The Sexual Landscape of Youth: How Adolescents from the U.S. Make Sense of Sexting

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Abstract

The present study examined the role of sexting in adolescents' peer environment and romantic relationships with attention to gender patterns. Thirty adolescent girls and boys (ages 16 or 17) of varying racial/ethnic background residing in Los Angeles or Phoenix participated in in-depth interviews about their experiences and attitudes toward sexting. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. In total, we identified 5 main themes and 15 subthemes. Participants reported that sexting is normal in their peer groups (Main theme #1 *Everyone's Doing It*) and that sexting occurs within a cultural milieu of the sexual double standard (Main theme #2 *Sexual Double Standard*). They described sexting as a part of expressing romantic interest in someone and playing a role in defining and furthering romantic relationships (Main theme #3 *Romantic Relationships*). Participants also identified social (Main theme #4 *Social Consequences*) as well as psychological and long-term consequences of sexting (Main theme #5 *Psychological or Long-Term Consequences*). Findings of this study have implications for educational interventions.

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Adolescence is a period during which ethnic majority youth in many Western countries initiate romantic and sexual relationships (Giordano et al., 2015; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). During this time, adolescents seek out information about sex and relationships, which often involves consuming sexual media and engaging in sexual experimentation with the self and others (Doornwaard et al., 2017). Sexting, the sending of sexually suggestive or sexually explicit texts, pictures, or videos through smartphones or mediated channels (e.g., social media; Barrense-Dias et al., 2017), is part of the sexual landscape of youth. A meta-analysis of 39 studies from English-speaking countries found that 14.8% of adolescents have sent a sext and 27.4% have received a sext, with prevalence rates increasing with age across adolescence (Madigan et al., 2018). However, a large-scale study (n = 7,507) with a nationally representative sample of U.S. adolescents, ages 13-17, found that 64.5% have engaged in some type of sexting behavior (29.3% sent a sex; 52.2% received a sext; 17.7% requested a sext), suggesting that sexting has become a fairly common activity among U.S. youth (Aubrey et al., 2020).

Despite the prevalence of this behavior, there is relatively little qualitative research, especially with U.S. youth, that examines youths' experiences of sexting. Indeed, a recent review of the qualitative literature on youth sexting included just 28 studies, only one of which included U.S. adolescents (Dully et al., 2023). In contrast, in December 2023, a PsycInfo search of quantitative studies on sexting among adolescents published in academic journals yielded 181 papers. Furthermore, the one study with U.S. youth included in the Dully et al. (2023) review was published almost a decade ago and was based on open-ended written responses to survey questions collected in 2009 that were part of a larger study on teens and mobile phones (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Thus, there is a significant lack of current qualitative research on U.S.

adolescents' experiences with sexting. Accordingly, the present study conducted in-depth interviews with U.S. adolescents regarding the role of sexting in their peer environment and romantic relationships with attention to gendered patterns. Because sexual norms are variable by cultural context (Schlegel & Hewlett, 2011), in this study, we aim to illuminate norms youth from the United States, specifically, may encounter regarding sexting. This study adds to the literature on sexting by (a) employing an in-depth interview methodology to better understand a prevalent behavior related to adolescent sexuality and (b) including a racially/ethnically diverse sample of youth from the United States. As described below, most of the qualitative research on sexting has been conducted with youth outside of the U.S.

Sexual Socialization of U.S. Youth

Sexual socialization entails the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, and values about sexuality (Ward, 2003). Media are potent sources of information about sexuality for several reasons including: (a) the pervasiveness of sexual content in media; (b) the ready accessibility of sexual content in media; (c) the typically positive portrayals of sex in media; and (d) the visually appealing and engaging nature of media (Ward, 2003). Furthermore, 95% of U.S. adolescents have access to a smartphone, 97% report using the internet daily, and 46% report being online almost constantly (Vogels et al., 2022). As a result, U.S. adolescents today can readily access sexual content from their phones (Giordano, 2022). Likewise, engaging in sexual behavior from one's phone (i.e., sexting) is easy and convenient; as such, sexting is considered a normative aspect of the dating process for U.S. youth (Aubrey et al., 2020; Temple & Choi, 2014).

Gender has been consistently examined as a predictor of adolescent sexting. However, findings on the prevalence of sexting by gender are mixed (for a review, see Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). For example, Huntington and Rhoades (2021) found no significant differences in the

frequency of sending or receiving of sexts by gender among youth, ages 14-18, in a Western U.S. state. In contrast, other findings with a nationally representative sample of U.S. youth, ages 13-17, showed that girls were more likely to have sent and received a sext compared to boys, whereas boys were more likely to request a sext compared to girls (Aubrey et al., 2020). These patterns may be explained by traditional beliefs about sexuality which prescribe different expectations based on gender.

Traditional beliefs about sexuality in heterosexual relationships state that women of good moral standing are only supposed to have sex in committed relationships, whereas men are expected to want and pursue sex regardless of emotional or romantic commitment (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Valenti, 2010). As a result, women are frequently judged as 'whores' or 'sluts' for engaging in sexual behaviors (e.g., sexting), but men are rewarded socially for the same behaviors (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Valenti, 2010). This sexual double standard underlies the practice of 'slut-shaming' girls and women for the presumption that they engage in sexual intercourse (Armstrong et al., 2014). Boys, in contrast, often gain status with their male peers for engaging in sexual intercourse (Kreager et al., 2016). Studies with European youth (as well as one study with U.S. youth; Lippman & Campbell, 2014) have found that the sexual double standard exists regarding adolescent sexting such that girls are more likely to face negative social consequences and boys are more likely to benefit socially from sexting (Ringrose et al., 2013; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017). Accordingly, we expect gender will be an important factor in U.S. youths' reports of sexting.

