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Unsolicited Sexts and Unwanted Requests for Sexts: Reflecting on the Online Sexual Harassment of Youth

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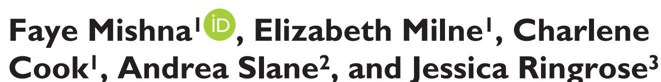

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to obtain youth perspectives on consensual and non-consensual sexting. We began this study on young people's (12–19) sexting practices in a large urban center. Before the study was put on pause due to COVID-19 physical distancing measures, we conducted 12 focus groups with 62 participants (47 girls, 15 boys). A key finding was that many girls had received unsolicited sexts (e.g., "dick pics") or unwanted requests for sexts. Analysis revealed four interconnected themes: (1) unsolicited sexts; (2) unwanted requests for sexts; (3) complexity associated with saying "no"; and (4) general lack of adult support. Using our findings from before COVID-19, we discuss the potential impact of COVID-19 on teens' sexting experiences and outline the ways in which social workers and other mental health practitioners can support adolescents and their parents in navigating this new context of sexting during and beyond the global pandemic.

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Over approximately the last 15 years, "sexting," defined as the exchange of sexually explicit photos and videos, has "become a part of teenagers' everyday lives" (Van Ouytsel, Lu et al., 2019, p. 2). Consensual sexting has become integrated into adolescents' normative expression of sexuality and relationship formation (Bianchi et al., 2016, 2017; O'Sullivan, 2014). Non-consensual sexting behaviours, considered online sexual harassment (Henry et al., 2018), have also become widespread. Female adolescents frequently receive unsolicited sexts (e.g., "dick pics") (YouGov, 2018) and unwanted requests for sexts (Choi et al., 2016). The purpose of the current study, which began months before the pandemic and was put on pause due to physical distancing measures, was to obtain youth perspectives on consensual and non-consensual sexting, as well as their opinions on the support they receive when faced with online sexual harassment. Although our study examined consensual and non-consensual sexting, in this article we focus on our findings related to non-consensual sexting because of the need to address these harmful behaviours. We present our findings on teens' experiences with unsolicited sexts and unwanted requests for sexts and discuss their relevance to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We then reflect on the roles and responsibilities of social workers and other mental health practitioners in helping adolescents navigate sexting experiences and in helping parents and other adults develop strategies to protect teens from online sexual harassment while supporting and respecting their freedom (including freedom of sexual expression, such as consensual sexting) during COVID-19 and beyond.

Background

A "deviancy discourse" (Döring, 2014) has traditionally dominated adolescent sexting research, connecting sexting (defined broadly) with other risky behaviuors, such as unprotected sex (Kosenko et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2018) and substance use (Frankel et al., 2018; Temple et al., 2014). Driving this risk-focused approach to adolescent sexting is the conflation of all sexting behaviuors, both consensual and non-consensual, in definitions of "sexting" (Krieger, 2017). Researchers have begun emphasizing the critical distinctions between consensual sexting, considered a normative risk-taking behaviour (Cooper et al., 2016) and a healthy expression of adolescent sexuality

(Bianchi et al., 2016, 2017; O'Sullivan, 2014), and non-consensual sexting, classified as online sexual harassment (Henry et al., 2018, 2020). By separating these digital forms of sexual harassment from consensual sexting behaviours, we argue that we can better understand and target teens' experiences of online harm, without suppressing their agency (Krieger, 2017; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Slane, 2009, 2010).

Two key forms of online sexual harassment are the sending of unsolicited sexts and unwanted requests for sexts. Research on the sending of unsolicited sexual images referred to as "cyberflashing" (McGlynn & Johnson, 2020) and "unsolicited dick pics" (Oswald et al., 2019), has found that women and girls often experience cisgendered men and boys sending unsolicited images of their genitals over digital technologies, such as AirDrop, social media platforms, dating platforms or video-conferencing platforms (e.g., "Zoom bombing") (Marcotte et al., 2021; McGlynn & Johnson, 2020; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019). Research has also found that adolescent girls frequently experience various behaviours that constitute online sexual pressure, such as repeated requests for nude images (Thomas, 2018) and the use of commitment manipulation to pressure them to send nude images (Drouin et al., 2015).

