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Gender construction through adolescent sexting

Elizabeth A. Severson

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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Gender Analysis of Adolescent Sexting

Elizabeth A. Severson, Courtney C. Chesness, Natalie M. Woggon, Jeremy L. Welters,

Emily M. Gould

College of Saint Benedict | Saint John's University

In the United States, text messaging is the most popular form of electronic communication among adolescents. Approximately 1 in 3 teens send over 100 text messages a day. According to the Pew Center, 75 percent of 12-17 year-olds own cell phones compared to 45 percent in 2004 (Judge, 2011). Recently adolescents have begun to use their cell phones to engage in sexual exploration with one another. This new occurrence has now been labeled as “sexting.” Sexting is a combination of the words “sex” and “texting” and it is the action of electronically sending sexual messages or pictures, according to Temple, J.R., Paul, Berg, Donna Le, McElhany, and Temple, B.W. (2012). This new phenomenon includes writing sexually explicit messages, taking provocative pictures of themselves or other individuals, and transmitting these messages using technology. It can also be considered sexting when individuals receive sexual messages or images, according to Comartin, Kernsmith, R., & Kernsmith, P. (2013). The institution in which sexting occurs is the media, specifically through the use of cell phones. According to Pasco (2011), youth spend more time with media compared to any other activity besides sleeping. Sexting is a behavior that is a result of male and female adolescents trying to adopt masculine and feminine characteristics, which are created by our cultural definitions of gender.

Sexual exploration or curiosity during adolescence is normal and not necessarily bad. Many adolescents turn to forms of media to have their questions answered. For example, the internet provides youth with a place to retrieve sexual health information that may be uncomfortable to ask about in person (Comartin et al., 2013). However, in cases of sexting many harmful consequences are often involved. Dir, Coskunpinar, Steiner, and Cyders (2013) note that sending or receiving sexually explicit messages or images can result in cyberbullying, social

humiliation, and psychological distress. Furthermore, teenage girls report being disturbed and traumatized by the unauthorized distribution of their private images (Hasinoff, 2013).

Sexting also becomes a major issue when minors are involved, and is framed almost exclusively as a dangerous activity and a serious problem (Angelides, 2013). This is because regardless of one's age or consent to sexting, "it is illegal to produce, possess, or distribute explicit sexual images of anyone under the age of 18" (Hasinoff, 2013). Nude photos of a minor found on an individual's personal electronic device can lead to child pornography charges, and once convicted of these charges, in most states, the individual is also required to register as a sex offender (Comartin et al., 2013). These are very serious charges that can be detrimental to adolescents' futures; especially because everyone has access to sex offender registration records. However, the program does not allow the viewer access to the context of the crime, "therefore a youth convicted of sexting would appear the same as a sexual predator" (Comartin et al., 2013, p. 40). Unfortunately many adolescents are unaware of these consequences and continue to participate in sexting.

We know sexting frequently occurs because in 2008 and 2009 alone, U.S. law enforcement agencies handled an estimated 3,477 sexting-related cases (Angelides, 2013). And those are only the individuals who got caught; many cases go unnoticed. In instances of sexting, 39 percent of all teens, 37 percent of teen girls, and 40 percent of teen boys, said that they have sent sexually suggestive messages (i.e. text, email) (Sex and tech: Results from a survey of teens and young adults, 2008). Additionally, according to Dir et al. (2013) it is estimated that 2.5 percent (ages 10-17) to 20 percent of adolescents (ages 13-19) have sent or received nude or seminude photos of themselves. Another study done by Temple, J. R. et al. (2012) involved 948 high school student participants, 56 percent of which were girls. 28 percent of the students

reported sending a naked picture and 31 percent reported having asked someone for a sext. In general, 1 in 4 adolescents have sent a nude picture of themselves electronically (Temple, J. R. et al., 2012). So it is very clear that sexting among adolescents is occurring, but it is important to explore *why* they are engaging in this behavior. A gender analysis of the issue yields helpful insights.

From a very young age boys and girls are socialized into a gendered society where clear masculine and feminine behaviors are highly valued. Boys quickly adopt the masculine qualities that include being strong, assertive, independent, aggressive and sexual. Girls take on the common feminine characteristics such as passive, sensitive, interpersonal, and pleasing to others. These behaviors carry through to adolescence and adulthood. The language our culture uses to define men and women contributes to these differences in their behaviors. For example, “Women are frequently defined by appearance or by relationships with others, whereas men are more typically defined by activities, accomplishments, or positions” (Wood, 2013, p. 119). This may explain why adolescents choose to participate in sexting behaviors. Feminine individuals typically use social media, such as texting, to build relationships with others, whereas masculine individuals use it as a form of entertainment (Wood, 2013). In this sense, adolescent girls are likely to send a sext in order to show off their appearance to gain approval and participate in a relationship with a boy. Furthermore, adolescent boys may consider receiving a sext from a girl to be an accomplishment and even find the act entertaining.