Review of the Qualitative Research on Youth Sexting

In contrast to the fairly extensive body of quantitative research on teen sexting (for reviews, see Doyle et al., 2021; Gassò et al., 2019; Madigan et al., 2018; Mori et al., 2019),

qualitative inquiries have been limited, especially with U.S. youth. Indeed, multiple reviews have called for more qualitative research into teen sexting to better understand adolescents' attitudes toward sexting to inform prevention and intervention efforts (Anastassiou, 2017; Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). A review of 11 mixed-methods studies involving youth and emerging adults (ages 13-25) primarily in Europe, found three main themes including: (a) sexting is widespread and normalized among youth; (b) positive sexting consequences (e.g., fun, sexually gratifying, safe substitute for sex); and (c) negative sexting consequences (e.g., risk of humiliation, feelings of shame and guilt, victimization; Dodaj et al., 2022; see also Doyle et al., 2021). Similarly, in an older review of mixed-methods and qualitative studies (n = 8) involving youth (ages 12-25) primarily in Australia and Europe, Anastassiou (2017) found four main themes including: (a) pleasure and amusement; (b) safe relief of sexual frustration; (c) reputational damage; and (d) feeling threatened. Gender was a key factor in the reputational damage theme such that girls risk humiliation and stigma as well as self-blame if their sexts are forwarded to an unintended audience, whereas boys are far less likely to face negative peer consequences for sexting. The gendered nature of reputational damage reflects the sexual double standard described above. Findings from the only qualitative study located with U.S. adolescents (n = 31 youth from Atlanta, Denver, and New York City; ages 12-18) reveal that girls are in a no-win situation regarding sexting (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). They are considered 'sluts' for sexting and 'prudes' for not sexting. These findings demonstrate the importance of examining the gendered nature of youth sexting.

Regarding romantic relationships, in Lippman and Campbell's (2014) study, U.S. youth reported sexting as a way adolescents indicate sexual interest in a peer or as a form of sexual expression toward one's sexual partner. However, girls also described feeling pressured by boys

to sext so that boys they like or are dating will continue to be interested in them. These girls were also aware of the possibility that sexts could be shared without consent and, if that were to happen, reputational harm could ensue. Qualitative research with Flemish adolescents, ages 15-18, found similar patterns such that girls might feel pressured to sext out of fear that if they refuse, their boyfriend will end the relationship (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017). These youth also identified ways in which the non-consensual distribution of sexts (or the threat thereof) could be used against someone including: (a) to coerce or blackmail a victim; (b) as revenge after a breakup; or (c) to show off to peers. Participants overwhelmingly identified boys and not girls as most likely to distribute sexts without consent. Thus, whereas sexting may serve a function in initiating or maintaining a romantic relationship, youth are also aware of the social pressures and risks that girls, specifically, face regarding sexting. Together, these findings provide a useful starting point regarding the norms that youth from the United States may face related to sexting.

Present Study

The objective of the present study was to examine the role of sexting in adolescents' peer environment and romantic relationships with attention to gender patterns. Thirty late adolescents (ages 16-17) from two cities in the U.S. West (Los Angeles and Phoenix) were interviewed about norms related to sexting and whether norms are similar or different by gender. We employed an inductive approach to analyze the data to center participants' lived experiences as related to a relatively new component of adolescent sexuality.

Method

Participants

Participants were 30 16- and 17-year-old girls and boys of varying racial backgrounds residing in Los Angeles or Phoenix (See Table 1 for demographic information). Participants

were recruited through a market research firm. They were already registered with the firm and invited to participate in the present study. All interviews were conducted over the phone. Interviews were conducted at two different time periods before and at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Twenty participants were interviewed in December 2019, and 10 participants were interviewed in March 2020. Participants were paid $100 each for their participation.

Before being interviewed, participants reported their demographic characteristics in a short screener questionnaire. Participants self-reported the following: age, gender, race, ethnicity, and experience with sexting. To assess gender identity, participants were asked if they identify as a man, woman, non-binary, or other. We also asked a follow-up question: "Do you consider yourself transgender?" Based on the answers to these questions, we determined that all participants were cisgender. In the first time period, the only eligibility criterion was age (16 or 17 years old). In the second time period, after we had conducted an initial review of the existing data, we employed two eligibility criteria: age and at least some experience with sexting.

Procedure

IRB oversight was obtained from the last author's university. Parental consent and participant assent were obtained in advance of the interview. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format by phone by a professional interviewer (an Asian American woman with extensive experience collecting qualitative data with youth) who was not known to the participants. The interview protocol was developed collaboratively and iteratively by the last author and the interviewer, and it was reviewed by the first, fifth, and sixth author. The discussion flow of the interview protocol and interview questions are in Table 2.

The protocol was soft launched with two participants, and then amended, before the remaining interviews were conducted. Interviews lasted on average 40 minutes and 35 seconds (ranged from 25 to 65 minutes). Transcriptions of the interviews were used for data analysis.

Open-ended Coding

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to create a coding scheme for explicit themes identified in the interview data at the surface level. Themes were inductively derived from the data by two European American female professors (the first and last authors). Six main themes with several sub-themes were identified and defined for the coding scheme (see Table 3). The first author trained two graduate students (both women, 1 Latina and 1 European American) on the coding scheme, and these three individuals jointly coded seven transcripts over 14 weeks. Coders met biweekly to discuss the interviews in depth, resolve any discrepancies and align coding practices. Following the joint coding of seven transcripts, the two graduate student coders coded six new transcripts, averaging 2-4 disagreements per transcript. Because agreement was high, the remaining 17 transcripts were split between the coders and just one student coded each one. In total, 13 transcripts were coded by two or more coders and 17 were coded by one coder. Finally, the first author and one of the graduate student coders performed a post-coding review of each category to check for fidelity to the code scheme. Less than 1% of codes needed to be reclassified, primarily from a miscellaneous category into other themes.

Results

Everyone's Doing It (Main theme #1)

In general, when it comes to sexting, most participants perceived that *Everyone's Doing It*. In fact, 84% (n = 21) of participants described that sexting is rather commonplace, if not normal among teenagers. For example, one participant stated that "sexting is very prevalent

among teenagers my age. Even starting from ninth grade to even twelfth grade" (G17; quotations are denoted with G or B for girl or boy and age 16 or 17). Further, multiple participants attributed the popularity of sexting to technological advancements (e.g., smartphones), as illustrated by another participant who described how "once phones were put into the mix, flirting and talking to people was a lot easier. It's really, really easy to just flirt with a random person or a person you know over the phone" (B17). In sum, most participants believed that their peers were engaging in sexting and that this behavior was made easier through technology.