With adolescents throughout the globe spending more time online during COVID-19, experts have warned that youth may be increasingly vulnerable to these forms of online sexual harassment (Europol, 2020; Government Of Canada, 2020; Plan UK, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). There is consequently an urgent need to reflect on the ways in which we can better support young people with their experiences of online sexual harassment, during the context of COVID-19 and beyond.

Theoretical Approach

A systemic-ecological framework emphasizes the importance of analyzing the societal, relational, and individual-level factors that influence development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Recent additions recognize the need to incorporate technology within the systemic-ecological framework (Johnson, 2010; Martin & Alaggia, 2013). A relevant conceptual framework to analyze the complex role of sexting among youth is adolescent sexuality development, which describes three domains of normative sexuality development: sexual socialization, sexual repertoire, and sexual selfhood (Fortenberry, 2013). Sexual socialization entails developing sexual values and attitudes, including gender norms, from family, peers, and the media, and sexual repertoire describes the process of sexual learning through sexual behaviours, interactions, and events (Fortenberry, 2013, 2014). Sexual selfhood describes the

cognitive processes and assessments of one's sexual self that lead to the development of sexual subjectivity and awareness of sexual desire by and for others (Fortenberry, 2013).

Another relevant concept is Kelly's (1988) "continuum of sexual violence" (p. 76), which describes the range of abusive, intimidating, and forceful behaviours that women regularly encounter (McGlynn et al., 2017). According to recent feminist literature, online sexual harassment fits on this continuum, as these behaviours share the same sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and other discriminatory roots as traditional forms of sexual violence (Waling & Pym, 2019). Online sexual harassment is thus only "new" in that it is facilitated through the affordances of digital technologies (Powell, 2010). Furthermore, scholars point to the gendered nature of these behaviours, as offline and online sexual violence primarily involves the humiliation, intimidation, and harassment of women and girls (Powell, 2010).

The purposes of this study are to contribute to the literature on youth's experiences with non-consensual sexting practices, classified as online sexual harassment, and to inform interventions that target these behaviours and breaches of consent. In this article, we outline our findings related to the gendered aspects of adolescents' experiences with, and knowledge of, two forms of online sexual harassment: (1) unsolicited sexts, and (2) unwanted requests for sexts.

Current Study

Methodology

We utilized a qualitative approach to create opportunities for youth voices to be heard (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002), to create a holistic understanding and to inform future research (Black, 1994). Qualitative data privilege individuals' experiences and perspectives (Van Manen, 1990). The current study utilized focus groups, an approach to understanding youths' experiences (Bragg et al., 2018; Slane, 2009, 2010) depicted as a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment" (Kruger, 1994, p. 6). Benefits of focus groups with youth include less pressure to answer questions (Horner, 2000), less emphasis on the adult-child relationship (Heary & Hennessy, 2002) and an opportunity to share their experiences and perceptions among peers (Horner, 2000). Approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Board. Open ended questions explored participants' exposure to images through various means, including consensually sending and receiving sexts, as well as non-consensually receiving and sending sexts (e.g., "dick pics").

Sample

The researchers and trained research assistants conducted 12 focus groups (girls: eight groups; boys: four groups) in three schools and organizations in a large city, representing diversity in terms of socio-economic status, age, gender, and race. Divided according to age and self-identified gender, focus groups comprised two to nine participants between 12 and 19 years, with 62 participants overall. At the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, three planned focus groups were cancelled, all of which were composed of boys. Consequently, our sample of 62 students disproportionately constituted girls (47 girls, 15 boys). Each organization or school informed youth and parents of the study through flyers, social media, or email; and in person. Assent and parental consent were obtained from participants aged 12 to 15, and consent from participants aged 16 to 19. Three male focus groups that had been arranged were put on pause due to COVID-19.

Data Collection and Analysis

Conducted in private rooms, focus groups were approximately 2 hours. With consent, discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, participants used pseudonyms, and transcripts were anonymized. We began by showing images taken from advertising in public spaces and pop artists' social media accounts and asked open ended questions to encourage participants to talk about how bodies are portrayed in popular culture. We inquired about participants' responses to these images and about how they make and share images of bodies on their phones and devices. We asked about sending and receiving unsolicited content and non-consensual sharing of images.

Data Analysis

NVivo qualitative software was used to organize the data (Richards, 1999). We applied an inductive analytic process, starting with the focus groups data to generate initial codes, organize connected codes, and explore early themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We then returned to the focus group guide to assess emerging themes in the context of the intended structure of concepts. The nature of responses varied across and within focus groups, with some participants exploring their personal experiences and others responding in a more speculative manner. We noted these distinctions in the analysis. Given the variation in experiences, we kept initial and thematic coding close to the data, to reflect the diversity of responses rather than draw broader conclusions.

