, sharing sexual content of a person without their consent has also resulted in legal repercussions. The act of posting sexually explicit images or videos of a nonconsenting person online, typically by an ex partner, popularly known as revenge porn (Franklin, 2014), is becoming illegal in several countries. In Canada, the Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act (Nicol & Valiquet, 2014) was enacted in 2013 to protect individuals from the nonconsensual distribution of sexual images after several cases of teenage girls' images were distributed without their consent. Over half of the states in the U.S. have criminalized

revenge porn, and several other states have pending bills in legislation ("State Revenge Porn Laws," 2015).

Gender differences. Among the focus of sexting being a problematic behavior, there is especially concern regarding female's participation in sexting. This concern may reflect the reality that females tend to be victims of physical and sexual crimes at a much higher rate and severity than males (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Some studies have illustrated that girls may experience coercion to send sexualized images. About half the female participants in a study by Englander (2012) reported sending an image due to pressure from someone else, often a male, at least once. There is some evidence to suggest that boys may retrieve sexualized images from girls as a way to heighten their status among their peers (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012). Reyns, Burek, Henson, and Fisher (2011) found that the rate of cybervictimization increased by 2.2 for those who engaged in sexting in comparison to those who did not engage in sexting. Females who engaged in sexting were 1.49 times more likely to experience one form of cybervictimization, 2.67 times more likely to experience two forms, and 8.71 times more likely to experience three or more forms in comparison to males (Reyns et al.). On the contrary, Lee and Crofts (2015) argue that these experiences of pressure and coercion are not typical of the average sexting experience among young females.

The unauthorized distribution of sext messages is a major risk that young people may encounter and experience negative repercussions from. Drouin et al. (2013) found that 3% of college students in committed relationships, 15% in casual relationships, and 21% in cheating relationships had reported forwarding images or videos they received with others. This risk may predominantly exist among females, as males tend to report having forwarded a sext message at a greater rate than females (Strassberg, Rullo, & Mackaronis, 2014). A study of college students

discovered that 40% of young men were the receivers of a second-hand sext, and that young men tend to forward sexts more than reciprocating a sext (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013). As some theorists suggest, this transmission of nonconsensual images through technology has provided a new form of sexual objectification and violence against women (Powell, 2010; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013).

The risks associated with sexting have often been depicted in the media, primarily among females. From celebrities (Gay, 2014) to everyday women (Clare, 2015), several stories have surfaced regarding the nonconsensual distribution of sexual content and the damage it caused these women. The suicides of young females who experienced cyberbullying after their images were shared online, such as Canadian teen, Amanda Todd (Lau, 2012), illustrate the devastating impact of the non-consensual distribution of visual sexual content. When visual, sexually explicit images are distributed without consent, it can result in issues such as reputational damage, employment problems, stalking, and harassment (Ronnenburger, 2009; "Power in Numbers," 2014). These problematic, and sometimes tragic stories sparked a public and academic interest on sexting. This dialogue typically viewed sexting as a problem that poses several dangers (Korenis & Billick, 2013; Ahern & Mechling, 2013) and has sparked actions such the creation of anti-sexting campaigns. Especially of concern is the creation and sharing of visual sexual content among young females (Draper, 2012). Walker et al (2011) conducted interviews with experts such as a secondary school teacher, youth psychologist, and cyber-safety expert, and found that they believe that females are more likely to be negatively impacted by sexting.

Some theorists have critiqued this dominant discourse to female sexting and posed new ways of thinking about the issue, such as how the publicized examples of problematic teen sexting has created a moral panic which stems from society's fears and anxieties (Angelides,

2013). Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, and Livingstone (2013) argues that reactions such as the scrutiny of girls' images instead of their unauthorized distribution reflect the discourse around sexting that girls' sexuality is a problem, which needs to be controlled. However, efforts to control this problem, such as criminalizing sexting and pushing anti-sexting campaigns against young women, ignores the idea that consensual sexting may be a form of female sexual expression and agency (Karaian, 2012; Angelides; Hasinoff, 2015).

Normalcy discourse. Although the current predominant sexting framework views it as a deviant behavior, the normalcy discourse is emerging. The normalcy discourse views "consensual sexting as a normal contemporary form of sexual expression and intimate communication in romantic and sexual relationships" (Döring 2014, Consensual Sexting and it's Opportunities, para. 1).

The digital generation. Young people are growing up with technologies that become engrained in their lives. Gasser (2008) refers to young people born after 1980 as "Digital Natives" who have the access and skills to use technologies, and rely on technologies for forms of expression, creation, and communication. For these young people, technology is conflated in their identities, interconnected with their physical and social world (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr (2010) found that 33% of teenagers (ages 12-17) and 93% of young adults (ages 18-29) reported owning cell phones, and 73% of teenagers and 72% of young adults reported using social networking sites. Moreover, the culture in which young people are embedded are constantly changing and emerging alongside technologies that normalizes the creation and sharing of sexualized content. For example, taking a photo of oneself, known as a 'selfie,' has become a popularized term, with Time Magazine listing it as one of the top buzz words of 2012 (Steinmetz, 2012). Given that using technologies

is a major part of young people's lives, sharing sexually explicit content through technologies may be a new and natural mode of sexual interaction.

Adolescence and emerging adulthood. In accordance with the stages of development outlined by some theorists, sexting can be viewed as a normal activity among young people. Erikson (1959) describes adolescence (ages 12-18) as a period marked by identity formation, where the adolescent searches for ways to define him/herself, leery of how he/she is viewed in the eyes of others. Sexuality is a healthy part of this stage of development (Erikson, 1968). Thus, creating and sharing sexually explicit photos of oneself may be another mode in which young people experiment with their sexual identities (Ringrose, 2011). Identity development continues to be an ongoing process through adulthood (Erikson, 1959). Arnett (2000) adds to Erikson's stages of development, proposing that there is a developmental stage called emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) that exists between adolescence and young adulthood. This period is distinguished by "relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations" (Arnett, p. 469). Identity exploration in the area of love tends to be more serious than in adolescence, with a quest for emotional and physical intimacy (Arnett). Emerging adulthood has shown to be an area of peaked risk behavior, which may be partially explained by their stage of identity exploration (Arnett). Sexting, which comes with risks, may be a form of identity and relationship exploration (Ringrose; Lenhart, 2009). Levine (2013, pg. 257) captures this notion of normal sexual development, positing, "Why we are even starting from a place that sharing sexy pictures might be linked to unhealthy behaviors in young adults? Young adults are in the prime of their sexual lives."

Motivations and enjoyment. The results of some studies depict motivations and positive aspects of sexting among young people. Several studies have found that sexting often occurs

with current or potential romantic partners (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; MTV & the Associated Press, 2009, Renfrow & Rollow, 2015; Perkins et al., 2014). In one of the first national surveys on sexting (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2009, pg. 4), the main reason for sexting among teenagers was "to be fun and flirtatious." Lenhart (2009) describes how sexting can be a healthier alternative to sex that allows inexperienced people to engage in sexual intimacy without being physical. Among young adults, motivations for sexting include being flirtatious, responding to a partner's request, and to initiate sex (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2009; Drouin et al., 2013). For young adults in romantic relationships, hedonism can be a primary motivating factor for sexting, and there may be a link between sexual satisfaction and sexting (Parker, 2013). A study of sexting behaviors among Hispanic women found that participants viewed sexting as an exciting aspect of their sexual lives (Ferguson, 2011).

Despite the deviance discourse that exists around sexting, predominantly among young people, sexting may be increasingly viewed as normal behavior. This is evident in books and magazines that outline sexting tips to help enhance romantic and sexual relationships (e.g., Love, 2015; Hussar, 2014). These discussions of sexting as a normal and potentially exciting and positive element of a romantic/sexual relationship illustrates how the idea of sexting as a deviant behavior is slowly being challenged.

Rationale for the Present Study

As a number of studies and commentaries on sexting among young people have derived from the view that sexting is a problematic behavior, our current understanding of sexting may not fully or accurately capture the reality of sexting. Some researchers and theorists have acknowledged this problem, pointing out that sexting may be a normal part of sexual

development for young people given the digital age (Hua, 2012; Levine, 2013). A survey by Cox Communications (2009) found that 90% of young people who reported sexting indicated that they have never experienced a negative consequence as a result of sexting, such as having their image shared, experiencing a threat to have their image shared, or being made fun of by the recipient. Bauermeister (2013) stresses the importance of researchers being aware and stating their theoretical assumptions when studying sexting, as abstaining from this practice poses threats to internal validity and can add to the shaming of young people who sext. When the predominant research framework stems from a gendered lens that sees sexting as a negative activity, there is little room for young women to express potential positive experiences (Albury, Funnell, & Noonan, 2010).

Also, considering that most of the research is quantitative, the voices of young people is not often captured. Throughout the sexting panic, several campaigns aimed at tackling the problem of sexting have been implemented. However, studying sexting from a view that privileges the voices of authorities as opposed to young people may not lend to an accurate or comprehensive understanding of sexting, and thus sexting programming. Indeed, an examination of 10 sexting campaigns found that all emphasized abstinence as the only effective form of risk prevention, with six campaigns focusing primarily on females as risky sexters (Döring, 2014). Thus, research examining the experience of sexting from the perspectives of young people who participate, and where researchers are aware of their biases and open to learning about sexting, could greatly add to the current limited knowledge of the topic. In order to develop comprehensive and effective educational sexting programming, and assist young people who may encounter problems when sexting, it is essential young people's experiences of sexting are examined. Although some qualitative research is emerging (Ringrose et al., 2012; Renfrow &

Rollo, 2014; Lippman & Campbell, 2014), an understanding of sexting experience is still needed.

This exploratory, qualitative study seeks to address these issues by examining the experience of sexting among female emerging adults. By listening to the experiences of young people who have participated in sexting, I aim to shed light on the perceptions, motivations, and experienced positive and/or negative effects of sexting.

I choose to focus on females, as sexting dynamics, such as reasons for sexting, may differ among males and females (Walker et al., 2013). I focus on emerging adults because this age group has has reported higher instances of sexting than adolescents (Klettke et al., 2014; MTV & the Associated Press, 2009), and participants are old enough to provide consent for their involvement in the study. Aside from these restrictions, this study aimed to be exploratory and thus left sexual orientation, type of relationship, and form of communication technology open to all experiences. My specific research question was: What is the experience of sharing visual sexual content of self through communication technologies for female emerging adults?