The Heterosexual Double Standard of Sexting (Main theme #2)

A majority of participants, most of whom were heterosexual,[1] described that their approach to sexting was largely driven by their understanding of the *Heterosexual Double Standard*. Participants described four components of this theme including: *Feeling Wanted*, *Bragging Rights*, *Biology Rules*, and *Manipulation.* In an example of this theme, one participant described that girls "would be nervous that people would call them names like slut or whore or something like that because that's something that people say a lot…boys aren't called those names because of gender norms…I don't really know where it started but girls are supposed to be tied to one man while the man is allowed to do whatever he wants basically" (G16). Similar sentiments were also shared by boys. For instance, another participant explained how boys and girls are judged differently for engaging in sexting:

> Because there's still the whole sexist stigma about slut shaming and all that, and so when you hear a girl's sending stuff like that, well, a lot of people's immediate thought is, "Oh she's a slut."…then when it comes to the guys, if you hear about it, you don't think, "Oh he's a cool guy." You just don't really think about it (B17).

[1] Although we did not ask participants to report their sexual orientation on the screener questionnaire, most participants disclosed their sexual orientation during the course of the interview. Thus, we can conclude that most participants were heterosexual, but we cannot make individual-level inferences about each participants' sexual orientation.

A component of the double standard is that teen girls might engage in sexting behaviors to feel wanted by teen boys. For example, one participant stated that, for girls, "...It feels like really good, especially if you're younger, to get attention from a guy in a way that you haven't before. And just to hear someone say like, 'oh, wow, you look so good' or something that they really want to have sex with you. It definitely is very flattering, no matter who you are" (G17). *Feeling Wanted* reflects the gendered power dynamic of sexting, as illustrated by:

> Because you want that validation, especially from a man who inherently has more power, which is unfortunate, but that's just somehow how it is, because they are men…and so sometimes it feels better to do that, to get that praise because we have to work harder to get that praise. So, one way of doing that is nudes, sexting, like wanting to be desired. And getting that easily because we can (G17).

Teen boys also spoke about girls' desire to feel wanted in relation to sexting. For example, one described that "They want to fit in or feel wanted. I guess, that's the only way they feel that they can get that feeling" (B17). Overall, teens appeared to believe that girls use sexting as a means for obtaining attention and validation from boys. Many participants described how girls seek sexual comments and praise from boys in relation to their body/looks.

Whereas participants explained that teen girls engage in sexting because of their desire to feel wanted, teen boys were described as engaging in sexting for other reasons such as to show the pictures off/brag to their friends. An illustration of this *Bragging Rights* theme is:

> For the boys…I just feel like, especially the athletes, they always have something to prove and they just have to be like Mr. Macho. Like, "Oh yes, I'm the head football player, so I have to show off how many girls I get," or "Oh, look at this picture that I got last night." So, I definitely think that boys do it as a sense of pride because they're trying to show off. It's almost like saying, who has the biggest muscles (G17)?"

A similar statement was made by another participant, who further illustrated the advantages boys receive from engage in sexting behaviors:

> What's in it for him? One, an advantage over her. He gets to say he got it. It's a power thing. It's for other men. You get nudes and you do it so that you could say you got them.

> Because it's cool, because you got a bitch, finally. That's really all it is. And then obviously, they almost 100%, don't care about the girl…(G17).

Teen boys also seem to be aware that other boys seek sexts to achieve social status, popularity, and power, as illustrated by one who stated, "If they get a picture from her, they feel like they have power (B17)." Some boys also shared their reactions when their friends have shown off pictures of girls to them; for example: "…he was kind of bragging to me like, hey, look what I got, kind of like that. I was like, in my head like, hey, good job man. Good for you (B16)." In general, participants understood the potential positive benefits that teen boys receive for engaging in sexting behaviors; namely, boys receive increased popularity and social status when they share or show off girls' pictures to their friends.

Another component within the heterosexual double standard is that teenagers think that boys are more interested in sexting than girls because of biological factors (i.e., *Biology Rules*). For instance, one participant described that "dudes get more enjoyment from sexting than girls do . . . because usually dudes are the more hornier ones…girls usually aren't eager to have sex like guys are (B16)." This assumption was also recognized by teen girls, such as one who stated that "guys do it [sext] more, or they're more likely to want to do it. Because I feel like a lot of teenage guys are always horny (G17)." Yet, a minority of participants claimed that teen girls are also interested in sexting and may even pressure boys to send nude photos. To illustrate, one participant described that "girls and boys both do it. So, it could be either. I've seen girls that are kind of like that, and it's kind of just different, because you kind of think males are like that. But no, there are girls out there that just engage in this behavior (G17)." In general, though, most participants perceived that boys are more likely to engage in sexting due to their hormones. However, some participants believe that teen girls may also be driven by biological factors.

Lastly, participants described how teen boys might intentionally *manipulate* girls to engage in sexting behaviors. For example, one participant described how "guys are usually more like invasive. They want more out of a girl. I feel like guys are more into that stuff…they get the girls to be vulnerable, and they make the girls send pictures and sext back to them (G17)." A similar statement was made by another who stated that "boys try to convince you [girls] to do things and you do it and they tell you that they're not going to like expose you, but they do (G16)." Some teenage boys also described this manipulative process, for instance:

> You just kind of flirt with them and kind of tell them all this stuff that they want to hear and kind of just bribe them into sending stuff. . .You talk about their beauty, like their face, or even if they're not [pretty] just say that they are, and just kind of whatever you think sounds good. . . Just kind of tell them stuff they want to hear and tell them that they're yours and stuff like, "You're mine," . . . and [then] you kind of flip it a little bit, like, "Oh, let me get a pic," or "Show me something," or something like that (B16).

In sum, teens understand the strategies that boys use to manipulate girls into engaging in sexting.