Examples were identified for each code as were negative cases, where applicable.

Findings

In our analysis of non-consensual sexting, we identified four connected themes: (1) unsolicited sexts; (2) unwanted requests for sexts; (3) complexity associated with saying “no”; and (4) general lack of adult support.

Theme 1: Unsolicited Sexts

Across all ages, most girls reported receiving unsolicited sexts, including photos, or knowing someone who had received them. One participant explained that she could be having a “simple conversation” and “out of nowhere on Snapchat . . . they’ll send me a picture, and it’s just their dick. They’re just like, I’m so hard right now, and I’m just like, I didn’t ask” (14–15, girl; We identify the participants by their age range and self-identified gender). While participants generally discussed the phenomenon of men and boys sending unsolicited sexts, two female teens described incidents of girls they knew who sent unsolicited sexual images. Most girls who had received unsolicited sexts received them from strangers. Several participants mentioned receiving unsolicited sexts from friends of friends (i.e., people the participant did not know personally but with whom they had mutual connections on social media). Finally, some participants described situations in which individuals in their peer group including friends and potential romantic or sexual partners, sent them unsolicited sexts. As one participant stated, “not every single time it’s always like a dick pic from like a random 30-year-old man,” and explained that she once received an unsolicited dick pic from a boy she was “almost dating” (17–18, girl).

Participants who received unsolicited sexts typically described reacting negatively. Many girls expressed feeling “disgusted” and referred to the unsolicited sexts as “unpleasant” and “gross.” Several females and one male reported feeling “uncomfortable,” whereas some girls reported feeling “nervous” and “scared.” Younger respondents considered the unsolicited images “inappropriate” for their age.

Theme 2: Unwanted Requests for Sexts

Many girls reported receiving unwanted requests for nude/semi-nude photos, with several characterizing the requests as persistent. One participant stated, “so many people ask me for nudes, and I’m just like, I don’t send nudes. It’s

not how I work" (16–17, girl). A girl (13–14) described feeling scared when a male requested nudes and repeatedly contacted her. She explained, "I didn't think he was ever going to leave me alone," and deleted her photos on social media because she "didn't want to keep anything up after that happened." Other participants similarly described feeling adversely impacted. Some noted that these unwanted requests "ruined friendships," as participants felt they had to moderate their behaviour afterwards to avoid misleading their male friends. Along with these struggles stemming from the requests themselves, participants described being punished by the sender for denying the requests. As one girl explained: "so many guys will block you if you don't send them nudes" (16–17). The participants felt these experiences affected their emotional wellbeing, which corresponds with findings that girls report feeling bothered (Temple et al., 2012) and exhausted (Thomas, 2018) by such requests.

Theme 3: Complexity Associated With Saying No

Some participants declined unsolicited sexts or unwanted requests for sexts by explicitly rejecting and/or deleting invitations, blocking people/accounts and/or using a platform's report feature. Many indicated, however, that they or their friends responded indirectly, such as "ghosting" the person, not talking to them for a while, or changing the topic. This corresponds with previous research, in which girls reported having difficulties saying "no," and often feeling that they must develop excuses or use negotiation strategies to avoid complying with the request (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). Participants offered several reasons for their difficulty responding directly. Some expressed fear of upsetting the boys. A girl (16–17) explained that she tempers her responses to unsolicited "dick pics," because "I don't want them to end up feeling self-conscious if their penis is small." Others cited the nature of their relationship, such as a friendship or intimate relationship, as making it difficult to respond to the unwanted request or sext. One girl explained, "if it's someone that you've built a long-term friendship with and then they just ask for those images of you or send you videos of them spinning their junk and stuff, you don't really know what to say. One, you don't want to ruin the friendship you've built for so long, but two, you also don't want to send them. So, you're kind of stuck in a spot" (16–17). This participant felt she had to monitor her behaviour going forward, for fear he would misread her actions as an invitation to send her further unsolicited sexual images. Some participants commented that when they have a relationship with the person, they don't have the option to "block and forget."

Many participants described the challenge they face when boys ignore their "no" and continue to push. A girl (16–17) offered another problematic response, in which the sender responded by declaring, "what's wrong baby girl? I thought you were liking it." This could be interpreted as a way of manipulating the girl.