Another way language defines men and women differently is by reflecting “social views of women as passive and men as active when engaged in sexual activity” (Wood, 2013, p. 120). These definitions are reflected strongly in the media in several ways. Specifically in the case of sexting, boys are more likely than girls to request a sext from someone else. In fact, Temple, J.

R. et al. (2012) found that 46 percent of boys asked to receive a sext whereas only 21 percent of girls did so. Wood (2013) also points out that there is an increasing trend for media to portray women and young girls in highly sexualized ways. A sexualized media culture floods young people with sexualized images and creates pressure for boys and girls to engage in sexting. Sexting is one way girls can act on the messages they receive from the media to be sexual. Also because males are bombarded by these highly sexualized portrayals of women it may be what they come to hold as expectations of women in reality.

Therefore, many young boys are placing these sexualized expectations on their female peers. In fact, 47 percent of teen girls say they have felt “pressure from guys” to send sexual messages or images (Sex and tech: Results from a survey of teens and young adults, 2008). A study done by Walker, Sanci, and Temple-Smith (2012) offered that images of boys penises sent to girls were mostly distributed as a motive to persuade girls to send an image in return, highlighting yet another form of pressure experienced by girls to produce and send images to boys. Receiving these types of pressures presents young girls with a difficult decision of whether or not to comply with the requests, and they may find themselves trying to make sense of the sexual double standard that exists today. Findings from Walker et al. (2012) suggests that young men are praised for being “active and pursuing sex” while “young women are rated for saying no or being “good girls”; treading a line of being labeled a “slut” if they sext and fear being rejected if they do not” (p. 700). This fine line is further perpetuated by the virgin/whore paradox where young girls have to be both virgin and whore in today’s society (Wood, 2013). Young women are caught in the middle of an impossible balancing act between being sexual and at the same time a respectable virgin. In terms of sexting, girls that choose to send nude photos of themselves will be perceived as “whores,” whereas girls who do not participate in this type of behavior will

likely be categorized as “virgins.” This may leave girls confused about their sexual identities because of the cultural pressures to please their male peers, yet uphold the idea of being a “good girl.”

Girls however, are not the only ones who experience pressures surrounding sexting. Males are described as being responsible for pressuring girls and each other, according to Walker et al. (2012). However, “18 percent of boys say they have felt pressure from girls to send sexual messages or images” (Sex and tech: Results from a survey of teens and young adults, 2008). Many boys feel these pressures from peers and other males around them to uphold the masculine identity of being sexual and interested in the female body at all times (Wood, 2013). Therefore, being sexually inhibited is not expected or desired for boys and accessing online porn is seen as normal for them (Hasinoff, 2013). This behavior is related to sexting because sexting is technically a form of child pornography. Wood (2013) further suggests that males who do not want to be sexually active with females will have their manhood questioned by other males. Boys conform to the pressure because if they do not they may be called names and shamed by their peers. Not only do boys receive negative feedback for not being sexual, but unlike girls, they are praised for engaging in sexual activities such as sexting. This may explain why so many adolescent boys engage in the act of sexting.

On the other hand, the argument has been made that biological factors have a greater influence on adolescents’ decisions to participate in sexting instead of the culturally constructed gender roles. “Neurobiological research has found that the decision-making and risk-taking regions of the brain are not fully developed until one reaches the late 20’s, suggesting that there are biological reasons for poor decision making during the developmental stage” (Comartin et al., 2013, p. 39). The prefrontal lobe is the last part of the human brain to be developed.

Incidentally, it is the part of the brain responsible for making decisions, weighing out consequences, planning, and regulating emotions (Pinel, 2011). Since this part of the adolescent's brain is not fully developed, it is hard for them to make decisions on an adult level and think about consequences of their actions beforehand. For example, Phineas Gage, whose prefrontal lobe was severely damaged in a construction accident, began to act like a teenager again by drinking more and engaging in risky activities (Pinel, 2011). Gage no longer had the ability to use good judgment to make decisions on an adult level, similar to adolescents. Sexting is one way in which adolescents exemplify an emotionally driven behavior and do not think of the possible consequences. According to Judge (2011), sexting may be viewed as an emotionally driven behavior that is often impulsive and without a clear anticipation or understanding of the potential adverse consequences. Therefore, many argue that sexting between adolescents occurs because their brains are not fully developed.