Sexting in Romantic Relationships (Main theme #3)

Most participants demonstrated an awareness that sexting plays a role in heterosexual, romantic relationships. In particular, participants described five ways that sexting may operate in romantic relationships: *To Please Guys, Timing is Everything, Testing the Water, Deepen a Connection,* and *Getting Physical Trumps Sexting*.

Most participants described that teen girls engage in sexting behaviors *To Please Guys* (e.g., to get closer to a guy). For instance, one participant stated that "[girls] might think that [sexting] is the only way to get closer to a guy . . .I think that the girls are only doing it because they want a relationship with this guy and they believe that the only way to get a relationship with him is to show her body (G16)." Similarly, another described how girls might use sexting to get a boy to like them: "Maybe she has feelings for the guy and she might think, 'Oh, if I do this, he'll like me, kind of thing (G17).'" In general, participants seemed to believe that a primary

reason that girls engage in sexting is to benefit or please the boys. Specifically, it appears that sexting is viewed as a way to get a boy to like you enough to commit to a relationship.

Another role that sexting plays in heterosexual, romantic relationships relates to *Timing is Everything* which defines the relationship; specifically, sexting too early in a relationship indicates a casual, less serious relationship, whereas sexting later in a relationship means that you are serious about the other person. For example, one teen described the typical timeline for a serious relationship compared to a casual/friends with benefits relationship: “I feel like if it was more of a hookup relationship, they would probably start [sexting] soon because there probably wouldn't be any actual feelings towards the person. But I feel like if it was more of a romantic relationship, it would take longer to get to that point to earn that person's respect and trust (G17).” Similarly, another highlighted the importance of getting to know your romantic partner before engaging in sexting behaviors: “If I was very interested in a person, I would kind of let time go by, and really, really, really get to know them. And then if maybe he wanted to get up to the next level, that's something [sexting] that you discuss with your partner . . . (G17).” A majority of participants noted that waiting to sext typically resulted in greater trust that one’s pictures would not get leaked; for instance, one participant stated that “as they got to know each other and trust each other more, that was kind of the point that they just, ‘Hey, I trust you. You're not going to do anything bad with these photos. So, here you go, you want to exchange (B16).’” Largely, participants indicated that sexting is useful within romantic relationships, but the timing of sexting within the relationship is quite important and defines the type of relationship. In particular, they appeared to recognize that sexting too early indicates a casual relationship but sexting later in the relationship signals greater investment in the relationship and your partner.

Participants also described that sexting is a precursor to sexual intercourse – a way for teens to *Test the Waters*. That is, sexting is a way for inexperienced teens to learn about sexual interactions and behaviors. For example, one participant described that "I feel like [sexting] might be exciting for some because they might not actually do anything in real life. So, sexting might be a way to make it feel real without it actually happening in a way (G17)." In contrast, one participant described how sexting might prepare couples for real-life sexual encounters:

> Sexting can help you set the mood. So, when y'all meet in person, it's not awkward…it can also help you understand what a person's mindset is…because if you're expecting too much and it's not what you want, then you're going to be disappointed. But if you already know ahead of time from texting like this person likes this, this person don't like this, this person is shy when it comes to this, that can help you adjust your mindset to the sex so you're not expecting too much (B17).

In general, participants described that sexting is useful to experiment with sexual interactions and behaviors, especially for teens with little to no firsthand experience.

Another way that sexting plays a role in romantic relationships is that it might strengthen or take a relationship to the next level by *Deepening the Connection*. For instance, one participant stated that sexting makes "guys and girls more vulnerable with each other and that just leads to more trust, and trust just builds a stronger bond and connection between two people (G17)." Similarly, one participant described how sexting improved his romantic relationship: "made me feel better about the relationship as a whole. . . I mean, it's an emotional thing. It's like a love language. So, it made me feel better about the relationship and where it was going, even though it had only been two and a half months (B17)." Overall, teens appear to view sexting as a way to "level-up" their romantic relationships; that is, sexting helps to signal trust.

Although participants described numerous ways sexting might play a role in romantic relationships, they also acknowledged that engaging in real-life, physical intimacy is preferred to sexting (i.e., *Getting Physical Trumps Sexting*). In particular, sexting is useful for teens when

they do not have access to private time together in real life. For example, one teen described that "people sext because they're not able to have sex at the moment or whatever, so they use that as an alternative or whatever (B17)." Similarly, another participant stated that sexting is "just another thing for us teenagers to do, because we don't really get the opportunity as much to go do actual sexual things, because we don't have enough freedom in areas that we could (B17)." Participants, in general, preferred real-life physical intimacy over sexting.

Social Consequences (Main theme #4)

Most participants were aware that if sexts are shared beyond the intended recipient without consent (i.e., getting "leaked" or "exposed"), there could be significant social repercussions. Participants described three specific social consequences including: *Biggest Fear* (getting leaked/exposed); *Getting Shot Down*; and becoming a *Laughingstock*.

The majority of participants described getting leaked/exposed as the *Biggest Fear* related to sexting. For example, one participant explained that this fear motivates her decision not to sext; she reported, "Because I just wouldn't do that. I wouldn't want it to be sent around. I wouldn't trust any of the guys with it, and I don't want that to be anywhere (G16)." Similarly, another explained that her experience of getting leaked changed her own behavior; she shared, "I would be super worried that a guy would send my pictures. Or show his friends or something that has happened to me before and that's why I would be scared and that's why I don't [do] it anymore really (G17)." Other participants discussed the importance of trust in sexting given the risk of getting leaked: "I think that for guys and girls when they send each other pictures, I feel like they both have to worry about it, because that puts a lot of trust into the receiver, and so they have to worry about the pictures not being leaked or anything…they have to make sure that they don't show anyone else (G17)." Whereas some participants speculated that boys might worry

about getting leaked, the majority reported that getting leaked is an issue girls face more than boys. For example, one participant stated, “Nah, it doesn't happen to the guys, but it happens to the girls though, like girls' pictures get sent around (B17).” Overall, participants expressed concern of getting leaked as a significant issue that affects their willingness, or lack thereof, to sext, especially among girls.

