

Teen Talk About Sexting: What it Reveals about Gender Practices

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Abstract

In recent years, the topic of sexting has risen to the fore in the public mind, and, in particular, concerns that teenagers are engaged in this practice. In this paper, we will report on a three-state, mixed-method, interdisciplinary, and comparative study of teens and adults views of sexting, which was funded by the US Department of Justice. Specifically, we will be discussing selected areas of the qualitative research data collected from 123 youth, who participated in a total of 20 focus groups in Massachusetts, Ohio, and South Carolina. In talking with teens about their views regarding sexting, we found teens acting out powerful expectations and beliefs about males and females (our data did not include any youth who identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual or Transgendered). The topic of sexting, which sits at the intersection between acceptable and unacceptable expressions of sexuality, was a powerful means of unearthing territories of ambivalence in teens’ gendered relationships. In this presentation we will examine selected areas of our qualitative research data that we feel have particular relevance to considerations of teens’ practice of gender as it emerges through discussions of sexting. These areas are: 1) teens definitions of sexting; 2) teens views of sexting, which we describe as falling on a continuum from mutual benefit to self interest to intent to harm; 3) the ways boys and girls describe the motivations of sexting as it is related to gender. The discussion of the data lays the groundwork for an exploration of potential theoretical lens through which to view the issue of sexting as it serves as a locale for the understanding of teens gendered practices.

What is Sexting? What does it have to do with teens?

Sexting is the act of sending sexually explicit messages or photographs, primarily between mobile phones. The term was first popularized in early 21st century, and is a portmanteau of *sex* and *texting*, where the latter is meant in the wide sense of sending a text possibly with images (Wikipedia, n.d.).

The first known published mention of the term *sexting* was in a 2005 article in the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*.^[2] (From Wikipedia 5/7/12: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexting>)

No sooner had the idea of sexting become front page news, than concerns about teen sexting practices began to be discussed. A number of national surveys have been conducted that probe what it is teens are doing in relationship to their gender practices and sexuality development with the various broadcast devices available to them, and this broad survey work has subsequently led to an increasing number of empirical studies examining special aspects of the issue (Ford, Tucker, Thompson, Davidson, & Harris, 2012). While there was a growing body of quantitative information about sexting and teens, there were very limited qualitative studies that could provide information on the in-depth perspectives of normal teens, and there was even less on the views of parents and educators.

The studies mentioned above served as the background for the study we undertook: *Building a Prevention Framework to Address Teen “Sexting” Behaviors*, a research project funded in 2011 by the US Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. This paper reports on selected portions of that work. We begin by describing the scope of the study and its methodology. Next, we look at a handful of topics within the data that we think have particular resonance for considering issues of teens and gender. We conclude with a more exploratory consideration of the theoretical lenses that might be of value for future investigations in this area.

Methodology

The project under discussion here, “Building a Prevention Framework to Address Teen “Sexting” Behaviors”, is a multi-state/region, multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional effort to examine youth and adult (parents and educators) views on the topic of sexting and to use this information as the basis for building prevention strategies to address problems related to sexting behaviors. The diversity in areas, institutions, and project leaders was a deliberate attempt to provide us with access to data that would represent a broad range of possible views and to provide us with many disciplinary perspectives and strengths from which to consider this data.

The state/regional partners in the study are: Massachusetts—The University of Massachusetts-Lowell; Ohio—Miami University of Ohio; and, South Carolina—The Medical School of the University of South Carolina.

Table 1

State Partners in the Study and Team Diversity by Discipline

University of Massachusetts- Lowell	Miami University of Ohio	Medical School of the University of South Carolina
Andrew Harris, Criminal Justice/Policy	Carl Paternite, Psychology and School Mental Health	Elizabeth LeTourneau,** Psychology and Juvenile Sexual Offenders
Judith Davidson, Education and Research Methodology	Cricket Meehan, Psychology and School Mental Health	
Karin Tusinsky-Miofsky*, Criminal Justice/Youth & Bullying		

Note. *Karin Tusinsky-Miofsky is now located at the University of Hartford, Connecticut

**Elizabeth LeTourneau is now located at John Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD

The study was explicitly designed to make strong use of qualitative research methods, particularly focus group interviews, in order to provide access to a better representation of the emic perspectives of participants. From the very beginning of the study, an NVivo data base has been maintained to be used for organization and analysis of the data by Davidson at UMass-Lowell and her student research team.