Despite this biological explanation, culturally constructed gender roles are a far greater influence on adolescents' choices to sext. Wood (2013) states, "Biology *influences* how we develop, but it doesn't absolutely *determine* behavior, personality, and so on" (p. 20). Essentially, biology cannot be held completely accountable for the ways we behave, as we are shaped by culture every day. The concept of gender is a large part of culture which creates "social meanings and expectations of each sex" (Wood, 2013, p. 20). Therefore, "sexting is not a gender-neutral activity, but is in fact influenced by gender dynamics" (Walker et al., 2012, p. 700). Culturally constructed gender roles help mold our every-day behavior therefore they are a much stronger influence than a biological factor on its own.

Clearly sexting is an issue facing youth today, however, there are plenty of ways parents, teens, and peers can help put an end to adolescent sexting. One helpful tip the National

Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy provided was that individuals should not assume anything they send will remain private. 40 percent of teens said they have been shown a sexual image and 20 percent say they have shown others a sexual image (Sex and tech: Results from a survey of teens and young adults, 2008). This demonstrates that participants of sexting often do not keep these sexual images to themselves. Parents can also help prevent adolescent texting in many ways. According to *Teens and sexting: What is it and what can parents do?* (2012), parents can help in preventing their kids from sexting by talking to them about it before the incident occurs. During discussions with their children about sex and dating, parents should acknowledge and explain the issue of sexting. They should remind their children that they have no control of a message once it is sent, and that there can be not only psychological consequences such as social humiliation, but also legal and long-term consequences such as charges of child pornography (Teens and sexting: What is it and what can parents do?, 2012). Finally, the most important message that needs to be delivered to adolescents by parents and peers is that sexting is not occurring as often as they may think. According to Temple, J. R. (2012), sexting is not as big of a problem as the media portrays it to be. A recent national study of 10-17 year-olds showed that 1.3 percent of youth were involved with creating a sext and 5.9 percent reported receiving a sexual image (Temple, J. R. et al., 2012). If adolescents are aware that sexting is not a popular activity that everyone else is a part of, then it is likely that they will not have as strong of a desire to participate in the act. However, it is still imperative for parents to discuss the pressures and consequences of sexting with their children before it becomes a bigger issue.

Our recommendation to adolescents is to become educated on gender issues by taking a gender studies or gender communication class. Since most middle and high schools do not offer

such classes, gender concepts could be incorporated into the sex unit of health classes or even classes where discussion of media influence might come up, such as sociology or psychology. Gender classes are very informative on the concept of gender, culturally constructed gender roles, and gender issues in a variety of social institutions, not to mention the role of gender in our every-day lives. By being well-informed and knowledgeable about gender issues, adolescents might be able to better understand the positive and negative aspects of gender stereotypes. This understanding will allow adolescents to refrain from participating in defined gender roles or behaviors that are harmful or limiting to them and others. In addition, adolescents might be more likely to abstain from acts which reflect these behaviors, such as sexting. Education is a basic method of raising awareness of issues and provides solutions to those issues.

In conclusion, with the recent increase of technology use among adolescents, sexting has become a common way they explore their sexuality. The pressure to adopt culturally constructed gender roles is the main influencing factor behind sexting behaviors of boys and girls. For adolescent boys, receiving a sext from a girl is an accomplishment which reinforces his masculine identity. For adolescent girls sending a sext to a boy is a way for them to receive feedback on their appearance and establish relationships. We live in a sexualized media culture where adolescents are bombarded with sexualized images that put pressure on boys and girls to engage in sexual activities such as sexting. The media portrays the gender stereotypes that adolescents actively model. While girls receive conflicting messages about their sexuality, boys are given the direct message that being engaged in sexual activities, such as sexting, is accepted and expected in society. Although biological factors may account for some sexting behaviors, they cannot stand as the only explanation. Education on the connection between gender stereotypes and sexting, whether it comes from parents or schools, is recommended to help

reduce adolescent sexting behaviors. Since it has been determined that gender dynamics play a role in adolescent sexting, we can now begin to work towards reducing cases of sexting and promoting more positive images of gender.

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