Another possible social consequence of sexting is getting rejected or *Getting Shot Down* for sending an unsolicited and/or unwelcome sext, such as a “dick pic” (i.e., a self-taken photo of a penis sent by a boy or man via a digital device like a smartphone; Mandua, 2020). Boys are typically more at risk of this outcome than girls are. One participant explained, “there's definitely more guys out there being rejected than girls...this girl say that she got sent an unsolicited dick pic. She blocked him. I've never heard that about a girl. And it's a pretty common occurrence that guys get a hard ‘no’ (B17).” Another participant described her reaction to receiving pictures she didn’t ask for as “I've had it come from people I don't know super well, which makes me kind of uncomfortable to really see that” and explained her behavior in response with “I would block them because I don't really want to see that, and I don't like to feel disrespected like that. I feel like that's rude, so I don't want to deal with that (G17).” Several other girls agreed that girls block boys electronically and stop talking to boys for sending dick pics. In general, participants explained that boys risk rejection from girls for sending unsolicited sexts.

Another possible social consequence that boys are at higher risk for than girls is being publicly humiliated or made into a *Laughingstock*. One participant described:

> Let's say you send a dick pic or something and she laugh and she's kind of laughing at you, that's a career-ending ... That's a ruptured-your-Achilles-playing-basketball-type play and/or injury. You can't go back from that because that ... She's going to screenshot it and probably post it on her private Instagram or Pinterest, and/or to a close friend's story and that's it. It's going to take you a long time to build your reputation back up if that happens (B17).

Similarly, another participant noted that if a girl leaks an unsolicited dick pic, “it's definitely very hard to live that down (B17).” Another girl agreed with the boys in describing that “if a guy sends a picture to a girl, but he's small, everyone's going to make fun of him (G17).” As these examples illustrate, boys risk both rejection and being an enduring object of ridicule for sending unsolicited sexts.

Psychological and Long-term Consequences (Main theme #5)

Participants identified several psychological and long-term consequences of getting leaked including *Mental Health Impacts, School Impacts,* and *Family Impacts*. In terms of *Mental Health Impacts*, participants described that getting leaked as deeply “humiliating,” “shameful,” and “embarrassing.” One participant described, “the person [a boy] was just embarrassed and when they started coming back to school, they were, like, they kept to themselves a lot. I mean over time they loosened up, but it was never the same (B17).” Another participant described:

> …you don't know how much damage it honestly brings upon a girl, when they don't know, and they find out that their photos are circulated with a group of guys of like 50. And you know that they've seen your body and everything about you. And it's just very uncomfortable, and it's very shameful, I think they feel. I've had girls talk to me and they're like, ‘I wish I didn't do this.’ And just all the burden that they have, and the shame that they have to deal with now (G17).

Other participants reported more extreme reactions from girls including “she tried committing suicide even (B17)” and having a “mental breakdown (B17)” after getting leaked. In general, participants expressed that getting leaked has substantial negative implications for one’s psychological well-being.

Participants also described *School Impacts* after being leaked. One participant described his own experience, “I had to transfer schools in the long run because the whole thing was just

really too much. It's just a lot to deal with (B17).” He also described a friend’s experience, “she went from being in public school to homeschool very quick.” Other participants described stories of youth at their school being suspended or “getting in trouble” at school. Less common were stories involving long-term academic consequences. However, one teen shared that for a family friend “some of his scholarships got pulled away (G17),” and another described learning from school assemblies that sexting could have impacts on college admissions. She shared, “it can lead to maybe not being accepted to a school that you want to be accepted to (G16).” Overall, participants shared that getting leaked can cause disruptions in school functioning and limit future academic opportunities.

Compared to discussions of mental health and school functioning consequences, participants commented sparingly about *Family Impacts* after sexts are leaked. One participant mentioned that she was “pretty sure parents would be mad (G17),” and another described a girl at his school getting grounded (B16). Participants also rarely discussed legal consequences. Just three participants reported actual or possible police involvement after sexts are leaked. One teen explained, “sometimes the police would have to get involved because it's underage pornography (G17).” Similarly, another described an incident at his middle school after a girl was exposed, “the police got involved with the kid…child pornography or something like that. It was a pretty big deal (B16).” Finally, one participant demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the legal implications of sexting, “because the kids are minors and it'd be child porn, because if you're under 18 and you're sharing nudes, it's still running child porn, but it's a lot more serious if you're over 18, [and] the other person isn't (B17).” In general, participants did not address parental or legal consequences of exposure of sexting behavior in much detail.

Discussion

Through in-depth interviews, the present study examined the role of sexting in adolescents' peer environment and romantic relationships with attention to gender patterns. Despite calls for more qualitative research on teen sexting to inform prevention and intervention efforts (Anastassiou, 2017; Barrense-Dias et al., 2017), we located just one qualitative study with U.S. adolescents that was published almost a decade ago using data collected in 2009 (i.e., Lippman & Campbell, 2014), and in that study, the researchers conducted an analysis of open-ended survey questions. Thus, there is a significant gap in qualitative research on youth sexting from the U.S., particularly using an in-depth interview methodology. As described in detail below, our findings both provide novel insights and are consistent with existing relevant research.

Findings: Novel Insights

Several of the sub-themes for romantic relationships provide new insights into the role of sexting in romantic relationships among youth from the United States. The *Testing the Water, Deepen a Connection,* and *Getting Physical Trumps Sexting* subthemes all reflect adolescent sexual exploration and the process of falling in love. Brown's (1999) developmental model of adolescent love, which includes an initiation phase, a status phase, an affection phase, and a bonding phase, provides helpful context to these findings. The *Testing the Water* subtheme is analogous to the initiation phase, during which romantic feelings and behaviors emerge. According to our results, youth who have not yet engaged in sex or youth who are about to have sex with a new partner are using sexting to explore their sexual feelings for another person. According to Brown's model, during the affection and bonding phases, youth form a more significant emotional connection and engage in more extensive sexual activity with each other. As shown in the *Deepen a Connection* subtheme, sexting can be a means for experiencing

emotional intimacy, even though youth report preferring physical intimacy over sexting (i.e., *Getting Physical Trumps Sexting*). Furthermore, the *Deepen a Connection* subtheme highlights how sexting can signal trust in a partner, specifically that one's partner can be trusted to not share their sexts. Youth described how that trust, in turn, increased the bond between partners and made the relationship stronger by making partners feel more secure and confident in the relationship. Our findings also indicate that youth have implicit rules about sexting in terms of defining a relationship such that sexting early in a relationship indicates a non-serious type of relationship, whereas sexting later in a relationship signals a more committed relationship (i.e., *Timing is Everything* subtheme). It could be useful to educate younger adolescents about this unwritten norm, especially if they are hoping that sexting will lead to a committed relationship. Taken together, these subthemes indicate that sexting serves specific functions in adolescents' romantic relationship development. Thus, interventions that feature prohibitions against sexting may be especially ineffective because they conflict with adolescents' relational needs.