In this research, I define sexting as sending or posting visual sexual content, such as images or videos through communication technologies. I focus on the experiences of participants who have actively shared sexual content of themselves, as there is an important differentiation between actively sending a sext, versus passively receiving a sext (Klettke et al., 2014). Given that this is an exploratory study, I use the term 'sexual content' to allow participants to define for themselves what they consider to be sexual in nature, as something that is considered a sexually suggestive sext to one participant may not be viewed as sexual at all to another. I refer to this content as 'visual' sexual content to allow participants to define the mode in which they may be sexting (i.e. image, video recording`) and the term 'communication technology' to explore a

potential number of mediums which young people may use to sext (i.e. cell phone, Internet). However, given the lack of involvement of participants in the discussion of sexting, a word that was created by the media, participants will be asked to define their personal definition of sexting, and discuss their actions based on these terms.

Methodology

In this section, I outline the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis method. I articulate the steps I took in recruiting participants, gathering and analyzing data, and meeting research quality.

Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research is used when a topic needs further exploration, helping to generate new hypothesis, often when variables are difficult to measure or the perspectives of certain groups have not been heard (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research focuses on the meaning that participants' assign to an issue, not the researcher (Creswell). Data is collected in a natural setting, directly from participants, so themes are built from the "bottom up" (Creswell, p. 45). Given the lack of research on the topic of sexting that focuses on the voices of participants, this exploratory study employed a qualitative approach to better understand sexting from those who have participated in it in hopes of providing an authentic perspective on this topic.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

This study employed an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is informed by hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA acknowledges that human beings are sense-making creatures that reflect on their life events and experiences, and is concerned with how people make sense of these experiences, (Smith et al., Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA is rooted in the philosophy of phenomenology, which focuses on identifying key components of a phenomenon or experience that make them unique (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As sexting research has not privileged the perspectives and experiences of those who engage in sexting, I chose IPA to provide participants an opportunity to reflect and describe their experience of sexting on their own terms.

As Smith et al. (2009) describe, IPA is an idiographic approach, focused on obtaining a detailed understanding of experience from individual participants, then moving to more general claims. This concern with particulars and in depth analysis means that sample sizes in IPA research tend to be small (Smith et al.). They suggest a sample size of three for novice IPA researchers, as it allows for detailed case analysis as well as cross-analysis among the cases. Following this suggestion, I interviewed three participants on their experiences of sexting.

The Role of the Researcher

In trying to understand what an experience is like for participants, the researcher also engages in asking critical questions and forming their own interpretation to provide insight on this data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This process of the researcher attempting to make sense of participants' meaning making is known as a double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher's interpretation of experience suggests that 'bracketing' or setting aside preconceptions, although important in gaining a true understanding of a phenomenon or experience, is never fully possible (Pietkiewicz & Smith). Thus, the personal process in conducting qualitative research requires the researcher to be aware of their biases, especially as the results of the study are influenced by their personal perspectives and experiences (Smith et al.; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999)

Here, I attempt to bracket my preconceptions and make my position explicit: I am a Vietnamese-Canadian, heterosexual woman. My interest in this topic stemmed from witnessing the problematic stories of teenage female sexting in the media, and feeling frustrated that little was done to include young people who participated in sexting in the discussions that occurred in the media, policy planning, and research. As a counselor, I recognize that it is easy for me to see the problematic side of situations at first and thus easily view sexting from the deviance lens that

dominates the topic to date. However, as a feminist, activist against sexual violence, and promoter of evidence-based and inclusive sexual health education, I also recognize that I favor female autonomy and expression of sexuality, and thus lean towards a normalcy lens. I believe it essential to gain a bigger picture about this newer form of sexual activity that may provide greater insight for helping professionals and educators, and potentially benefit young people's romantic/sexual relationships.

Participants

Inclusion and exclusion criteria. Participants who identified as a female between ages 18-24, and had sent or posted visual sexual content (e.g. image, video) of herself through a form of communication technology (e.g. cell phone, Internet) were eligible to participate in the study.

The sample. The sample consisted of three young women who had engaged in sending visual sexual content of themselves through a form of communication technology: Jenna, 21, Alison, 22, and Clare, 19. Participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to strive for anonymity. All participants shared examples of sexting with only male participants; however, Alison stated she was "attracted to both men and women." Neither Jenna nor Alison were involved in romantic relationships at the time of the interview, but Clare was in a four-year relationship.

Procedure

Recruitment. The University of Alberta Research Ethics Board approved the procedures described herein (No. Pro00045889, May 14, 2014). Recruitment posters (Appendix A) were placed in several buildings on the University of Alberta campus in Summer 2014. The posters advertised the contact information for the primary researcher who the participants contacted directly to set up an interview time and place.

Conducting semi-structured interviews. I met with eligible participants individually at a private room at the University of Alberta. They provided informed consent and participated in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately one hour. In efforts to enter closely to the participants' world and obtain new and rich data (Smith & Osborn, 2007), the interview followed the direction in which participants took it, however, I created an interview schedule and used it as a guide (Appendix B). The interviews were audio-recorded and stored on a password-protected computer. Participants received an information letter outlining details of the study (Appendix C) and $10 in thanks for their participation.

Data analysis & quality

I analyzed the data following the suggested steps outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). I transcribed the interviews and read and re-read them several times to become familiar with the data. I made initial notes including descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. With the assistance of Dedoose qualitative analysis software (Dedoose Version 6.2.10), I extracted emergent themes for each transcript. Then, I examined transcripts for patterns all together to create superordinate and subordinate themes for the group.

To strive for trustworthy data, I employed triangulation strategies, such as member checking. I emailed each participant a copy of their interview transcript for review. Two out of three participants responded and stated that their transcripts were accurate and did not require any changes. I engaged in peer review with the research supervisor and academic peers who provided feedback in all stages of the study. I engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process, writing memos and being aware that my previous experiences and biases play a role in the approach and interpretation of this study.

Results

There were five superordinate themes that were found in this study: characteristics of relationship, recognizing risk, taking control, enjoying sexting, and juggling different personal perspectives. These themes and their related subordinate themes are outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Table of Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

SUPERORDINATE THEMES	SUBORDINATE THEMES
Characteristics of relationship	Foundation of trust Increasing comfort levels Building a sexual dialogue Desire for physical intimacy
Recognizing risk	
Taking control	Control in crafting and sending image Actions to alleviate concerns Asserting boundaries Power as a recipient
Enjoying sexting	Excitement in risk and taboo Having fun and feeling good
Juggling different personal perspectives	Uncomfortable topic Working through negative judgment But sexting is normal

Characteristics of Relationship

This superordinate theme illustrates the various factors of an intimate relationship that participants discussed as being part of a sexting relationship. This included sexting with a partner they trusted, typically in a long-term relationship; feeling increasingly comfortable with partners

and sexting; communicating with partners to create a sexual dialogue that led to sharing explicit images; and wanting to be physically intimate with partners.

Foundation of trust. All participants discussed how sexting often started with or occurred within a trusting relationship. Jenna stated, "I never sent something to someone I wasn't dating or someone that I didn't trust." Trust was typical in participants' long-term relationships, which they had all been in, or were currently in. As Alison explains, "[sexting] existed before – a little bit before I was in a relationship, but really happened more so when I was in a long-term, long-distance relationship."

Jenna described how being in a long-term relationship allowed her to be more open to engaging in sexting because her partner was deemed as more trustworthy:

> Initially he had asked me for pictures maybe… around the three month mark into that relationship and at first I was really hesitant and said "no," and then towards the end, maybe five months in, I said "OK, its, you know, its become more long term and I can sort of trust you" and, I spent a lot more time with that person as well, so, I felt as though I knew them better and I didn't feel like they were the type of person that would you know, if things went sideways with our relationship that they would you know threaten to send something like that even if they were angry with me or…

Spending more time with committed partners allowed participants to feel confident that their partners would not share images or use them as blackmail material. For Clare and her partner who were also in a long-term relationship, there was an implicit understanding that they knew each other well enough to know that sharing images was unacceptable:

> Interviewer: Yeah. And you said with that person, you felt trust with them.
> Clare: Yes.
> Interviewer: I'm curious how you determine that this person is trustworthy?
> Clare: Um well I mean I- well- it was with my boyfriend and we had been together for four years so *(laughing)*. I feel like, like it would be very uncharacteristic if like, if anything was like captured and shared. So I mean, like I said, I was fully cognizant of the risk I was taking, but I felt like it was rather small *(laughing)*.

Thus, trust was viewed as being more established or greater in a long-term relationship in comparison to a short-term relationship. Two participants also discussed how they viewed their partners as even more trustworthy throughout the sexting relationship when their partners did not share the images:

> Well the longer it went on the more I sort of trusted him because I saw that he didn't post it, or send it to anybody else…didn't…at least to my knowledge. And so, it sort of increased the trust in our relationship I guess. – Jenna

> Like maybe could like- and it also sounds, I don't know, really cliché, but, uh I dunno could like enhance like the feeling of trust, just because it is a risky thing and, as you engage in it, nothing bad happens and you get kinda reinforces that like, "Oh I do trust my partner not to do bad things with these images that I am sending" *(laughing)*. – Clare

Both participants felt like trust was enhanced; however they did not appear confident in this. Jenna's statement, "I guess," suggested that she recognized that it was possible her images could have been shared without her knowledge, and Clare's feeling like her response were "'cliché" and that it "could" enhance feelings of trust suggested that this experience was not something she personally identified with. Both participants discussed feelings of enhanced trust, yet their reluctance to own this experience may reflect an uneasiness entertaining the possibility that their trustworthy partners could or have shared these images without their awareness.

Increasing comfort levels. Participants discussed how they became increasingly comfortable taking and sending photos in their sexting relationships. For Jenna, "it was a bit awkward trying to take the picture for the first time, like, just sort of you know positioning and that kinda thing *(laughing)*." As she became more experienced with taking images, she also became "more comfortable in terms of taking the picture as time went on." Similar to the necessity of having trust within the relationship, feeling comfortable with partners was also important. Clare described feeling "really vulnerable" in instances of her sharing images without

receiving any in return, but this feeling was "ameliorated by [her] comfort level with [her] partner."