A discrepancy became apparent between the girls' awareness and understanding of inequitable gender norms in society, and their difficulties applying this critical lens to their experiences. The girls discussed unrealistic gender norms, with girls and women expected to be sexual but not too sexual, and the potential for slut-shaming of girls. While their accounts of harassment and pressure indicate the patriarchal context of non-consensual sexting, as discussed in the feminist sexting literature (Harvey et al., 2013; Lippman & Campbell, 2014), the girls' understanding of oppressive gender norms did not appear to help them when responding to unwanted requests and unsolicited sexts.

Theme 4: General Lack of Adult Support

Almost all the participants reported that they did not tell their parents, school authorities, or other adults about these experiences, and seemed to take for granted that telling adults was not an option. Their reasons for not telling parents did not necessarily appear to be due to conflicted relationships. Rather, participants thought their parents would not understand. Some girls believed that out of concern, their parents would monitor their accounts "excessively" or compel them to delete the apps. One girl (13–14) explained not telling her mother about unsolicited sexts because she would "probably be very sad." Another girl said she avoided telling adults about these experiences out of fear that she would be "victim blamed" by society.

Discussion

Implications of the Impact of COVID-19

Analysis of the focus group transcripts illustrates worrying trends in teens' experiences of online sexual harassment and indicates a lack of available support pre-COVID. We expect that the COVID-19 context will have impacted these trends. We discuss the possible effects of this new context on adolescents' experiences of receiving unsolicited sexts and unwanted requests for sexts, followed by a discussion of the role and responsibilities of social workers and other mental health practitioners in supporting youth and their parents during and beyond this global pandemic.

Receiving unsolicited sexts. Most girls had received unsolicited sexts—often in the form of “dick pics”—or knew someone who had. This corresponds with the documented evidence of young millennial women receiving unsolicited dick pics (YouGov, 2018). Most participants recounted reacting negatively to these unsolicited sexts, which is consistent with Klettke et al.’s (2019) finding that recipients of unwanted sexts report higher depression and anxiety, and lower self-esteem. These reactions similarly align with McGlynn and Johnson’s (2020) overview of victim-survivors’ public testimonies, in which they describe “cyberflashing” as a form of “sexual intrusion, which violates victim-survivors’ sexual autonomy, privacy and right to everyday life” (p. 4). Importantly, these researchers consider the sending of unsolicited sexts as a digital form of traditional gender-based sexual violence. Hayes and Dragiewicz (2018) indicate the ways in which the dynamics of women’s experiences of online sexual harassment on dating apps, such as men sending dick pics to women who ignored them (Shaw, 2016), mimic the dynamics of public forms of sexual harassment and abuse, such as street sexual harassment. Furthermore, Oswald et al. (2019) found that men who reported sending unsolicited dick pics endorsed both ambivalent and hostile sexism to a greater degree. Participants’ experiences of unsolicited dick pics in our study likely share similar discriminatory roots and motivations as traditional sexual violence. As most of the research on unsolicited sexts focuses on adult experiences (e.g., Oswald et al., 2019; Waling & Pym, 2019), further research is needed on the gendered context of unsolicited sexts among adolescents, and its impact on sexuality development.

With adolescents spending even more time online during COVID-19 (Government Of Canada, 2020), it is likely that receiving unsolicited sexts will have increased. During the lockdown period in the UK, 25% of girls experienced at least one form of abuse, bullying or sexual harassment online, including receiving unwanted pictures (Plan UK, 2020). With the shift to online schooling and work during COVID-19, “zoomflashing” and “zoombombing” became a common trend, whereby “cyberflashers” infiltrated Zoom calls and online meetings and flashed unwanted penis or other pornographic images onscreen to adolescents as well as adults (Bernal, 2020; McGlynn & Johnson, 2020). Furthermore, data show a 384% increase in people tweeting the term “dick pics” alongside the term “Coronavirus” (Lewinski, 2020). The term “Social ‘Dick’stancing” was created to describe “sending unsolicited dick pics during COVID-19 quarantine” (Urban Dictionary, 2020). Given the documented pre-pandemic effect of these behaviours on adolescents’ wellbeing and the worsening of adolescent girls’ mental health during COVID-19 (Plan UK, 2020), research is needed on these trends and the associated repercussions.