Another domain in which our findings provide novel insights is the social consequences of sexting. Social consequences of sexting may be especially detrimental to youth given the importance of peer acceptance during adolescence (Brown & Larson, 2009). Furthermore, social evaluations are particularly salient during adolescence (Foulkes & Blakemore, 2016). Regarding social consequences, youth reported gender differences. Some participants identified fear of getting leaked (i.e., *Biggest Fear*) as something girls worry about more than boys; however, other participants stated that both girls and boys worry about being exposed. Participants described *Getting Shot Down* and becoming a *Laughingstock* as consequences boys, specifically, face. In both cases, boys are rejected by girls for sending an unwanted sext and in the latter case that rejection is paired with public humiliation. Whereas prior research has established that

sexting can come with social consequences if sexts are leaked (e.g., Anastassiou, 2017), the present findings illuminate two specific social risks boys may face in sexting. Although they appear to be less common experiences, they are undoubtedly strongly negative experiences for boys who do experience them, likely due to the social implications of failing to appear sufficiently masculine in their peer group (Setty, 2020). For example, a boy who is shot down for sending unsolicited dick pics to girls may be perceived as desperate and sexually incompetent, which conflicts with expectations of social dominance and heterosexual success associated with masculinity (Connell, 1996). Notably youth described possible social consequences of sexting in far more detail than possible family or legal consequences, indicating that youth are more attuned to social rather than other consequences.

Findings: Consistent with Prior Research

The *Everyone Is Doing It* theme is consistent with results from a recent review of mixed-methods research on sexting that also found youth believe sexting is widespread and normal (Dodaj et al., 2022). This perception is in line with findings from a large nationally representative survey of U.S. youth, ages 13-17, that found almost 65% of participants had engaged in some type of sexting behavior (Aubrey et al., 2020). Given that U.S. adolescents believe that sexting is common, and prevalence rates do appear to support that perception, it would be beneficial for educators to address this behavior in sexual education curricula in ways that reflect adolescents' lived experiences. A study with adolescents in Northern Ireland could serve as a cautionary tale regarding how sexting is handled in school-based instruction. The study found that although youth perceive sexting to be normal, school sexual educators primarily caution against sexting because of the legal implications (York et al., 2021). This form of instruction contradicts youths' actual experiences with sexting (e.g., many youth sext with no

legal penalty) and their belief that consensual sexting between youth is acceptable. Youth in this study reported wanting instruction on sex and sexting so they could make good choices about their own behavior, but receiving few, if any, such lessons in their school-based sexual education classes. For school-based instruction on sexting to be effective, educators must move beyond a narrow approach that simply discourages sexting to one that acknowledges that sexting is common and that helps youth understand the full range of possible risks and benefits.

Another theme in our findings that is consistent with prior research is the *Heterosexual Double Standard* theme including *Feeling Wanted*, *Bragging Rights*, *Biology Rules*, and *Manipulation* subthemes. Like participants in prior research (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017), youth in our study reported differential social evaluations such that girls risk being slut shamed, whereas boys earn social status for engaging in sexting. These beliefs map onto Kim and colleagues' (2007) heterosexual script which equates sexuality with masculinity and characterizes men as preoccupied with women's bodies, driven by sexual urges, and sexual initiators. In contrast, according to this script, women are valued mainly for their physical appearance and encouraged to use their bodies and looks to attract male interest. However, women are judged by their sexual behavior because women of good moral standing should set limits on men's sexual advances. In the present study, participants' descriptions of the gendered norms surrounding sexting reflect the sexual double standard and the heterosexual script. It is, therefore, clear that disrupting these beliefs is critical in sex education curricula, particularly in terms of consent. Indeed, research with British youth indicates that attitudes regarding sexting and consent tend to replicate traditional gender norms and sexual scripts, for example, boys have uncontrollable sexual urges and girls are responsible for limiting boys' advances and communicating non-consent (Setty, 2021). Specific instruction

that challenges and deconstructs the sexual double standard and the heterosexual script is essential for helping youth develop ethical principles that guide their behavior regarding sexting.

A third theme consistent with prior research is the *To Please Guys* subtheme. Lippman and Campbell (2014) observed that sexting was integrated into youths' dating rituals when their data were collected in 2009. The present findings are consistent with this observation. Participants in both studies described sexting as a way to express romantic interest (see also Van Ouytsel et al., 2017). However, in both studies, girls felt that sexting is necessary to establish or maintain a relationship with a boy (i.e., *To Please Guys* subtheme). As Lippman and Campbell (2014) described, sending sexts "was the undesirable price they [girls] had to pay for a desirable relationship" (p. 38). Similarly, we found that girls are in a no-win situation such that they are compelled to sext to participate in heterosexual dating, but they are judged negatively for doing so. Indeed, participants described that girls feel that sending sexually explicit images of themselves to a boy is necessary to keep boys interested in them romantically (i.e., *To Please Guys*), but in doing so they risk boys showing off the images to others (i.e., *Biggest Fear*) because for boys collecting these images was a sign of their heterosexual prowess. Educating boys about this dynamic in intervention programs would be useful for alleviating the pressures girls face and generating compassion about girls' experiences.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study had multiple limitations that should be considered. First, although our sample was relatively racially diverse (50% identifying as BIPOC) with a near equal number of cisgender girls and boys, it was limited in other ways; namely, it consisted primarily of heterosexual older adolescents residing in two urban locations (Phoenix, AZ and Los Angeles, CA). It is, therefore, unknown whether differences might exist among other adolescent