This comfort level with partners was also illustrated in how sexting progressed along with relationships. At first, participants sent what they perceived as low-risk images because they weren't quite as comfortable:

> Um, like the first couple I sent was sort of more just sort of lingerie pictures and so like he, you know, wanted increasing… nudity I guess and, in the photos, so.
> – Jenna

> ...OK, well I've sent a Snap like earlier on like, it wasn't- it wasn't *(whispering under breath)* super explicit I would say (laughing). [ ] It would be on daytime television, maybe. It would be like PG-13 probably. – Clare

Qualifying the type of images as "just sort of lingerie pictures" and "PG-13" rating illustrates how participants viewed these images as lower risk and thus something they were more comfortable sharing at the start of the sexting relationship.

As the relationship progressed, participants were more comfortable "going further" (Jenna), suggesting comfort sending more sexually explicit images, or engaging in sexting activity that would have been out of their comfort zone had their not been a high level of trust and comfort with their partners. Jenna discussed how her images became more explicit in a longer-term relationship:

> Yeah, um, one of them I dated about… a year and two months [ ] with him I sent, I sent completely naked pictures towards the end of our relationship. In the beginning, not so much, in the beginning it was more sort of texting.

Whereas Jenna began sexting near the same time she became involved in a romantic relationship and thus the progression of these explicit images was gradual, the process was much quicker for Clare who began sexting after she and her partner were already in a long-term relationship. Thus, that trust and comfort level was already established. Clare explained:

> It was fairly fast-paced and increasingly in raciness, if raciness was a quantitatively analyzed scale thing…Yeah the first like Snap I sent wasn't um you know, explicit in nature but um, I don't know, it was probably a couple days later and it's just. It's almost like a game, you know what I mean? You try to one-up the other person but like not too far, but you raise the bar and the person and the other person has to reciprocate. It's kind of like that *(laughing)*.

Building a sexual dialogue. Sending sexually explicit images was a form of communication that built on an already existing communication among partners in sexting relationships. There was a sequential progression that occurred up to the first suggestion, request, or initiation to engage in sharing images. Typically, the interaction between partners transitioned from being non-sexual, to flirting, to written sext messages, to visual sext messages. The initiation to engage in sexting images was in context with flirting, sexual innuendo, or explicit written sext messages that was already taking place:

> Um, talking about random things: school, life. And then probably a compliment, and a compliment went to some suggestions, propositions if you will…all through text message. And then like, "Send me a photo," winkey-face. – Alison

> Usually it would start off with, um, like someone would make a sexual joke and then it would get into that sort of sexting through text messages, and then some of them were more polite about it than others. Some of them would say "Would you be open to doing this?" and some of them would just say like would be more sort of firm and say you know like, "Send me this." – Jenna

The request or initiation to share visual sext messages followed written sext messages. The experience was similar for Clare who discussed how she would have never thought she would engage in sending visual sext messages, but that engaging in sexting through text "normalizes" sexting and the perceived risks. Thus, sending written sext messages was viewed as less risky, and after sending written sext messages, participants may have felt more comfortable sending visual sext messages. This also illustrated how sexting wasn't just simply about exchanging images, but these images were embedded in a conversation, often adding to the co-existing

sexual dialogue. As Alison explained, "We weave these tales that are exciting," and "You're talking about these exciting things and you want that image to accompany your imagination." The same way a picture can enhance a reader's account of what a story looks like, a visual sext message could enhance a partner's account of the "tale" that partners have been building through written sext messages.

Desire for physical intimacy. The final product of building this sexual dialogue was oftentimes anticipation that partners would eventually become sexually intimate. Sexting allowed participants to stay close and connected with their partners, and was attempt to meet sexual needs when partners were apart:

> I'd say it brought us closer, 'cause, um, like I said when he was gone for the two weeks, it was sort of hard because I would get a little bit distracted like, not having him around and sort of missed him and stuff like that. So I found it difficult, but that was sort of a way that like, like, when he would send me pictures or when I would send him pictures… yeah, I sort of felt it sort of brought us closer together, so. And then during that two weeks we would be together quite a bit, but there would be periods where he would be gone so, yeah. – Jenna

> [My boyfriend] lived in [Canadian City] and I lived in [Participant's Hometown] so we were always kind of distant from one another so that was a primary means of us kinda meeting those sexual needs. Like I found that him and I were both very sexual people *(laughing)*. – Alison

Unlike Clare who only participated in sexting with her long-term partner, Jenna and Alison discussed sexting experiences with multiple partners. They also discussed how a primary motivation for engaging in sexting was to show their partners that they were interested in physical sex, and "a way to initiate something" (Jenna).

Although the invitation for sex was not always immediate, sex as motivation for sexting was also the case for Alison who described sending images to partners when she was hopeful of connecting or engaging in physical intimacy:

> …We have the odd message that's like, the things we'd do if we were together right now. Like that's just affirming that when we do see each other, like, well we're probably gonna have sex. Like that's the whole point of it, isn't it? Well, that, for me, the whole point of it is to work yourself up to actually hooking up.

Because sex was seen as the ultimate goal for sexting, participants experienced frustration when they were not able to engage in sex after sexting. Alison describes her frustration in regards to the lack of "follow through" in regards to her romantic interests, stating, "Why are you texting me to receive these messages and potentially photos from me in the middle of the night when you won't act on it?" This frustration was also prominent in long-distance relationships where participants were unable to act upon those sexual urges. Jenna stated, "[sexting's] not the same as being with someone." Alison echoes this frustration:

> Like it was just really bad being away from this person and not feeling connected and feeling that tension that you want to be with other people because those needs aren't being met because we don't see each other. [ ] I mean in a way kept us close-er, I guess. It reminded each other of our you know, our appreciation of that person's, more so than their being, like their body as well, and um, but it's a void that no message or photo was gonna fill *(laughing)*. Like, there's a deeply intimate connection when you're actually with a person: that language, that discourse, even though it's sexual and intimate, it's empty in a way, you know? Um… And I think in the end, perhaps it even causes more sexual frustration 'cause you know, you're having this exciting conversation of something that could be or will be and obviously you want to enact with that person, but you're not for a while, indefinitely almost, so it perhaps even created more frustration. It was two-fold, definitely. It kept us close but created that tension that your needs weren't being met.

Sexting was thus an intimate dialogue that embodied words, stories, and images that participants hoped would bring partners closer to one another and result in a physical connection. Alison's description of how sexting kept her and her partner "closer-er in a way," reflects the frustration that resulted from engaging in this dialogue and the inability to act upon it.

Recognizing Risk

This superordinate theme illustrated how participants were very aware of the risks involved in sexting, primarily, focusing on the possibility of images being shared and resulting in their identification. This was a source of concern for participants because they recognized that partners had the power to share these images, and that there were limitations to the technologies they used.

For some participants, this concern was greater than others. Jenna experienced a real concern because her partner at the time had threatened to post her pictures on Facebook when she refused to participate in filming a video.

> Yeah that made me very apprehensive, and, like I was, I was worried you know. I was sort of coming up with things in my mind you know, like if he said like, this was like, and released my name with it and whatever, um, like, you know could I deny that this was actually me in the picture, like ex-excuses like I would come up with, you know, saying that you know, he was just you know, angry that I had broke up with him or whatever or like, trying to think of was there anything identifying in that picture. Like was I wearing a necklace *(laughing and exhaling)* that day or a bracelet or something that like that where someone could identify me…

The threat of having her identity exposed to the public was a serious worry, as Jenna prepared for how she might be able to defend herself if her partner were to follow through with these threats. Even after two months of breaking up with him and having no contact, she explained, "I did periodically keep checking to make sure he hadn't posted anything but after that period of time I sort of felt OK, I'm probably safe, he's probably moved onto someone else..."

Other participants did not discuss experiences of threats or exposed images, but echoed this awareness of the risk of their images potentially being shared without their consent. Alison knew

that her partner had the power to do anything with her photos but experienced an uncertainty of exactly was being done with them:

> Like who would he share that photo with, what that photo would be used for, it's like, so does he use this photo to masturbate or like what is, what do… [ ] Skeptical, what he would use it for, who he would share it with, who's hands that would end up in? Because obviously, you know, we grew up in an age where you have to be careful what you put on the Internet and careful what you're sending through these technologies.

There was uneasiness thinking of the possibility that these images could easily be transmitted through technology, that anybody could have access and use them for their own personal pleasure, and she would not know where it has gone or what is being done with them.

Clare echoed this uneasiness. Despite feeling like sending images was a "low-level" risk because they were sent to a trustworthy partner, she recognized that "with each subsequent Snap or image, um ah you give like the other party like- if they're going to do something terrible and save it and share it with people, you give them the opportunity to."

Although the act of her partner sharing these images without her consent and knowledge would be entirely his doing, Clare took some of this responsibility by describing that she had given this opportunity to distribute the image by sending it in the first place. She later elaborated,

> And if like those consequences were to happen, like I'd be surprised, but I would also be accepting of my fate because I would have brought this on myself if anything like that happened. I totally made the decision. It's by all means my fault um 'cause I made the decision to share those images, so I know that I can like, all of the onus of like guilt, shame, reparation, whatever, is completely on my shoulders.

Participants were also concerned that those other than intended partners could see their photos because privacy is limited when using various technologies. Jenna described how technology is not secure because of threats such as "government monitoring" or "people hacking into people's phones." Alison discussed similar limits to privacy, even when using Snapchat, a

cell phone application that allows participants to send images or videos referred to as 'Snaps' that disappears after a set time limit:

> So that is, this person can see this image for up to 10 seconds, then it's gone. [---] The kind of contentious piece is because it's not really gone because you don't have like, Snapchat owns that photo now, right? It's not private, it's not secure by any means. [ ] I've accepted that the photos that we're sending could end up anywhere. And that's probably unnerving for some people and that's why they don't use it, but for me it's like no different than your Google search, no different than your Internet usage, period, like, digital access is beyond our own private control. [ ] And anyone who's thinking that their own Internet usage is private is foolin' themselves.

Taking Control

This superordinate theme illustrates actions participants took to reduce their perceived risks and increase their perceived control during sexting. Participants recognized that "after you get the right photo and you send it, it's out of your hands." (Alison). Thus they attempted to take control through the process of crafting and sending images, engaged in certain actions to limit risk or discomfort after sending images, were aware of their boundaries, and received images from partners as a sign of trust and accountability.

Control in crafting and sending image. Two participants discussed efforts they engaged in to protect their identity or show only parts of themselves they felt comfortable.