Unwanted requests for sexts. An important finding was the experience and impact of girls receiving unwanted requests for sexts, sometimes persistently, from male partners, friends, friends of mutual contacts, and strangers. Young women report being "bombarded" by repeated requests for sexts (Thomas, 2018), and refer to requests from male peers as commonplace (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Temple et al., 2012). Engaging in repeated requests exerts a form of sexual pressure on young women, referred to as "working a yes out" (Sanday, 2007), which has been observed in fraternity culture. Boys' requests for girls' sexts can be analyzed from the viewpoint of sexual socialization. Research has explored homosocial masculinity practices in relation to sexting, which makes it normative for boys and men to share images of girls, as a form of social currency that garners homosocial reward (Ringrose et al., 2013, 2021; Roberts et al., 2021). Further research is needed to explore whether heterosexual prowess and homosocial reward inform boys' attempts to acquire these images, regardless of whether they are shared.

Such requests negatively affected participants, which is supported by findings that unwanted requests for sexts lead teenage girls to feel stressed (Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016), bothered (Temple et al., 2012), exhausted and hopeless (Thomas, 2018). In the case of requests from partners, teenage girls often feel conflicted between wanting both to "say no" and to satisfy their partner (Thomas, 2018), with the looming fear of losing their romantic partner or interest should they say "no" (Choi et al., 2016; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Another important finding was the ways in which boys would sometimes shame or block girls when they declined the requests for sexts. This response to rejection has been documented in the well-known Instagram account, "Bye Felipe," which exposes "dudes who turn hostile when rejected or ignored" by posting women's screenshots of their experiences with sexual online harassment (Shaw, 2016).

During lockdown in the UK, 9% of girls were asked to send intimate pictures of themselves or received unwanted pictures online (Plan UK, 2020). Due to the limits on in-person sexual activities because of physical distancing measures, boys who are partners, friends of mutual contacts, and peers may seek out sexually explicit images more than before, to replace physical intimacy or affirm their masculinity.

Complexity associated with saying no. Participants often found it difficult to directly decline unsolicited sexts and unwanted requests for sexts, especially when these came from a partner, peer, or friend of a mutual contact. With diminished in-person interactions and increased isolation during COVID-19, teens may have felt increased pressure to engage in "unwanted

but consensual sexting" (Klettke et al., 2019, p. 237) to maintain their relationships. Combined with the normalization of adult sexting in the media (Döring & Walter, 2020), and promotion by public health of sexting as a safer alternative to in-person sexual encounters (Bccdc, 2020; Toronto Public Health, 2020), the normative pressure adolescents frequently feel to send sexts (Walrave et al., 2015) may have increased. This aligns with research that shows how perceived peer sexual experience, and thus sexual socialization, influences adolescents' sexual decision making (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Such pressure could lead to many teens engaging in coerced but consensual sexting—that is, agreeing to send nudes despite not wanting to (Klettke et al., 2019), a decision they may later regret (Thomas, 2018). As adolescents who send coerced but consensual sexts report higher mental health issues (Klettke et al., 2019), it is important to research the prevalence of these requests during and beyond COVID-19 and how adolescents respond to these requests.

We found that girls were experiencing these challenges, despite articulating advanced awareness, and understanding of inequitable societal gender norms (e.g., double standards). This finding is particularly notable given the widespread support for gender education to reduce negative sexting experiences (Bragg et al., 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2013; Walrave et al., 2015). While knowledge of gender stereotypes and social norms is undoubtedly an important step to improving the interpersonal experiences of girls, adolescents must be equipped with skills to help them navigate distressing social circumstances. Along with their female peers, male adolescents must be supported in countering harmful gender stereotypes and norms. We suggest that clearly identifying abusive practices such as labelling unsolicited dick pics and unwanted solicitation as forms of sexual harassment, would help youth differentiate consensual sexting which can form a part of normal, healthy digital intimacy from non-consensual and harmful practices (see also Ringrose et al., 2021).