populations (e.g., LGBTQIA+ teens, rural or suburban teens, younger teens). For example, sexting may play a unique role within LGBTQIA+ adolescent romantic or sexual relationships as sexuality development is relatively more challenging for this population (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2017). Of note, to our knowledge, no qualitative research on sexting with sexual minority youth has been conducted to date, and existing qualitative studies have not typically examined participants' sexual identities. Therefore, much of the qualitative research on youth sexting is premised on heterosexual relationship norms. Similarly, sexting may be more or less prevalent among rural populations due to physical proximity. As such, future research would benefit from examining sexting behaviors and perceptions among a more diverse group of adolescents that include greater representation of the suggested demographic communities. Second, we reported gender comparisons when they were made consistently across participants. It is possible, though, that our sample's perceptions of gender differences are unique to their schools and/or peer groups. Future research should investigate the prevalence of these patterns among U.S. youth more generally. Third, one-third of the data collection occurred at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when stay-at-home orders were just coming into place. It is plausible that adolescents may have been engaging in sexting at an increased frequency or in novel ways during this period. Additional research following the pandemic is needed to investigate this possibility.

In addition to addressing these limitations, we recommend that future research investigate gaps we observed related to our findings. Specifically, our participants described serious negative effects of being leaked on mental health, e.g., suicidal ideation, and school functioning, e.g., transferring school. Negative effects on mental health were discussed as being more severe for girls specifically, whereas youth provided more examples of school disruptions for boys,

mostly getting suspended for circulating sexts. More generally, research with U.S. adolescents has not found that sexting itself is an indicator of poor mental health (Temple et al., 2014); however, to our knowledge, there is no existing research on mental health impacts with youth who have been leaked. Thus, it is unclear whether getting leaked has long-lasting negative impacts on mental health and academic functioning and which youth might be especially vulnerable to serious impacts. Furthermore, there appears to be no research with U.S. youth examining sexting and academic performance more generally.

Summary and Conclusion

Youth in the present study reported that sexting is a facet of contemporary adolescent dating. It serves a role in initiating and maintaining relationships, despite the risks inherent in getting leaked. Given the importance of peers (Brown & Larson, 2009) and social evaluations (Foulkes & Blakemore, 2016) during adolescence, which was reflected in many of the themes present in our interview data, peer dynamics may be an important intervention target for addressing youth sexting. In addition, employing peer-based strategies to educate youth about healthy relationships and sexting may be effective. Indeed, findings from a study with youth, parents, and school-based professionals from the United States suggest that empowering youth to educate each other about what is and is not acceptable in terms of sexting could be effective in promoting more positive sexting behaviors and healthy relationships (Harris & Davidson, 2014). Similarly, research in health promotion has found that peer-led strategies can be successful in promoting positive change related to physical activity (McHale et al., 2022). Together, these findings indicate that peer-based interventions may be effective in fostering healthy norms around youth sexting.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Prior Sexting Experience	Received Sexts	Sent Sexts	Requested Sexts	Location
Participant 1	17	Boy	African American	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	LA
Participant 2	16	Boy	Latinx	No	No	No	No	LA
Participant 3	16	Boy	African American	Yes	Yes	No	No	LA
Participant 4	16	Girl	White/Caucasian	No	No	No	No	LA
Participant 5	17	Girl	Latinx	Yes	Yes	No	No	LA
Participant 6	17	Girl	White/Caucasian	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	LA
Participant 7	17	Girl	Asian/Asian American	No	No	No	No	LA
Participant 8	16	Boy	White/Caucasian	No	No	No	No	LA
Participant 9	16	Boy	Latinx	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	LA
Participant 10	17	Boy	White/Caucasian	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	LA
Participant 11	16	Boy	White/Caucasian	No	No	No	No	PHX
Participant 12	16	Boy	Latinx	Yes	No	No	Yes	PHX
Participant 13	17	Boy	White/Caucasian	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	PHX
Participant 14	17	Boy	White/Caucasian	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	PHX
Participant 15	16	Girl	Latinx	No	No	No	No	PHX
Participant 16	16	Girl	White/Caucasian	No	No	No	No	PHX

Participant 17	17	Boy	Other	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	PHX
Participant 18	17	Girl	White/Caucasian	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	PHX
Participant 19	17	Girl	African American	Yes	Yes	No	No	PHX
Participant 20	16	Girl	White/Caucasian	No	No	No	No	PHX
Participant 21	17	Girl	White/Caucasian	Yes	Yes	No	No	LA
Participant 22	17	Boy	African American	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	LA
Participant 23	17	Boy	White/Caucasian	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	LA
Participant 24	17	Girl	Asian/Asian American	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	LA
Participant 25	17	Girl	African American	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	LA
Participant 26	17	Boy	African American	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	LA
Participant 27	16	Girl	Latinx	Yes	Yes	No	No	LA
Participant 28	17	Boy	Latinx	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	LA
Participant 29	17	Girl	White/Caucasian	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	LA
Participant 30	17	Girl	White/Caucasian	Yes	Yes	No	No	LA

Note. LA = Los Angeles, CA; PHX = Phoenix, AZ.