> Yeah, sort of not having my face in it or sort of like having pretty blank background, not like, you know, being able to see my room or something like that in the background or anything like that, or computers in the background. – Jenna

> … I've never Snapchatted a photo of my complete body, like it's always been upper body. For sure. Ya. Like, I dunno, breasts aren't genitals, but like genitals have never been in any photo that I've sent ever. [ ] And generally I won't include my face and my naked upper body in the same photo, like it will kinda be one or the other. Like, it may, if it's a photo of me and my face is in it, like maybe I'll be covering my breasts, but I don't like the idea of having my face and my naked self together. Only because I know that that photo will go wherever it will go. – Alison

Since participants did not have control over what happened after an image was sent, they exerted control in the process of creating an image. On top of considering how an image could reveal or conceal their identity, imagination and creativity were required to construct images they believed their partners would enjoy, and make participants feel comfortable and beautiful. Alison stated,

> I briefly touched on crafting the photo, making it art. I find now that the body is a beautiful thing or can be beautiful. Like, there's a lot to photos, it's not just what you're taking a photo of, it's how you take it and what you add to it that makes it appealing. And so I suppose through those mediums it's just been like looking at my own body in a different way and seeing what could be desirable about it to another person.

An image is something she felt like both she and her partner could benefit from. She may have taken into account what her partner may find enjoyable in an image but ultimately, what went into this art form was up to her. Jenna also echoed this, stating, "if it wasn't initiated by [my partner] necessarily, I would like tend to take um, usually more lower body um pictures than upper body because I'm sort of flat chested so I sort of felt like not as comfortable with my upper body as my lower body." Thus, there was a balance between crafting an image that a partner would enjoy and desire, and what she felt comfortable or confident in to include in an image. The need to be creative in crafting an image was something Clare struggled with:

> Yeah right? No, actually, that's a real issue. How do you come up with like- it sounds horrible, but like poses. Like how do you change up these pictures? I totally- that is something I've been like, "Oh man, I don't have any other ideas." *(laughing).* Yeah, no, that's- that's a really valid question. Um… uh yeah *(exhaling)*… and it's hard to answer. I mean there obviously some preconceived notion of what you know, like a suggestive or even explicit photo would look like. Um, and it's pretty much off of that. I'm not very creative.

Sexting wasn't just as simple as snapping and sending sexually explicit images, but a process that required thought to capture something that was attractive and different. For Clare

who did not identify as a much of a sexual person as the other participants, there was a struggle to venture outside of what the "preconceived notion" of what an image should look like.

Participants also attempted to be in control by being intentional about the technologies they used to send images. Participants "never post[ed] to a general audience" (Clare) and stayed clear of social networking sites. All participants used cell phones, specifically Short Messaging Service (SMS) or mobile applications because it was viewed as the most secure and convenient method. Jenna shared how texting on a cell phone was more secure as her phone was mostly on her body as opposed to her laptop, which could be easily accessed by other people. There were also fewer steps involved with deleting a photo from a phone in comparison to a computer. Jenna and Clare also preferred cell phones, using applications, such as Snapchat. Despite their recognition of the limitations to these technologies, it was the mode of choice because it gave some sense of security that other technologies could not:

> I think it is an ease of mind thing, it feels less permanent if you send it through Snapchat [ ] Well it's you know, gone in that app, I mean, there's ample time to capture it but you know, it gives you faux piece of mind *(laughing)*. – Clare

> If it's on Snapchat, I can see that they've taken a photo of it, that they've taken a screen shot, and that they now have that access to do what they will. But the- it's almost a sense of security that if they haven't Snapchatted, or if they haven't screen-shotted it, that it's gone. – Alison

Using Snapchat allowed participants to have some level of monitoring by being able to see if their partner had taken a screenshot of the image. Participants acknowledged that even if it this was a false or limited sense of security, it provided a sense of control in the process that put them at ease.

Actions to alleviate concerns. Jenna and Clare discussed how they took precautions to alleviate concerns before and after sending an image. Especially when she first began sexting,

Jenna feared she may be sending it to the wrong person and engaged in constant checking behaviors to make sure this did not happen, sometimes "double-checking or triple-checking." After sending an image over text, both participants immediately deleted the image from their phones, as it was a source of anxiety to still have that data. She stated,

> I'll make sure I delete the picture definitely from my phone, and then if I send the text message or picture message to the person, I'll delete our entire thread of conversation after we've finished speaking so that you know, there's no sort of trace of it in my phone if someone was just casually going through my phone, that kind of thing.

Clare was so uncomfortable with the idea of keeping her image on her phone that she deleted it before her partner had the opportunity to respond. This discomfort carried over when it came to the idea of having her partner's image on her phone:

> Um just because you know you have this image that's y- uh, like, it's not like something you should keep but, I personally never saved anything. Just because also, I feel like that would just be weird. I wouldn't even want that on my phone. I don't want anyone to go through my phone and see this *(whispering under breath and laughing)*. Like that's weird. Like no, the only thing I think you can use it for is like blackmail.

The thought of having a sexually explicit image of her partner felt wrong, as Clare could only see blackmail as a motivation for a person wanting to keep an image, and she did not identify as a person malicious enough to do something like that. It was uncomfortable having photos of herself and her partner on her phone, and a concern in regards to others potentially accessing these photos. There was something "weird" about keeping these images and immediately deleting images was a way to alleviate this.

Asserting boundaries. All participants spoke about how they did or would assert boundaries in regards to what they were and weren't comfortable doing when it came to sexting practices. When Jenna's partner requested that she participate in filming a video, she made it clear that she did not want to. When he began calling her "some not very nice names" and

threatened to distribute previous images, Jenna ended the relationship. This was a decision she was proud of. She stated,

> It made me feel even though I felt bad about the situation at the time, sort of that like I didn't give in to him just because he was saying you know saying, "You're a prude, you need to send me this, blah blah blah blah blah." So I feel good you know that I stuck my ground and said "I'm not doing something, I'm not comfortable.

Jenna recognized that "giving in" was an option when faced with these demands from a partner. It may have been difficult to confront her partner, but after "realizing that this person wasn't the person that [she] thought that they were," someone who would respect her boundaries, she felt like she had to assert herself and leave this unhealthy relationship.

Although Alison did not discuss a situation where she felt she needed to make these boundaries explicit, she discussed how she was comfortable asserting herself if an uncomfortable situation were to arise:

> I'm also comfortable enough standing up to that kind of confrontation because for me, like sex is about respect and about trust and if there's something I don't like or if there's something that's making me uncomfortable, I am more than happy to say so. And if I care about this person and I do want to appease or please them in some way, I would have that conversation, like "Hey, I don't dig this, but how can we compromise?" I guess. And if would get to the point that, this is all like imagining, if it would get to the point that clearly this person is into something I'm not, I would walk away... I try to be as authentic as I can, for sure. Like if I'm not interested in a person, they'll probably know it.

In this hypothetical situation, she expressed how she knew her stance and approach because she held a conception of how all sexual relationships should involve respect, trust, and communication. Similar to Jenna who would take direction from her partners on what they desire in an image, she would find a way to compromise what works for both partners. Again, similar to Jenna who ended a relationship after her partner refused to respect her boundaries, she would not

have a problem voicing her feelings and walking away from a relationship if this respect was not reciprocated.

Considering that Clare was in a long-term relationship and indicated on numerous occasions that she was extremely trusting of her partner, she did not discuss boundaries but that for example, not sharing images was "assumed." She did, however state, "If there's an activity that I don't feel uncomfortable talking about, I'm not gonna actually do it. Like I feel comfortable with him about that." Thus she was comfortable enough with her partner to voice if she was uncomfortable in a certain sexting situations.

Power as a recipient. Sexting involved a power imbalance. As Clare explained, the person sending the image is "vulnerable," whereas the person who is receiving the image has power to misuse it. Receiving images was not a primary motivator for sending images, as pointed out by Alison who stated, "I wasn't even that turned on by the photos, actually." Instead, receiving images from a partner was a way to equivocate this power. Jenna explained how she, and probably women in general, found written sext messages more powerful than images, saying it allowed "this imagination thing where I can put my own spin on it." All participants saw receiving images as a sign of trust and accountability.

> Um I don't usually ask them for anything um, because I don't – I don't find it as much as a thrill receiving them as sending them. Um, but, sometimes I will make a joke like, like, "You know, you could reciprocate" or something like that because… I- yeah, so I don't feel like it's totally one sided I guess. Yeah, not necessarily that I-I would get anything out of it, but I would know that OK, they feel comfortable sending me that kind of thing. I guess I sort of say it with, and it sounds sort of bad but I'd say it to see if they trusted me I guess *(laughing)*.
> – Jenna

> I'm not the kind of person who's just give something away like, I'd like to receive something in return, it's not just me… I dunno. And it's the same I guess with sex, you know, for me anyways, you're not just gonna give a blow job and not get anything back so with these photos it's like, OK why would I put myself, my naked self for that matter, out

> there for potentially anyone to see if I, he really could have showed anybody, when I'm not gonna have that same freedom. So I guess in a way it was accountability as well as reciprocation like… – Alison

> It's almost like you feel so like… powerful. [ ] It's like "Ooh" you- you have this. And it's like I dunno, I feel like if it was a one-way thing, it wouldn't be the same just because it's being reciprocated. Um you also like understand that your recipient, you know partner in this activity, uh like they also trust you. – Clare

Thus, receiving images was not necessarily about gaining sexual pleasure, but it was important for participants to feel like they knew that their partners could also trust them. As participants were vulnerable and concerned in exposing themselves in these images, having an image of their partner also made the process fair because participants were able to have the same power or freedom as a recipient to share these images if they wanted to or if their partners threatened or followed through with sharing. This requirement of a mutual exchange in sexting further illustrates previous themes of how this process is very much part of an intimate relationship between two partners who are able to see each other as trustworthy.

Enjoying Sexting

This superordinate theme illustrates how participants enjoyed sexting, primarily because they found the idea of it being risky and taboo to be very thrilling. It was an activity that they found fun and made them feel good about themselves.