The two-hour focus group sessions were designed to be conducted in three-parts--an anonymous survey on teen technology practices, followed by an in-depth focus group session on issues related to teens' beliefs about technology and sexting, and concluding with a second anonymous survey that examined teens' sexting practices. In this way, our work aimed to yield a range of descriptive statistics and safely gleaned confidential information, as well as collect teens' views of sexting and how it is (or is not) part of the landscape of their lives.

The focus group conversations with teens, which are what we will be drawing upon in this paper, investigated the following questions:

1. What role does technology play in teens' lives?
2. How do teens define sexting?
3. What do teens understand about the motivations for sexting?
4. How are beliefs about sexting differentiated by gender?
5. Do teens understand the legal consequences of sexting? What does that understanding consist of?
6. How do teens make sense of the personal and social consequences of sexting?
7. How do teens relate to adults in regard to this topic? Do they?
8. What are teens' perspectives on the best interventions for sexting issues?

The research protocols—survey and focus group protocol—were developed through an intense interactive process that engaged all research team members at each site. Each member was

asked to apply his or her methodological skills and disciplinary content to the development and review of each item and consideration of its placement within the focus group session. We worked online, through email and dropbox.com, as well as with individual and group phone calls. Institutional Review Board feedback also contributed to the development of the final protocols.

The methodological diversity of the team (most were experienced in survey research, but Davidson was expert in qualitative research) led to a very productive creative exchange that was possible because of the inclusive culture of the project—its leadership and members. In a world where, increasingly, mixed methods are extolled, we have learned that this kind of inclusive culture is critical to further a truly hybrid approach to research.

In all, 20 youth focus groups were conducted, representing three High Schools in each of the three states (with the exception of Massachusetts where one of the three sites was a community organization). Males and females were interviewed in separate groups. The size of the groups ranged from 1-11. Focus groups were during Spring 2011. A total of 123 youth ages 14 to 20 were interviewed, 55 male and 68 female.

Table 2

Gender Breakdown of Teen Focus Groups

State and Site	Males	Females
Massachusetts	19	23
Andrews	7	9
Gateway City	6	8
Romney	6	6
Ohio	23	29
Astro	6	9
Native	9	9
Norse	8	11
South Carolina	13	16
Brad	5	8
Norton	3	4
Wes	4	2
Make-Up Session	1	2
Total	55	68

In recruiting young people and conducting the focus group sessions, we adhered rigorously to Institutional Review Board (IRB) policies. Our research plans and instruments were submitted to the UMass-Lowell IRB and subsequently to the IRB's of the partner institutions. For young people, consent was received from guardians in advance of their participation in the focus group session. All participants received a gift card of \$25.00. for their participation.

The focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by an outside transcription service. Copies of interviews from all sites were retained at the “mother site” (University of Massachusetts Lowell, and each site received back-up copies of their transcribed interviews.

Preliminary analysis began with site-based reading of the transcripts. Two researchers—one who had participated in the interview and one who had not—read each transcript, using a review protocol to search for themes. The review protocol was very broadly constructed to support the reader to identify important elements in the first round. The transcripts were read within case (site by site) and then considered cross-site (comparison of all the youth transcripts produced at that site). Each researcher produced memos related to single transcripts and looking across transcripts.

Secondary analysis took place at UMass Lowell, where two researchers had responsibility for reading all the transcripts, and through a process similar to the site analyses, writing memos on the individual sites and a cross-site review memo.

Tertiary analysis took place in a full team research meeting (July, 2011), when all members met in Massachusetts to discuss the memos, synthesize meaning, and identify themes for further study.

Coding of the materials in the NVivo database took place simultaneously to the three stages described above. It fed the work of the researchers, and, at the same time, was nourished by them. The database we have created in NVivo is very large and complex and makes use of many of the more advanced features of the tool, including the development and importation of case attributes using descriptive statistics from the survey data. Moreover, figuring out the ways for multiple team members (NVivo trained or not) to make efficient and effective use of the material stored here has been very challenging. Although I (Davidson) thought I was proficient in the use of the tool, this project has brought me much to consider in thinking about issues related to qualitative computing!

Subsequent presentations to specialist and practitioner audiences has provided yet more opportunities to share our ideas and receive feedback about preliminary findings (Davidson & Harris, 2011; Davidson, Harris, & Thompson, 2011; Davidson, Thompson, Ford, & Tucker, 2011; Ford, Tucker, Thompson, Davidson, & Harris, 2012; Harris & Davidson, 2011; Harris & Davidson, 2012, Meehan & Paternite, 2011a; Meehan & Paternite, 2011b; Miofsky & Tanso, 2011; Paternite, LeTourneau, & Hales, 2011).