General lack of adult support. Aiming to protect teens from the "catastrophic" effects of sexting (Smith, 2016), public education campaigns commonly promote preventative and punitive approaches to adolescent sexting. These approaches encourage parents to restrict and monitor adolescents' technology use (Brisson-Boivin, 2018; McGovern & Lee, 2018), advise educators to use an abstinence-style model that teaches adolescents only about the dangers of sexting (Albury et al., 2017; Döring, 2014; McGovern & Lee, 2018), and use worst-case scenarios to illustrate these risks (Albury et al., 2017; Döring, 2014). Research shows, however, that these approaches to sexting are, at best, ineffective (Strassberg et al., 2017), and, at worst, harmful. Youth have

expressed that surveillance and controls erode the trust between young people and adults and reduce the likelihood that they will seek support when they encounter issues online (Jørgensen et al., 2019; Steeves et al., 2020). By uniformly condemning all sexting behaviours, the abstinence-style educational approach often encourages a trend of punishing and blaming female adolescents for their own victimization in online sexual harassment (Döring, 2014). For example, in Mishna et al.'s (2020) study, participants frequently "spotlighted girls" by framing the non-consensual sharing of sexts as the fault of the victims (p. 11).

Although teens reported that their wellbeing was impacted by this online sexual harassment, they typically did not tell their parents. This corresponds with Jørgensen et al.'s (2019) finding that youth report feeling uncomfortable turning to their parents for support when facing issues related to sexting because they fear punishment, "getting told off" or having their mobile phones "over-monitored" (p. 33). Research demonstrates, however, that family contexts are an important aspect of adolescent sexuality development; parental support is particularly influential for the sexual behaviours and experiences of teens (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). When populations worldwide were told to "stay home" to contain the pandemic, in-person support systems were largely relegated to parents and caregivers. As teens do not generally turn to parents for help with harmful sexting behaviours (Harger, 2019), there is a critical need to develop strategies to improve the supports adolescents receive at home and school, and to create incentives for adolescents to turn to their parents and other adults for help, during and after the pandemic.

Limitations. As the study was put on pause due to COVID-19 and we were unable to conduct all our planned focus groups, we did not achieve saturation before lockdown, and our findings are consequently emerging themes. Nevertheless, our results are consistent with previous research. Furthermore, our data comprise a combination of participants' personal experiences, descriptions of others' experiences, and speculation. These distinctions, however, are noted in the analysis, and the context of each selected quote is included in the text.

A limitation is a disproportionate focus on the perspective of girls due to the cancellation of focus groups comprising boys due to the advent of COVID-19. While this enriched our analysis of the girls' experiences, which is the focus of this article, there is a need for more analysis of boys' experiences with consensual and non-consensual sexting. In addition, our study lacked sufficient LGBTQ and gender nonconforming participants. Further research is needed to explore these youth's experiences with sexting and the

ways in which intersecting identities shape youth's experiences and understandings of sexting.

Finally, this study was potentially limited by the focus group nature of data collection. Participants may have been influenced by the perspectives of their peers, and less comfortable discussing positive accounts of sexting, for fear of being judged by peers.

Implications for Practice and Research

Decline of the Deviancy Discourse and Opportunities for the Normalcy Discourse

COVID-19 has led to a shift in attitudes toward technology, whereby parents are now encouraged to recognize the positive role of technology in teens' access to social interactions, learning, and entertainment (CDC, 2020; Winther & Byrne, 2020). This underscores the need for parents to reconsider how they deal with their concerns about youth's online activities and associated safety issues (Midamba & Moreno, 2019). Rather than a punitive approach which can exacerbate youth's resistance to speaking with adults (Midamba & Moreno, 2019), parents are encouraged to regularly check in with their children about their experiences with sexting (Van Ouytsel, Madigan et al., 2019). Given the context of COVID-19, it is possible that parents will lean more toward their desire to provide their children with access to the benefits of digital technology, despite their pre-COVID tendency to restrict their children's technology use (Brisson-Boivin, 2018). By urging parents to move away from the "just switch it off" approach to technology (Winther & Byrne, 2020), the context of COVID-19 could serve as an opportunity for parents to transition to taking a more nuanced approach to sexting. Such an approach could enable parents to provide space for the positive context of consensual sexting in adolescents' healthy sexual activity, and through support, simultaneously protect youth from the harms of online harassment and abuse. This approach would avoid the risk of blaming and punishing girls for their own victimization.