Excitement in risk and taboo. All participants discussed how they enjoyed sexting because they found it to be very exciting. Alison focused on how the content of sexting was exciting, as the sexual dialogue that participants built through written and visual sext messages allowed them to creating exciting narratives of what they would be doing to one another if they were together in that moment. It was exciting "when you can imagine this person who you've been hanging out with in a new light or in this circumstance or in this scenario." She also

described how not knowing how the relationship would play out was exciting. When asked what overrides her own feelings of skepticism to engage in sexting, she responded,

> Enjoyment! For sure. That excitement and that little bit of fear enjoyable. Being desired is enjoyable and um – is. Yeah, that little... that uncertainty. Like you don't really know where it's gonna end up.

For the other participants, sexting was expressed as something that was considered exciting because it was considered taboo and risky. As Clare describes, sexting "goes against [her] externally ascribed archetype" but participating in "something that's perceived by the general population to be like wrong almost [ ] is exciting by that very nature." She adds that the possibility of "being shown is kind of what makes it exciting." Jenna reiterates a similar notion:

> Um… I guess it's sort of… ehhh… sort of the risk I guess of, s-someone potentially seeing it but, um. Yeah, I-I it's sort of a masochistic thing I guess 'cause I don't want anyone to see it obviously *(laughing)* but there's sort of the risk there that I'm breaking rules or doing something that is considered taboo or, yeah.

Not only did participants recognize risk, but also this risk was a source of thrill that motivated them to engage in sending images. Although participants did not actually want their images or identity to be exposed, this possibility is thrilling, and as Jenna explains, sending an image released "endorphins" or a rush of "adrenaline." Thus, the excitement in the uncertainty of not know where a relationship would end up, or where a photo could end up, was a major pull to sending images and favoring it over receiving images.

Having fun and feeling good. Jenna and Alison had experience being in casual sexual relationships, and these included sexting relationships with multiple partners, something they found fun and enjoyable. Jenna did not have any hesitations to engage in sexting because she felt like because she was young, she should "just go for it" while she was in college. Alison also sexted partners casually, explaining "we're both just having fun," and if she was "interested in

getting together, [she] might send him a sexy Snapchat." Sexting could be a casual activity the same way participants might engage in casual sexual relationships. Sexting was also embedded within a sexual relationship where it acts as an invitation for sex, as previously discussed.

Casual sex and sexting was not mentioned by Clare who was in a long-term and committed relationship, but the experience of sexting as fun and enjoyable was. She explained, "It's fun. So I mean, both of us are enjoying ourselves, that's really a positive." Sexting was an activity that Clare and her partner felt was outside of their comfort zone and they found the whole idea of sexting humorous, making sexting "lighthearted and fun." This lighthearted nature of sexting was evident when she described sexting as "almost like a game" where participants tried to top one another in the explicitness and creativity of the images they reciprocated.

Participants also discussed other positive feelings they experienced when sexting. "The fact that someone's interested in seeing these things" (Jenna) was also a benefit. Alison felt the same way:

> Well, first I am happy that this person wants to receive that photo. Clearly that means they enjoy me which means I'm enjoyable, I'm desirable, it's-it's providing I guess a bit of legitimacy for feeling good about myself. That might sound fucked up but, um, and it's honestly only been in the last mm, two years that I've started really like appreciating myself and loving myself and being OK with my body.

As participants may have be struggling with body image issues, the idea that another person desired to see their bodies confirmed or boosted self esteem. Considering again how Alison equated crafting an image to "making it art" where she had found "now that the body is a beautiful thing or can be beautiful," creating and sending images of herself, and her partner's appreciation of her body allowed her to further appreciate her own body.

Juggling different personal perspectives

This superordinate theme illustrates participants' complex and sometimes opposing perspectives on sexting. They recognized how mainstream cultural messages influenced their perceptions, sometimes a source of conflict, which they tried to reason through. They were uncomfortable discussing these topics and exhibited some negative judgments about it. However, participants also viewed sexting as normal and mostly acceptable.

Uncomfortable topic. All participants discussed how they hardly ever talked about sexting, finding it an uncomfortable or taboo topic. The interview was one of the few places they opened up about sex or sexting, and this discomfort was evident. For Clare, sharing these experiences in the interview was the first time she's talked about them with anyone other than her partner. When I asked her to talk about the images she took, she replied, "Um, I don't know. Haha. Sorry *(laughing)*. It's such a strange thing to discuss. Not something I've really articulated before." She further explains how uncomfortable she was discussing anything related to sex:

> Um, I dunno, I just, I usually feel very uncomfortable uh discussing anything about remotely suggestive of like sex or like um the bodies in general um anything *(laughing)*. [ ] I feel really uncomfortable thinking about uh, you know, women's bodies, anyone's bodies. I don't like that *(laughing)* so um my natural aversion to these kinds of topics um just kind of like influences mm, the- like how I discuss them with others. So yeah. Like even like my mom never, never talked about anything like ever I never had "the talk" and I'm so glad I didn't. Um no ya. Zero communication there which may or not be healthy, but certainly the way I like it *(laughing)*.

Alison described why she rarely discussed sex and sexting:

> Um, privacy, I suppose? Like that intimacy, that connection with somebody is not something that I'm like, "Hey, look what I do!" You know? But, I would feel uncomfortable about it. I was definitely skeptical about participating in this study and like, how am I gonna talk about this with a complete stranger? And what's gonna happen when I run into that stranger at Starbucks or [Local Coffee Shop]? And like, you know? But um, I dunno. That's strange. Just as we don't talk about our own like- like physical sexual acts, or I don't as much, ever, actually *(laughing)*.

Jenna also had reservations about talking about sexting with others:

> Like I am still nervous because I know other people don't necessarily have the same views as me, um you know, they might find that there's something wrong with it for whatever their reasons are so I wouldn't want it to be out there.

This discomfort was also illustrated in the interview process, which forced participants into a reflection and verbalization of their practices and experiences. They worked through their own thought processes and feelings about the topic. For example, Alison had difficulty keeping up with certain points she was trying to make:

> It's gonna be like, it varies, but then like how you craft that image and make it artistic, and perhaps not all people do this, like this is actually very weird to talk about now. Um, but… Sorry what was the question? *(laughing)*

This was likely uncomfortable because she may not have thought that others may also think of crafting and image as artistic, and was possibly feeling exposed and embarrassed.

It was also evident that this interview was one of the few times participants had intensely reflected on sexting, as they struggled with what to call the sexual activity they were participating in. Although the project used the term sexting, and participants' identified how they defined this term at the start of the interview, it was not necessarily a term they identified with or had used:

> Oh that was- that was like the only one sent through permanent… technology, I don't know, I need a name for this. – Clare

> But how I guess the sexting and the photo-sharing, let's call it, impacted our relationship, I mean in a way kept us close-er, I guess. – Alison

Participants also posed questions about sexting aloud, as if pondering them for the first time:

> Oh, I'm trying to make these connections, and I'm like, "Maybe this?" and "Is this a correlation? Is that actually a causation? – Clare

> And I think when we send, when I send these photos, as much as I've pointed out that it does do something for me, it is for that other person, typically. Um, but I benefit from that, for sure. Is that in line with what I was saying earlier? 'Cause I know I talked a lot about how… Um, but yeah [pause]. It's interesting. – Alison

Most noticeably, all participants would giggle or laugh at multiple times during the interview, suggesting their discomfort discussing the topic or feelings of awkwardness hearing themselves say these experiences and perspectives aloud. Despite participants' discomfort discussing sexting, they responded voluntarily to advertisements to participate in the interview. Clare described her excitement to participate in the study to her partner:

> I- like as soon as I ripped off this paper, I was like, "Look at this! [recruitment for study] I'm totally gonna do this!

When the researcher pointed out that she was voluntarily participating in a project she felt uncomfortable about, she responded,

> Oh ya this is for science. [ ] This is a totally different realm so I'm able to kind of alienate it and just be like, "OK, this exists in this small room and this small world," and I would love to con- I love to contribute to research in regardless of area of study so um I ya I'm able to kind of just think of this as a very isolated situation and I don't know. Um think of- if I think of it more analytically, it becomes a lot more easy to discuss. But if you're talking about it casually, it's like- and about, I dunno I'm very uncomfortable and I just can't do it *(laughing)*.

Working through negative judgment. The perception of sexting as taboo was rooted in how our culture discusses sex and sexuality, which differs between men and women. This perception shaped how participants perceived sexting, others' participation in it, and their own experiences, which were sometimes negative. Sex and sexting were viewed as something that is more natural and acceptable among men:

> Like I think for guys it's sort of like taken almost as sort of a joke. It's like, y-yeah. They, I guess, it's sort of a double-standard that guys just sort of you know can do it and it's not a big deal, like if a guy sent a picture around like that, they wouldn't be thought of as promiscuous or ah you know, slutty I guess. And they might be thought of as a player or

> girls might be a little bit more cautious around them but probably not to the same extent where as I think with girls, if they were doing that kind of thing, guys sort of see them as easy and they would probably pursue them but they wouldn't be girlfriend material I guess or wife-material, um. So*...(laughing).* – Jenna

> He's also messaged other girlfriends of mine, and like, this character's like- I've called him the Sociopath before, Um because he- he would be in contact with all these women and I'd like kinda deny it. And I'm, it's like you know, I was hurt at first that he's doing this to multiple people. Like, what the hell is wrong with you… – Alison

However, sex and sexting was viewed as taboo and shameful for women, and engaging in it often brought on a label of promiscuity. The participants believed that "it's a lot more taboo for girls to send things around" (Jenna), and " it's totally trashy, totally slutty, totally provocative" (Clare).

Thus, there is a double standard that exists in sex and sexting. Sexting was perceived to be more socially acceptable for men whereas women who engage in sexting are seen as promiscuous. Thus, men may tend to do it more often or more easily, whereas women, although perhaps engaging in sexting to the same degree, may feel the need to keep it quiet for fear of being shamed or judged.

It was clear that when participants initiated sexting or discussed feelings of sexuality, they began questioning how they fit into negative perceptions of being a sexual female, as these ideas and labels were not something they wanted to identify with. There was some concern wondering what their partners would think of them for wanting to sext.

Alison explains, "I don't want to give him the wrong idea [ ] that I do this with anybody or that I'm interested in this person purely sexually which I'm clearly not." She also explains how she does not want to appear "narcisstic" and elaborates on her hopes for sending images:

> I think I have the motivation or the intention for him to be reminded of me and wanting to um, hopefully inspiring conversation. Maybe he'll think I'm pretty, maybe he'll think that,

> "Wow I haven't seen this person in a long time, how great it would be to get in contact with her." I'm overly hopeful. I should stop this sick, twisted spiral.