For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on a segment of the youth data—responses to the ways boys and girls perceived boys and girls motivations for sexting, meaning their perceptions of their own gender and the opposite gender.

Teens Talk About Sexting

Teens are Confused About the Definition of Sexting

“Sexting—I don’t—it’s kind of vague to me, because you know, I’ve heard a lot about it on TV and news and stuff. It kind of went through a trend for a while, like everything—

everybody was talking about all of these charges and stuff coming up, and I guess I don't really have a definition. I don't really know. Inappropriate things being texted or sent via text message?" Amanda—South Carolina

"I think sexting is like sending pictures of you in the nude or like in your underwear. And sending like nasty text message, like to other people and stuff." Angelique—South Carolina.

These two quotations from girls in South Carolina are quite representative of the kinds of responses we received to the question of "What is sexting?" "How would you define it?" Many teens had a set of related notions about the practices that constituted sexting, but they were confused or unsure of the exact boundaries of what this term meant. Our questions to them tended to prompt more questions back from them, and these conversations were often continued after the focus group as teens probed researchers for information about the meaning of sexting.

A Continuum for Understanding Sexting Behaviors Among Teens

In analyzing male and female perspectives on sexting, we developed a continuum (a set of three categories) by which to separate the levels of danger related to sexting. From best to worst, these three categories are: 1) mutual benefit; 2) self-interest; and 3) intent to harm. These categories were very helpful in allowing us to manage the large amounts of material in this area and make comparative interpretations. In this section, we present information related to the continuum, but in the following section we go more deeply into the gender issues related to this model.



Mutual Benefit

Teens note a number of positive reasons for sexting. It is a way to keep connection when you can't be near each other. Indeed, in reading their descriptions of the positives of sexting, you can begin to imagine sexting as the petting stage of a long phone date! For teens, many of whom now have their own bedrooms and their own phones or computers, but may lack transportation to see that significant other—at certain times sexting may be the best alternative they can come up with. Sexting can be a way of saying—want to get to know you or I think I may be ready to take the next step. Mutual benefit is defined by a trusting relationship where there is shared respect for both parties.

“The good reason is maybe because you haven't seen this person in awhile I guess.”
(Male, South Carolina)

“Like what if someone’s in a long distance relationship or something like that but they want to like still retain like some intimacy or something with it.” (Female, Massachusetts)

Self Interest

Self Interest is a broad category that includes one’s personal desires and goals for sexual interaction or other attainment, such as improved status, greater attention or notoriety. It is in this category that trust is not as easy to gauge--you may not know the person well enough, you may not understand their true motivation, or changing relationship circumstances may lead to changing levels of trust. Self Interest is the arena where a boy may ask for a photo, and a girl is unsure of how to respond, or sends a photo to keep him interested. You show me yours and I will show you mine—falls squarely into this category. Self Interest is also the area where teens may use the forwarding or sharing of sexual messages or photos to try and increase their social standing or decrease the social standing of others.

Here are two quotations that offer a good sense of some of the content we have coded as “self-interest”.

“Mm. I agree with both five and seven. I think people do it mainly like -- I mean, they might do it if they are in a relationship but I don’t think it’s a -- Like when I think of a romantic relationship, I think of like a serious future together with the person long-term, maybe. But I think it’s mostly with people that are just kind of having flings and are looking for like maybe a fun or good time or something or they’re trying to get someone to like them by showing them something they think would impress them, in a way. But -- I lost the train of thought. Oh, yeah. (Female, Ohio)”

“Maybe somebody'll talk about it, talk about, they send it, and somebody as a friend. Then it may make somebody else do it because well, maybe everyone else is doing it. (Female, South Carolina)”

Intent to Harm

We discovered that most young people are well aware of what “intent to harm” means—they do not want to be there, they do not like it, they would avoid that one at any cost. The criminal connections to sexting are contained in this category, such as: sexual predation, rape, bullying, pornography, sexual trafficking, and stalking.

Intent to Harm is most often the category that will include the outsider—whether a real outsider, someone outside of the circle of the young persons’ friends and acquaintances or the more marginal individual in an organization who, for most intents and purposes, plays the role of an

outsider. In the following section, Damon, a young man from Massachusetts describes an “Intent to Harm” incident that happened to a friend.

Damon (4): I had a buddy that was actually a target of sexting. He was being targeted by it. He was 18 at the time, and this girl says she was 14. Yeah. Didn’t know each other, didn’t know each other, just some random number, and started to try, and send them inappropriate things.

Karin: Did he get into trouble?