Table 2

Discussion Flow of Interview Protocol and Interview Questions

Introduction 10 minutes · Welcome and context, check for comfort. · Build trust while identifying key context to interviewee. *For the next hour, we'll be talking a little bit about your everyday life, impressions of the media, and sex, which can be embarrassing or uncomfortable. And that's OK. If you feel too uncomfortable, we can skip any question you don't want to answer.* *This is a topic that people have WILDLY different viewpoints on – some are shaped by how we were raised, what we've adopted on our own, and what our friends teach us. So there's no right or wrong answer, only what works for YOU! My goal here is to create a space of trust where we feel like we can be honest to our experiences.* *I know, though, that that can be difficult, even when trying your hardest! One thing I've noticed is sometimes people tell us what they think that we want to hear and what they should say, even when there's a little voice inside that feels differently. I want this to be a space where you can tell me what you feel is expected of you to say, versus what that voice on the inside says, versus what you actually believe. So be prepared – I may ask you about that!* *It's also important to let you know that our conversation is confidential and is going to help with research on parenting and media. We so appreciate you taking the time to speak with us today!* *Do you have any questions for me?*
Sexting in Context 15 minutes · Uncover how adolescents conceptualize and make sense of sexting. · Inquire about why they think adolescents in general sext and why they have found themselves involved in sexting in particular. · Uncover the relational dimensions of sexting; how does sexting help or hinder the relationships with their sexting partners? • *In general, how do people your age feel about sexting? Do they find it fun or scary, both?*

- *How do your feelings about sexting compare to your friends' or other people your age?*
- *Where in your day or life does the topic of sexting come up? When hanging out with friends, when watching something on TV, when reading, at school, at parties… where?*
- *Thinking of your friends, how often do you discuss sexting or refer to it in typical conversation?*
- *When sexting comes up, what are the topics that come up in these conversations?*
- *How much do you think kids your age are sexting? How much do you think your friends are sexting?*
- *When does sexting occur in a typical relationship, e.g., before you start dating, after you start dating? What does sexting mean in terms of the relationship? Does it mean you are serious? Not necessarily?*
- *In an ideal world, how would you use sexting in your own relationships (if at all)? Why do you say that? What do you think are the positive aspects of sexting? Negative aspects?*

Gender and Sexting
15 minutes

- Investigate how adolescents feel sexting is perceived differently for boys and girls.
- Understand how gendered expectations influence their inclinations to sext (or not).

- *In matters of dating, how are girls supposed to act? What about boys?*
- *There are sometimes considered to be unwritten rules that girls and boys need to follow in order to be accepted by others – how would you describe these rules?*
- *How much do you think you follow these "rules" in your own life?*
- *In light of these rules… Do you think sexting is more acceptable for boys than for girls? Why do you think that?*
- *What makes sexting fun for boys? What make it risky or dangerous for them?*
- *What about for girls? What makes sexting fun for girls? Dangerous?*
- *Do you think boys and girls want to sext to the same degree? Or does one group typically want to do it more than the other?*

Media and Sexting
15 minutes

- Identify relationship between sexting and media consumption, drawing upon everyday habits and media views.
- Understand how the media affect their beliefs about sexting.

- *I'm curious about if what you see in the media influences how you think about sexting. [If answer is yes], can you explain how to me?*

- *How does that make you feel? (Threatened? excited?)*

- *Thinking about what we talked about before, do you think that the way reality TV portrays sex has an influence on what teens think about sexting? What about celebrities on social media? Do they have an influence on how teens think about sexting?*
- *Do you think teens learn about sex from pornography? Do you think watching pornography affects how kids think about sex these days? How so?*

Wrap Up
5 minutes

- Conclude conversation, thank participants, and answer any lingering questions.

- *This has been a great conversation, and we're just about done! Before we finish up, do you want to add anything else?*
- *If you had to share with a friend what two main ideas or thoughts that you have about sexting, what would they be?*
- *Do you have any questions for me?*

Table 3

Coding Scheme

Main Theme	Conceptualization	Subtheme
Everyone's Doing It	Adolescents perceive that sexting is pretty common and normal among their peers. It might not be open or not discussed widely, but it is happening.	N/A
(Hetero)Sexual Double Standard	Different sexual behaviors are expected of, and valued, for girls and boys. Boys are expected to be sexually active, dominant, and the initiators of (hetero)sexual activity, whereas girls are expected to be sexually reactive, submissive, and passive. As a result, girls and boys are treated differently for the same sexual behaviors.	1. *Feeling Wanted*: Girls might sext because it is flattering to be wanted sexually by a guy, to get attention from a guy, and/or to feel validated by their looks. 2. *Bragging Rights*: Boys use pictures of girls to show off/brag to their friends. This gives them social status, popularity, street credit, and power. 3. *Biology Rules*: Adolescents think boys are more interested in sex, sexting, and are more visual than girls. 4. *Manipulation*: Boys might intentionally pressure or coerce girls into sending pictures through a grooming process. In turn, boys can control girls because they now have power over them with sexts.
Romantic Relationships	Adolescents view sexting as playing a role in romantic relationships.	1. *To Please Guys*: Girls might sext because guys pressure them to or because they think guys expect it or they'll dump them. They do it to get closer to boys. 2. *Timing is Everything*: Timing defines the relationship. If an adolescent is serious about someone, they need to

		wait a few months to initiate sexting because the relationship could get ruined if they jump right in. 3. *Testing the Water*: Adolescents view sexting as a precursor to sexual intercourse. It could also be difficult to say no to physical contact in person after sexting. They can practice by phone and learn what the other person likes or wants. 4. *Deepen a Connection*: Adolescents in a relationship might sext to strengthen their relationship and take it to the next level; it brings them closer. 5. *Getting Physical Trumps Sexting*: Especially for older adolescents, getting physical is preferred over and replaces sexting.
Social Consequences	Sending a sext is a sign of trust, especially for girls. It could have significant repercussions with peers if sexts are ever shared.	1. *Biggest Fear*: Getting leaked/exposed from sexts is a fear for boys and girls, but more so for girls because getting leaked is a huge breach of trust. 2. *Getting Shot Down*: Boys risk getting shut down by girls for unwanted dick pics. Girls might block them on social media and stop talking to them in real life. 3. *Laughingstock*: It is humiliating if a girl/her friends publicly laugh at a boys' dick pic because of his size or appearance.
Psychological or Long-Term Consequences	Getting leaked from a sext could result in significant effects to one's well-being and/or material outcomes.	1. *Mental Health Impacts*: For girls especially, getting leaked can be humiliating, deeply embarrassing, traumatizing, and shameful. Some might even hurt themselves or attempt suicide.

2. *School Impacts*: After being leaked, adolescents might skip or switch schools. They might get suspended, lose college scholarships, or have an impact on college admissions.
3. *Family Impacts*: Adolescents worry about their parents finding out about sexting and getting in trouble at home.