She viewed her actions from a negative light, calling it a "sick, twisted spiral." She acknowledged that her intentions were good and she initiated sexting to connect with potential partners on more than a sexual level, however there are some uneasy feelings about doing this. Clare describes how she jokingly invited her partner to sext, but that there "was a kernel of truth in it since that did come to fruition." This may reflect her bracing herself for the possibility of her partner responding negatively to this initiating for sexting. Whereas for men, it would not be as big of a deal, participants felt like they had to test the waters when initiating sexting or send images with caution.

Sometimes these perspectives impacted how participants viewed their own sexting behaviors. Clare described her feelings sometimes after sending an image: "I just feel like, uh, eh like, am I trashy now?" Because the label "trashy" was not one in which she identified with, feeling this way after sending an image clashed with how she perceived herself. She attempted to distance herself from this perspective by stating:

> It's a very fleeting thing, but I think um if I engage in it more often, that feeling would intensify… If I engaged in sexting more often, I would think I was trashy more often, probably in greater severity too.

This rationalization or need for distancing was continuously seen as participants tried to reconcile their negative perspectives of sexting, which was influenced by societal messages, something Clare felt were "engrained in [her]." She struggled to explain how her perspectives of sexting as trashy impacted how she viewed herself:

> …uh, k, this is gonna be messy but, feeling like you have s- phh feeling *(exhaling and laughing)*, k let me try to make a sentence [pause] OK, somehow, by engaging in said uncharacteristic activity, you have now become immured in the negative connotations of said activity and now they are like inextricably attached to you and your self-constructed

> identity and you can never be rid of them and now suddenly you trashy and slutty. It's not that you did something – you now are.

Although she felt like "slut-shaming is bad," she still used this terminology to label women who were sexual. It was uncomfortable identifying as a "prude," while also engaging in a behavior she considered "slutty" or "trashy." She had a difficult time trying to explain this, evident by her exhalation, laughter, and choppy thought process. In the end, she was able to explain these feelings by providing an objective and scientific explanation, thereby completely detaching her personal experiences completely and making it easier for her to discuss.

For Alison, being sexually intimate and sexting with multiple casual partners also suggested that she was being promiscuous, however, she stayed away from labeling her actions:

> I've been single now for like a year, and I've kind of been understanding more of why people stay single and have like non-committed relationships or like, polyandry some people call it. I wouldn't put a label on what I'm doing. Maybe I'm just being promiscuous, not… disrespectfully so, and I mean disrespectful to my own body…

Jenna also tried to navigate these opposing beliefs about promiscuity. She stated that she would think, "That's promiscuous, that's a little bit slutty" of people who send images to an extreme extent, while also saying, "I don't think it really changes who I am as a person and so, I don't think my opinion would change of any of my friends or any other female if I knew that they were [sending images] *(laughing)*."

Although it is likely true that Jenna believed that she would not negatively judge a female peer who was engaging in sexting, as she engaged in it and finds it an acceptable activity, she too was influenced by cultural beliefs and labeling of frequent sexting as promiscuous or slutty behavior. This is likely why she prefaces slutty with "just a little bit," as if afraid to place this label on other women's actions, or worse, her own. Her specifying that this is a personal opinion

illustrated that she understands that many others hold this opinion, however, she is separate from this.

Thus, participants had difficulty shaking off negative judgments about female sexuality and sexting, despite not personally identifying with some of these ideas, some of which they discussed inadvertently. Because they did not want to identify with these negative perceptions and saw it as incongruent to their identity, participants distanced themselves by finding differences in their sexting experiences, discussed it in objective terms, or detached labels from their behaviors.

But sexting is normal. Despite feeling uncomfortable discussing sexting and recognizing negative perceptions of it, some of which participants were also influenced by, they felt like it was a normal and relatively acceptable activity. Participants recognized humans as sexual creatures and saw technology as always progressing, and thus viewed sexting as natural for this day and age. It was not surprising for them that other young people were likely engaging in sexting too. Jenna explained that a lot of people her age have "college experiences" and thus saw sexting as a part of this norm. Alison explained that she is "pretty sure most people, especially [her] age have done it or will be doing it," given the nature of how technology shapes our world. She stated:

> I think the way our communication works digitally, it totally makes sense. Humans are sexual creatures and we can connect with people from around the world with a touch of a button. If you're interested in that person or perhaps like, you have sexual interest in that point in time and with one person or with many people, like that's how we're going to act on it is through these mediums.

Sexting was viewed as a part of other sexual activities that existed before technology. Now with these new means of communication, it has become a common place way for people to approach and connect with potential sexual interests, stemming from the same motivations but

just in a way that fits with the digital world in which we live. As technology progresses, how participants engage in sexting also progresses. Jenna described how sexting may be safer now since technology such as webcams do not require a hard copy like videos once did, but may actually not be safer since so many people can access personal information through new social medias. New technology since the Internet and webcams has created more efficient and secure ways of sharing images, such as through cell phone applications like Snapchat that permits images to be exchanged and automatically deleted.

For Alison, "sexting's not such a bad thing and it does bring people together." She's "not opposed to it, [she doesn't] judge people who do it," and points out that she believes most young people are or will be sexting. But, she recognizes how the culture we live in does not support these ideas, which may make it difficult to openly discuss:

> Are we just more accustomed to seeing sex and being bombarded by it, but like being told not to talk about it, and you know, what are we fearing? I think there is, like here is a culture of fear that you know, especially with security and sending photos and where is this message going and uncertainty and lack of security on all fronts, that may make people skeptical towards it, um.

Although sexting may be seen as normal, it also remains a suppressed topic and taboo topic in society, which made it difficult for Clare to support it whole-heartedly:

> Sexting is fine as long as you just never tell anyone about it. And nothing- and it's never captured and shared, you know what I mean? If I never get to hear about it or know about it, then I'm totally fine because I'm oblivious. Um even though the very act of it I think is pretty trashy *(laughing)*. Like if I don't know about it, I can't judge.

For Jenna, her perspective was more straightforward, stating, "I just don't personally see anything wrong with it." However, she believed that if her images were ever exposed, it would elicit a negative reaction and stigma against her by others:

> Reputations could be damaged um, so you know people thinking less of me or, um, that kind of thing, or, yeah, I guess that's the main thing where someone being disappointed

> like my Mom saw something like that was spread across the internet or like, potential jobs in the future, um like I know a lot of employers sort of look at Facebook profiles and things like that for people that are planning on hiring now and so if it came out that you know, there were nude pictures of me on the internet, I think it would show – show sort of maybe a lack of judgment both in taking the picture and in sending them to the person who released them *(exhaling)*.

These feelings that sexting could be a positive experience, one which participants benefitted from, are complicated by how others perceive it. The taboo nature of sexting does not provide space for participants to discuss it, and thus the research interview provided this opportunity, despite participant's discomfort. The current state of sexting is illustrated nicely by Alison, and forces us into a reflection of cultural practices and how it shapes young women's experiences of sex and sexting:

> It just becomes clear that it's- it's commonplace and why like, condemn it or talk poorly about it when it's a reality, you know, like come- we gotta come to terms with the way digital communication is shaping our relationships.

Discussion

Given that a large part of the literature has been focused on risks and prevalence of sexting, this study set out to learn more about the topic by conducting an exploratory study on female emerging adults' experience of sexting. Three participants were interviewed on their experiences sharing visual sexual content of themselves through communication technologies, which was always sent by text message or a cell phone application. The study findings highlighted five themes: (1) characteristics of relationship, (2) recognizing risk, (3) taking control, (4) enjoying sexting, and (5) juggling different personal perspectives. In the discussion section, I will consider the interconnectedness between these themes and relate them to existing literature. Sex connections between the emergent themes are particularly relevant and will be discussed in depth: sexting is enjoyable with a trustworthy partner, sexting comes with certain risks, the risk is exciting, senders exert control over sexts, a gender double standard exists, and sexting is a personal dilemma. I will discuss the implications for practice, limitations of the study, and provide suggestions for further research.

What is the experience of sharing visual sexual content of self through communication technologies for female emerging adults?

Sexting is enjoyable with a trustworthy partner. This study found that participants typically viewed their sexting experiences as a positive and enjoyable activity that existed in a mutual and trusting relationship. Consistent with previous literature that illustrates that sexting typically existed in the context of a desired sexual/romantic relationship, or an existing relationship (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; MTV & the Associated Press, 2009; Renfrow & Rollow, 2015; & Perkins et al., 2014), all participants mentioned only sexting to boyfriends or potential partners. Sexting was an activity that all participants engaged in with a

partner they trusted and felt comfortable with. Although discussed separately, trust and comfort often went hand in hand, and typically became more established as the length of relationship progressed, and partners proved themselves more trustworthy by keeping images private. This established and continuous proof of trust and comfort while sexting could potentially be beneficial for romantic/sexual partners. Parker et al. (2013) found that in romantic relationships, sexting was related to both partner's level of relationship satisfaction and may be an activity that adds to the relationship. This expression of overall enjoyment is in line with other studies that have found that having engaged in sexting is correlated with positive attitudes towards the activity, typically more than those who have not sexted (Strassberg et al., 2013; Ferguson, 2011).

For couples in long-distance relationships, sexting may be one of the few methods of staying close and sexually connected. Drouin et al. (2013) found that the main reason for sexting reported by college students involved in committed relationships was because the partner was far away. The same study found that the initiation for sex was one of the main reasons for sexting among participants. This motivating factor was similar for the participants in this study who sent images as an expression of sexual interest or an invitation to eventually have sex. Although it may have provided some connection, and in the case of one participant, increased the frequency of sex when she and her partner re-united, there were instances where sexting resulted in a great deal of frustration when partners were apart and therefore sexting did nothing fill this "void." Future research should examine the potential benefits of sexting among couples, and differentiating the types of relationships to understand how motivation and experiences may differ, such as in long-distance relationships.

Sexting comes with certain risks. Although much of the focus on sexting has revolved around risk, and educational campaigns have focused on raising awareness of risks among young

people, this study showed that participants were aware of the risks involved. This is consistent with other studies that illustrate that young people are engaging in sexting despite an awareness of risks that could possibly result in negative repercussions (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker et al., 2013). This likens sexting to any number of behaviours in which emerging adults tend to engage despite knowing the risks, such as driving under the influence of alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and binge drinking (Steinberg, 2008). In comparison to older adults, young people under the age of 25 are more likely to engage in these activities (Steinberg).