Damon (4): I guess.

Karin: So that he would be caught with something that he shouldn’t have?

Damon (4): Yeah.

Karin: That’s scary.

Damon (4): I took his phone battery out, and we kind of destroyed his phone.

(Males, Massachusetts)

Boys and Girls: The Face of Gender in Teen Relations

The three categories above—mutual benefit, self-interest, and intent to harm—provided us with a way to divide the data related to teens’ perspectives on motivations for sexting—in general and as a gendered response. Thus, we learned, that males and females are in much agreement about who does what (in regard to sexting) and why, that is, males views of male behavior and female behavior are predictable as are females views of male and female behavior. This table synthesizes the ways boys and girls talk about each themselves and the opposite sex in regard to sexting.

Table 3

Boys and Girls Views of Sexting

Boys	Girls
Boys and girls say that boys: compete, strut, and show-off.	Girls and boys say that girls: are seeking attention, to impress, and feel wanted.
Words like competition, trophy, bragging rights, are used in relationship to boys and sexting.	Girls are always in danger of being labeled sluts or whores.
Boys can increase status through sexting.	Sexting decreases girls’ status.

Interestingly, boys’ view of boys’ behavior in the realm of sexting is more benign, than girls’ views of boys’ behavior in this realm. In other words, boys are more likely to think they are curious, want to have sex, are simply asking for what they want (benign or non-hurtful). Whereas girls identify boys’ behavior as more manipulating and demanding than boys do.

While there may appear to be little significant difference between compete, strut, or show-off and seek attention or to impress, the boys and girls we interviewed do make a distinction that is clearly present across the many transcripts we reviewed. It is significant to them.

This quotation from a male focus group in South Carolina is an example of the *joie de vivre* with which boys describe their motivations for sexting:

“Sarah: So I was going to ask cause you were talking about like for guys too. Like you could send a picture. Does it give you like a certain status or something?”

Bevaun (2): Yeah.

Cordell (3): Yeah.

Sarah: So Bevaun (2), yeah? You agree Cordell (3)?

Cordell (3): Cause you know, you send a picture to the girl, she sees you’re packing. So she’s telling all her friends, friends tell her friends, then sooner or later everyone wants to do you. So basically --

Diondre (4): You know, the Johnson slang.

Cordell (3): Yeah, the Johnson man.

Sarah: So that’s a slang term, Diondre (4)? The Johnson man?

Diondre (4): Yeah, the Johnson.”

A girl in Massachusetts describes the attention-seeking actions of girls in this way:

“I think for girls with low self-esteem if they send a picture or something and the guy tells them they look good or whatever they get like a little boost and they feel better about themselves.”

A young woman in Ohio describes it in this way:

“Gail (7): I think that some girls would do it because they’re insecure about their relationship and want to keep the guy. But it depends-- I don’t know. Like maybe it’s they’re just like doing it for attention and they want the guy to just stay, because they want to be like, “Oh, I’m cool.””

Sexting, gender, and power

As we took a closer look at the differences between male and female responses to our focus group questions, we also noted that there was significant evidence that sexting was a tool for exercising power among teen groups.

In South Carolina, a focus group of girls described it in this way. In this discussion they are discussing sexting as a means of demonstrating membership and providing access to a particular social group.

“Chantel (3): Chantel (3) says it probably could be a good thing too.

Sarah: How could it be good?

Chantel (3): Because if you can get a lot of friends, like you be like oh, she can do whatever (inaudible) so she can be our friend. You get a lot of popularity. You

hang out with different parts that you never thought you would be because you did this one simple thing. So they feel like if you're bold enough to do this then you can do whatever they ask you to do and they particularly wouldn't call you a flip, they'd just be like oh, she's like one of our side girls so she can hang with us. And she'll feel like oh, I did it too, maybe I'll send one of my friends to do it and then they can join the posse.

Sarah: So could you be popular among girls or does this get you popular I guess among boys?

Chantel (3): Popular all over. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

Bonnie (2): Bonnie (2) says it could get you popular among guys but (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) girls.

Devina (4): Devina (4) agrees with Bonnie (2)."

For the uninitiated, "flip" was a term that South Carolina teens used that is similar to the ways 'slut' and 'whore' were used in South Carolina and among our other groups in Massachusetts and Ohio. A 'flip' like a 'slut' or 'whore' is a female who has multiple, indiscriminate sexual encounters with males. In other words, she flips from male to male.

In the more harmful descriptions of sexting both boys and girls described it used as a way to get back at someone, bring someone down, or control another.