Social workers and mental health practitioners are well positioned to support parents, educators, and other adults in understanding and responding through a normalcy approach to sexting among youth. Such an approach recognizes the risks and benefits of sexting that is consensual as well as the distinct problematic category of non-consensual sexting and emphasizes the role of social supports in reducing the harms of normative risk-taking sexual behaviours. In this approach, sexting is conceptualized within adolescent sexuality development (O'Sullivan, 2014; Tolman & McClelland, 2011), and

the complex contexts of sexting behaviours are recognized and emphasized (Burkett, 2015). An important role for practitioners would be to provide support to youth, parents, and other adults in understanding the differences between consensual and non-consensual sexting, including coercive sexting, non-consensual sexts (such as unwanted dick pics) and image-based sexual harassment (sharing beyond the intended recipient). By outlining the ways in which non-consensual sexting is a form of online sexual harassment that fits on a continuum of sexual violence, practitioners can help youth, parents, and other adults to appropriately identify and respond to these harmful behaviours. Informed by an ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as applied through the person-in-environment framework (Germain & Bloom, 1991), social workers and other mental health practitioners can help parents understand the range of sexting behaviours. It is incumbent on practitioners to understand dominant norms and trends and assist parents and other adults to recognize the influence of contextual factors, such as consent, gender, and social pressure, on adolescents' experiences (Mishna et al., 2020; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015).

As the harmful contexts of sexting have likely increased during COVID-19 there is an urgent need to understand the contexts and to respond effectively. Practitioners can assist parents to maintain open communication with their pre-teen and adolescent children. Research suggests that parent-child communication about sexual topics can reduce the impact of harmful sexual experiences, especially for young women (Evans et al., 2020). By maintaining open communication, therefore, parents can mitigate the effects of receiving unsolicited sexts and unwanted requests for sexts (Van Ouytsel, Madigan et al., 2019).

Youth need help to situate their experiences of sexting within broader societal gender inequities (Setty, 2019). Social workers and other mental health practitioners can support female adolescents respond to pressure, manipulation and harassment by their peers, partners and friends of mutual contexts in their sexting experiences (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Moreover, practitioners can work with adults to help them avoid the common pitfalls of sexual double standards such as stigmatizing girls who receive dick pics, and talk with girls about the meaning of such issues for them and about how they can negotiate the intimate peer power relations involved. Social workers and other practitioners can help boys identify naturalized heteronormative masculinity norms and homosocial competition (where for instance, sending dick pics can be an initiation process and asking to trade nudes can be part of performing idealized sexually active masculinity (Salter, 2016)—introducing conversations that challenge unequal focus on girls and girls' images common in anti-sexting responses (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Dobson &

Ringrose, 2016). Finally, practitioners can encourage teens to reflect on their role as bystanders, and their responsibility to prevent and intervene in harmful sexting behaviours (Walker et al., 2013).

Implications for Research

Research is needed to examine and understand the distinct contexts of consensual and non-consensual sexting. While the focus of our study is on the more problematic experiences with sexting, it is important for future research to explore the positive or neutral components of sexting, particularly in the context of COVID-19 and beyond, in which interactions dramatically changed to online. Furthermore, teens may feel even more pressure to engage in sexting during COVID-19 due to the restrictions on physical forms of intimacy, and the normalization in the media of adult sexting (Döring & Walter, 2020). It is critical to evaluate the existence and effects of these trends on teens during COVID-19 and beyond, to contribute to reducing the harms of online sexual harassment likely amplified during the pandemic. Importantly, research is needed on how adults can effectively support adolescents who are navigating these harmful and abusive online behaviours.

Conclusion

As our findings demonstrate, some girls find themselves in problematic situations in which they receive unwanted sexts and are asked to send sexts back. Girls struggle to resist these dynamics and in their everyday lives, lack support from adult carers or from their institutional contexts such as schools. Such pressure and lack of support may be particularly problematic during COVID-19, which has created an unprecedented context for adolescent sexting. While many parents and caregivers have previously perceived digital technology as a source of risk for their teens, the global pandemic forced parents and caregivers to shift from disparaging to encouraging adolescents' technology use. This extraordinary time presents an opportunity for parents and caregivers to be receptive to the normalcy discourse, which recognizes both risks and benefits of sexting that is consensual and to increase their discussions with teens about sexting and what constitutes harmful gender dynamics in these practices. Although the context of COVID-19 has likely increased the need to address online sexual harassment of teens, it has also created a unique opportunity for parents and other adults to recognize the positive potential of consensual sexting for teens. It is incumbent upon social workers and other mental health practitioners to facilitate a shift to a normalcy discourse in understanding and responding to consensual sexting, by

working with various levels of the ecological system, including parents, adolescents, and educators.

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