One of the major risks to sexting identified is the possibility of partners sharing the images without participants' consent, which could lead to embarrassment or damaged reputations. In one study, the possibility of having their sexts shared with unintended recipients was the main fear for those who engaged in sexting (Renfrow & Rollo, 2014). There may be some merit to this concern, as 30% of males in one study reporting to have forwarded a sext in comparison to 12% of females (Strassberg et al., 2014). There is also the risk of feeling coerced. Some research has found that for girls, experiencing pressure or coercion was a motivating factor for sexting (Englander, 2012; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008). However, coercion and pressure were not identified as motivating factors for the participants in this study. Lee and Crofts (2015) reviewed research on pressure and coercion in sexting and explained that although these experiences may occur, it does not represent motivations for the majority of girls who participate in sexting. They argue that factors such conducting sexting research from adult perceptions of risk, and studying the perspectives of sexting among young people in general as opposed to those who have experience sexting do not adequately capture the motivations or experiences for sexting. This study strived to overcome these factors and found that although only one participant reported an experience of coercion in

sexting, which she refused, motivations for sexting among all participants were attributed to having fun, experiencing thrill involved, being physically intimate, or staying connected with potential or long-distance partners.

The risk is exciting. Interestingly, this study provided that the potential risk of being identified in sexting was actually something participants enjoyed. Although not a major finding, participants between the ages 15-20 in a study by Walker et al. (2013) similarly reported that the risk in doing something illegal was a motivating factor for sexting. While participants in this study did not want their images to be exposed and possessed some negative judgment about self or others for sexting, engaging in a taboo activity that could result in their identification was found to be exciting and thrilling. Engaging in what participants viewed as a risky activity may reflect a developmental stage of risk-taking behavior that is typical of young people. Although risky behavior decreases between adolescence and emerging adulthood, the cognitive control system that manages self-regulating behavior is still developing (Steinburg, 2008). Lee et al. (2013) argue that efforts to suppress sexting have actually created the opposite effect whereby young people now view sexting as an exciting and desirable activity. Future research should explore if the perception and enjoyment of risk in sexting is similar among older adults.

Senders exert control over sexts. In order to combat potential risks, participants took control in the sexting process. The creation of images was a main source of control for participants. They may have considered partner's input or what partner's may find desirable, however, the decision as to what to reveal/conceal in an image, how it was constructed, and the medium through which it was sent was entirely up to participants. Similarly, participants in another study attempted to minimize risk by controlling the level of explicitness and level of personal disclosure in their images and videos (Renfrow & Rollo, 2014). Cupples and Thompson

(2010) found that girls were more assertive when communicating with their romantic partners through texting in comparison to in person. The control in creating and sending an image and being able to assert boundaries with partners during sexting may be similar, as there is a physical distance between partners which allow participants to feel more comfortable taking control. Given the focus on the risk of unauthorized images and thus a lack of control in sexting, this study provides new data on how female participants experience control in the process. Hasinoff (2012) poses a new framework for sexting, suggesting that researchers consider it a form of media production where young people have control over what they look like, thus possibly opening doors to new understandings and reflections of sexting on representations of self and in the media. Future research may consider this framework, exploring control and the creation of visual sexual content in sexting.

A gender double standard exists. The sexual double standard, whereby men and women are judged differently based on the same sexual practices, has been illustrated in sexuality research (Crawford & Popp, 2003). This sexual double standard also applies to sexting. The draw of doing something taboo may also reflect a gendered motivation to sending visual sexual content as female sexting tends to be seen as more deviant in comparison to males. Participants' perspectives that our culture tends to see male sex/sexting as acceptable and female sex/sexting as "slutty," illustrated that there is a double standard that exists within sexting. This double standard is illustrated in previous studies examining the perspectives of sexting among young people. Lippman & Campbell (2014) found that girls were often harshly judged for both sexting (e.g. "slut") and not sexting (e.g. "prude"), in comparison to boys who were not faced with the same negative judgment. Similarly, female youth in a study by Ringrose and colleagues (2012) often brought up anxiety around being negatively judged for sexting, such as being slut-shamed,

whereas boys used the images they received to enhance their status among friends. Girls' sexuality and images of their bodies have the capacity to bring about and negative repercussions, such as damaged reputations and feelings of shame in a way that is not evident among males (Ringrose, et al.). Indeed, some studies indicate that girls are more likely to see view sexting negatively in comparison to boys (Temple et al., 2012).

Although participants did not want their reputations to be damaged, and did not want to identify with these labels, sending visual sexual content was a motivating factor because "engaging in something taboo is exciting by that very nature." This may explain why the participants in this study reported finding more enjoyment and thrill from sending sexts as opposed to receiving them. This reflects some of the research that illustrates that females tend to send more sexts than males (Associated Press & MTV 2009; Lenhart 2009; Cox Communications, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2011), whereas males tend to receive more sexts than females, sometimes without sending one (Lenhart, 2009; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013). Because male sex/sexting behavior is deemed more acceptable than females, and thus not considered taboo, males may not possess the same thrill when sending visual sexual content.

Sexting is a personal dilemma. As participants were engaged in something they enjoyed but felt was deemed wrong by society, there was a struggle to come to terms with how this made sense for them. This can be reflective of experiencing the sexual double standard, which females can use as a tool to evaluate themselves (Crawford & Popp, 2003). They attempted to distance themselves from what they perceived to be negative, for example, seeing sexting as uncharacteristic of their identity or not labeling their own behaviors. Wanting and enjoying sexting conflicted with the cultural scripts of appropriate female sexuality and again, played into

any negative labels. Thus, participants found ways to distance or protect themselves from this as well (e.g. inviting partners to sext as a joke, careful not to send too many sexts to avoid being viewed as narcissistic). This is similar to the findings in Renfrow & Rollo's (2014) study where participants were aware of the deviant nature of sexting, and attempted to reframe this to alleviate the tension they felt from engaging in it by claiming it as normal, comparable to sex, and a beneficial activity.

Discomfort also stemmed from discussing the taboo topic of sexting and participants' personal and private experiences. As participants explained, they rarely brought up sexting (and sometimes sex) with others, let alone had this type of discussion with an audio-recording running. Lee and Crofts (2015, p. 11) point out that gendered double standard in sexting illustrates the "(hetero-)normative moral judgments of females who sext." The experience of the participants in this study illustrate that these moral judgments was sometimes inadvertently applied to their own behaviors. Discussing these experiences aloud may elicit reminders of the taboo nature of sexting, which when kept private, was exciting. However, when made explicit, appeared to elicit negative judgments of female sexuality.

Despite their discomfort around openly discussing sexting, participants knew and understood the nature of the study, they voluntarily participated, and no participant withdrew from the study. As an aside, I was concerned that due to the intimate topic and nature of the research, few young women would be interested in participating, however, I received several inquiries. This may suggest that young women who are engaging in sexting want a safe space to discuss it. Given the negative lens in which sexting is viewed through in mainstream culture, openly discussing sexting may not be easy for young people, especially females. In some sense,

the interview process served as an intervention that allowed participants a space to reflect on an activity they may not have thought of or shared with others before.

The off limits nature of sexting combined with the enjoyment participants experienced from it created conflicting personal perspectives on sexting. Thus, on one hand, participants endorsed the normalcy discourse of sexting, voluntarily engaging in what they believed to be a normal activity given their young age, relationship status, and access to communication technologies. On the other hand, their immersion in a culture that tends to view sex and sex-related topics as taboo, especially for women, resulted in beliefs that fell in line with the deviant discourse of sexting. The cultural message that engaging in sexting is 'wrong' seeped into participant's own perspectives and ways they approached the topic, despite finding it a normal activity. These conflicting messages resulted in a discomfort and confusion as participants reflected and verbalized their experiences of sexting, and illustrate the power of cultural ideas on young people, and how it influences their personal perspectives and experiences.

Clinical implications

The results of this study provide greater insight on the experiences of sexting among female emerging adults. More specifically, it provides information on participants motivations for sexting, the contexts in which sexting takes place, participants perspectives on sexting, and detailed accounts of both positive or negative experiences of sexting. These findings allow anyone working with young people who may be engaged in sexting to better understand this phenomenon that has up until this point, have primarily viewed sexting through a deviance framework.

Perhaps what is an especially relevant finding of this study is how young women do not feel like they can safely discuss their sexting experiences, or do so comfortably because it is

viewed as a taboo topic. Even for these participants who mostly had positive experiences to share, it was sometimes a struggle. It is probable to assume that young women who have negative experiences regarding sexting, perhaps having experienced a coercive situation or blackmail from a partner, speaking about sexting may be even more difficult. Thus, it is essential that mental health professionals, educators, academics, and the general public recognize the cultural context in which sexting is currently situated, and strive to shift this environment to be more inviting and safe for young people to discuss sexting. This may begin by engaging in a reflective practice examining personal opinions of young people sexting (Döring, 2014; Bauermeister, 2013). As this study and the results of Renfrow and Rollo (2014) suggest, young people experience tension between engaging in sexting, an activity they enjoy, while also recognizing how it is deemed taboo by society. Perhaps then, we must also consider that the negative judgment imposed by others on those who sext can result in harmful consequences on young people's well-being, and not focus solely on the deviance or potential risks to sexting alone. The harm associated with the unauthorized distribution of sext messages may not simply lie in the distribution itself, but people's reactions to it. Several young women, such as Amanda Todd, who committed suicide, experienced extreme bullying or cyberbullying as a result of their images being exposed. Given that technology is often engrained in the developmental stages of young people today, Judge (2012) suggests that clinicians inquire about young people's technology usage, perhaps even asking about experience with sexting. Explicitly discussing these topics, which may often go undetected, may provide a safe space young people need and open up the door for valuable information (Judge).