These boys in Massachusetts described the use of sexting as a way for girls to attract and enter the arena of popular boys:

"Ben (2): Like Floyd (6) said, it's something kind of like that, like an attention thing, you know. Maybe they just want to be the person who's in the center of everything and who's like so popular and all that. So they start sending pictures to the most popular guys or whatever. Or trying to get pictures and stuff."

In sum, gendered relationships are explored and worked out within these well-established boundaries and understandings.

Implications

1. New technology; Old gender stereotypes. What emerged clearly for us was the idea that the young men and women in our study may be using a wealth of new technologies from cell phones to social media, but they appear to be continuing to practice gender in ways that are quaintly stereotypical. Both, as we saw, are complicit in these gendered stereotypes.
2. We tend to look at sexting as an individual issue (whom did what to whom within a restricted set of individuals), but if we allow ourselves to consider the role of power within the act of sexting many new questions emerge, such as: Who (corporate group) is trying to exercise power over another? How (corporate tools) are they exercising this

power? Who is complicit? Who is the challenger? How are not only gender, but race, class and other social markers present in the context of a sexting event?

3. Frequently during the course of this study we encountered these questions: Haven't young people always experimented with sex? Why does this technology make it different? Sexting, as became abundantly apparent to us during this study, is an act of broadcasting; you have a broadcasting tool in your pocket—your cell phone, or a camera on your computer that can send out an image to one or all...the one can hold onto it and keep it private, or pass it on...to one or all. Sexting is broadcasting + sex. Depending on the circumstances, the act can equal deep intimacy or flirtation or it can suggest abandonment, pornography or violence. The technology does have meaning,
4. Solutions to sexting are directly and indirectly aligned with concerns about formal curriculum (in the schools and provided by other youth agencies) and informal curriculum (the curriculum that is provided by families, as well as the unspoken curriculum that young people imbue from their cultural surroundings. The discussion of teen gender practices and their relationship to sexting, must then, be related to discussions of curriculum in a thoughtful manner.

Future Directions

In undertaking this study, our initial goals were highly practical and results oriented—how can we protect teens from the dangers of sexting? Moreover, while the diversity of background on our team provided us with many disciplinary lenses from which to examine the topic of sexting, it did not come with shared theoretical perspectives. For that reason, our theoretical forays are following, rather than guiding, our analysis work. In many ways this has been a liberating accident, allowing us to truly think with the data before we became enmeshed in discussion of high theory about cultural and social issues.

We have begun to identify authors whose work speaks to these questions. How, for instance, do discussions of gender and performance (Butler, 2002, Weedon, 1987) speak to concerns about discourse and power (Foucault, 1972)? How do debates about technology and its role in our society (Hickman, 1990; Idhe, 1990), fall short without the extension of a critical feminist perspective (Haraway, 1990)? Indeed, how can we even consider the topic of technology without a deep understanding of the ways young people are swimming in the culture of new media (Ito, et. al., 2010)? Finally, the formal and informal pedagogies by which gender and technology are employed, deserve careful attention is the work to find solutions to the cyber-safety dilemmas that teens face (Bach,1998; Pinar, 2006; Pryor, 2011).

Analysis of our focus group interviews with teens and thinking about their words in terms of concerns about the relationship work that young people of this age must undertake, has led us to a series of linked questions about gender, performance, power, technology, and curriculum that relate our work to the theoretical resources described above. We hope to use these questions to drive future exploration of our data in a more theoretical vein.

Table 4

Future Questions

Gender and Performance	Gender, Performance, and Power	Gender, Performance, Power, and Technology	Gender, Performance, Power, Technology, and Curriculum
How is gender performed?	How is power exercised on gendered people?	What technologies are employed in the practice of gender?	What are the ways that the above are taught?
In performing gender...how do we become gendered?	Through gendered practice?	How do new technologies shape gender performances?	What is the content of that teaching?
How do we come to understand the rights, roles, and responsibilities of a particular gender?			How is sexting an opportunity to learn and teach about these issues?
How does self and other unfold in the performance of gender?			What course of study do we follow to become gendered, someone who can exercise power, and use technology in that work?

Teens in today’s world exist in a magical and fragile state. They thread their way delicately between the many tasks their age brings—from the definition of gender and the identification of future directions to the exploration of sexuality and the search for intimacy of many kinds. New digital technologies will be at the heart of this work. These technologies offer so much possibility and yet they come with special dangers. We hope our work will contribute to safe futures for young people.

We look forward to your suggestions and thoughts about the next level of integration between theory and practice on this project.

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