This study provides implications for how sexting is approached in educational and prevention campaigns. Youth sexting campaigns have typically been centered on a deviance

discourse, seeing youth sexting as risky and resulting in negative consequences, and thus is something to be abstained from (Döring, 2014). Sexting prevention programs often regulate female's behaviors the same way sexual assault programs do as opposed to targeting perpetrators of these crimes (Lee & Crofts, 2015). Provided that young women who have been victims of sexual assault can experience feelings of shame (Koss, 2000; Vidal & Petrak, 2007), a notion that is echoed by participants in this study who expressed that they were prepared to take responsibility if their images were distributed, these programs only add to the blaming and shaming that these young women experience. We need to steer clear from promoting gender stereotyping and female victim blaming messages, which make up several current sexting prevention campaigns (Döring). Also, these programs need to be more comprehensive in its approach instead of only focusing on risks because is evident that young people are aware of the risks in sexting, and that the risk and taboo nature of sexting may actually be drawing young people to sexting as opposed to deterring them. Instead, programs should focus on educating recipients of sexting to practice consensual sexting practices by keeping the images they receive confidential, a suggestion that has been posited by other researchers (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Hasinoff, 2013). Similar to practicing consent in sex, young people should learn about consent in sexting. As young people continue to engage in sexting, there is a need to "move towards an evidence-based approach to sexting risk prevention that acknowledges both adolescents' vulnerability and sexual agency" (Döring).

Limitations of the study and future research

Examining the experiences of three participants allowed for an in-depth understanding of sexting, however, it only reflected the experiences of this small group. Thus, the findings of this study are not representative of the experiences of all female emerging adults, but provide a

detailed understanding of the experiences of a select few that can lend to future research. The exploratory nature of the study allowed for a broad range of sexting experience (i.e. not limiting type of relationship, type of communication technology used), and thus some of the data was not as homogenous as it could be if the project was more selective.

The emerging literature and qualitative studies such as this one have opened up new areas for exploration. Future research should be more specific in its examination of sexting, as it can happen in several contexts, for example, if intimacy and connection are enhanced by sexting in long-distance relationships versus close-distance relationships.

This study revealed that the process of sexting, mostly in sending images, was one in which participants felt control over. Future research could explore this experience and perspective of control in female sexting and how it relates or differs to other sex practices.

The tension between understanding society's perception of sexting and their own personal involvement in sexting, and the thrill associated with the risk and taboo nature of sexting could reflect a gendered nature of sexting. Future research could examine how the sexual double standard impacts young women's sexual identities, and study a larger population to identify what is typical for other young women, and how the experiences of sexting for males may be similar or different.

Sexting research can also strive to be more diverse as well as inclusive. For example, there is only one study to date examining sexting among a non-hetero population (Bauermeister, Yeagley, Meanley, & Pingel, 2013). Another group that may be of interest and have been neglected from the research are adults and older adults. Research into these older populations may be important in teasing out if young people are engaging in sexting because of the thrill in the risk and taboo nature, or if sexting is a new sexual norm for all ages in the digital era. This

study has provided a glimpse into the experiences and perspectives of three emerging female young adults, however, the experiences and perspectives of sexting among other populations are essential to add to our understanding of sexting.

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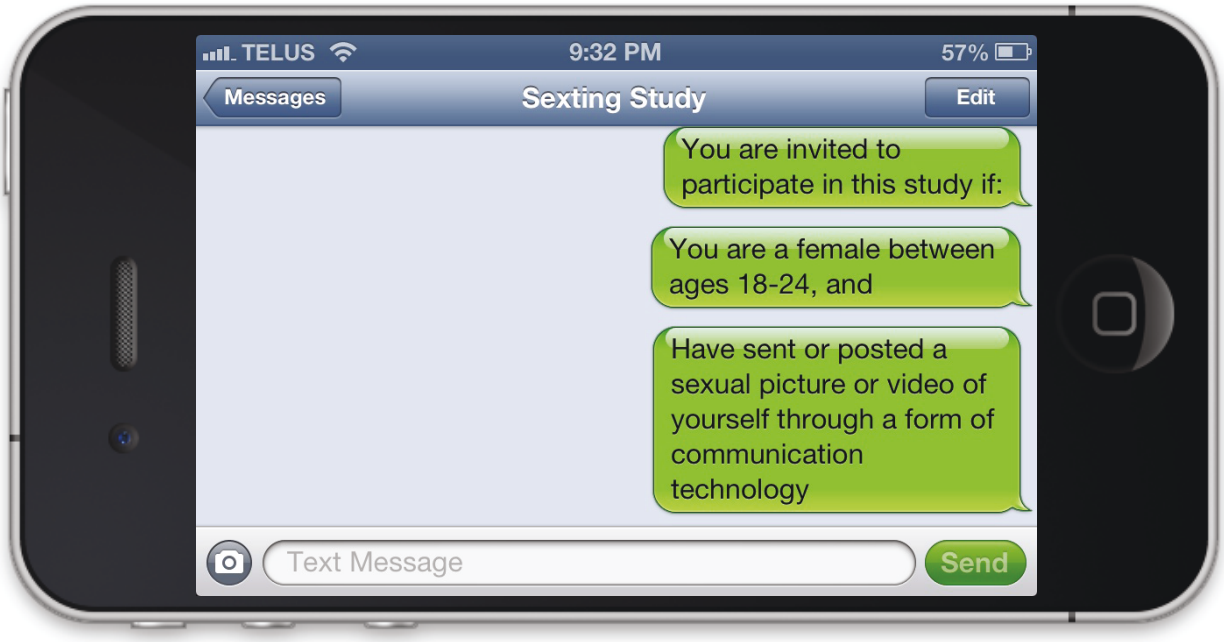
Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

'Sexting' Study



I am hoping to gain insight on female young adults' experience of sexting, specifically in regards to sending or posting **visual** sexual content through communication technologies, such as cell phones and social media. In the present study, you will be participating in a one-on-one interview with the researcher at the University of Alberta campus for approximately one hour. In thanks for your time, I am offering participants $10 in cash.

The data in this study is being collected for my thesis, as partial fulfillment for the Master of Education in Counselling Psychology degree.

If you are comfortable discussing your experience and are interested in participating, please contact Lily Le. Thanks!

Principle Investigator: Lily Le, B.A.
Email: lle1@ualberta.ca
Study Supervisor: Dr. Lia Daniels
Email: lia1@ualberta.ca

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta.

Sexting Study Email Lily Le lle1@ualberta.ca	Sexting Study Email Lily Le lle1@ualberta.ca	Sexting Study Email Lily Le lle1@ualberta.ca	Sexting Study Email Lily Le lle1@ualberta.ca	Sexting Study Email Lily Le lle1@ualberta.ca	Sexting Study Email Lily Le lle1@ualberta.ca	Sexting Study Email Lily Le lle1@ualberta.ca	Sexting Study Email Lily Le lle1@ualberta.ca	Sexting Study Email Lily Le lle1@ualberta.ca

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Date:

Start time of interview:

End time of interview:

Place:

Name of interviewee:

Age of interviewee:

Pre-interview:

- Describe the interview process:
  - Semi-structural interview with guideline questions, let participant do most of the talking so I can understand her experience, embed direct quotes
- Go through information letter/consent form
- Explain member-checking – is current email OK?
- Answer any questions
- Sign consent form

- Ensure cell phones turned off
- Attend to comfort
- Explain purpose of notes

Interview ----------

Closing the interview:

- Additional comments?
- Transcription process
- Up to 4 weeks post interview to withdraw from study
  - **Email**:
- Thank you

Interview Questions

1. ***How do you, in your own words, define sexting?***

In this project, I am particularly interested in understanding your experience of sexting visual content, such as pictures or videos.

2. ***What have you experienced in terms of sexting visual content?***
    - *Could you describe a time when you sexted?*
    - *What forms of communication technologies have you used to sext?*

3. ***What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of sexting?***
    - *What has the relationship context been when you have sexted?*
        - *Peer, Flirting, dating, common law, married, cheating?*
    - *What is the sexting interaction between you and the recipient(s)?*

4. ***When you sext, how do you feel?***

5. ***How has your experience of sexting impacted you?***
    - *Relationship with the recipient(s)?*
    - *Positively? Negatively?*

6. ***What motivates you to sext?***

7. ***What else can you tell me about sexting?***

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Appendix C: Information Letter

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

www.ualberta.ca 6 – 102 Education North Tel: 780: 492-5245
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2G5 Fax: 780: 492-1318

INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM

Study Title: What's your 'sext' drive? Female young adults' experiences of sharing sexual content through communication technologies

Research Investigator:
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(780) 492-4761

Background
You are being asked to take part in this research study examining the sexting experiences of young women. We are asking you to participate because you responded to a recruitment poster for this study and have met the inclusion criteria.

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to learn about female young adults' experiences of sending or posting images or videos of a sexual nature through communication technologies. Little research has been conducted on the topic of sexting, and the research that has been done has focused on its potential negative consequences. This study aims to obtain a more well rounded picture of sexting by hearing from female young adults' who have participated in sexting, whose experiences may be positive and/or negative. The data collected in this study is for my thesis as partial fulfillment for the Master of Education degree.

Study Procedures
You will be participating in a one-on-one interview with the researcher in regards to your sexting experience, which will last approximately one hour. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Once the transcript is drafted, it will be emailed to you so you can check to make sure it is accurate.

Benefits
By participating in the interview, you may possibly feel empowered in sharing your experience. If you had a negative experience, you may find it helpful to talk about this. By sharing your

experience you are contributing to the small knowledge base on sexting, which can potentially inform programs such as sexual health education and support services. In thanks for your time you will receive $10 upon completion of the interview.

Risks
It is possible that you may experience discomfort by sharing your experience with the researcher. If you are recalling a negative experience associated with sexting, this may bring up difficult emotions.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. If you do not want to answer a question during the interview, you have to right to decline. If you wish to discontinue your participation from the research study, you have a right to change your mind and withdraw at any time before and during the interview. If you wish to withdraw from the study after data has been collected, you will have up to 4 weeks post interview to contact the researcher to indicate so, in which the data will be destroyed.

Confidentiality & Anonymity
Information collected from this study will be kept confidential. However, there may be limits to confidentiality if you disclose abuse of vulnerable populations (i.e. minors, elderly persons) or disclose potential situations where you or others may be harmed. The data from this study will be used in my thesis, which may be published or presented on. Pseudonyms will replace your name and identifying information will be removed to strive for anonymity. The data will be kept confidential by being locked in a cabinet and stored on a password-protected computer. Data will be kept for 5 years in a secure place following the completion of the project and then appropriately destroyed. If you would like, the researcher can email you a copy of the research findings when the study is completed.

Further Information
If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Lily Le at (780) 722-0354 or Lia Daniels at (780) 492-4761.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information, and received answers to any questions I asked. I agree to take part in this study:

Printed Name of Research Participant _____

Signature of Research Participant _____

Date _____