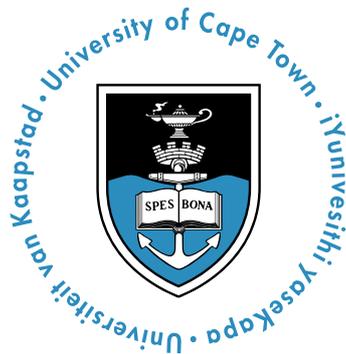Normal: Sexting and Adaptive Sexual Development During Emerging Adulthood

Diaan Mynhardt

University of Cape Town

Supervisor: Associate Professor Lauren Wild

Word count:

    Main Text: 9380

    Abstract: 212

PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

PLAGIARISM

This means that you present substantial portions or elements of another's work, ideas or data as your own, even if the original author is cited occasionally. A signed photocopy or other copy of the Declaration below must accompany every piece of work that you hand in.

1. I know that Plagiarism is wrong. Plagiarism is to use another's work and pretend that it is one's own.

2. I have used the American Psychological Association formatting for citation and referencing. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this essay/report/project from the work or works, of other people has been attributed, cited and referenced.

3. This essay/report/project is my own work.

4. I have not allowed, and will not allow, anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as his or her own work.

NAME: Diaan Mynhardt

STUDENT NUMBER: MYNDIA001

SIGNATURE: DM

SUPERVISOR: Associate Professor Lauren Wild

Abstract

The ubiquity of digital communication leads ever more people to conduct the daily details of their lives online, and sex is no exception. Sexting, the online exchange of sexual materials, is increasingly prevalent, and a growing research interest. Psychology focusses primarily on sexting's deviant associations, so little is known of its role in adaptive sexual development. A two-stage, mixed-methods, descriptive study was used to investigate sexting during emerging adulthood, the developmental period extending from 18 to 25 years. Stage one utilized a self-report survey to determine sexting prevalence and attitudes towards sexting in a convenience sample of 108 undergraduate students at the University of Cape Town. Eight volunteers from stage one participated in stage two, a semi-structured focus group discussion. The majority of participants (82%) had sexted in the preceding year, with most sexting taking place within relationships. Most considered sexting safe, pleasurable, beneficial for sexual self-expression, and helpful for building and maintaining relationships. Participants were highly aware of, but only moderately concerned by, the risks of sexting. There were no significant gender differences in sexting prevalence, and limited gender differences in sexting attitudes. These results suggest that psychology's focus on the negative aspects of sexting represents a missed opportunity, and that further investigation of sexting in adaptive sexual development is warranted.

Keywords: attitudes, adaptive sexual development, emerging adulthood, sexting

Acknowledgements

Much of my excitement and enthusiasm for sexting research this year derived from the bi-weekly meeting of the ACSENT Cyberpsychology group, and I would like to tip my hat to my three fellow cyber-conspirators, Associate Professor Kevin Thomas, Jess Oosthuizen, and Leora Hodes. Now where did I put my phone?

For their assistance with statistical analysis, and especially for the role they played in helping me understand the incredible power of simple description, I would like to thank Marilyn Lake, Dr Michelle Henry, and Professor Colin Tredoux.

Without Rosalind Adams, Dr Leigh Schrieff-Elson, and Professor Floretta Boonzaier just about nothing would have gone right this year. Thank you for keeping us all organised.

My gratitude and admiration go out to my supervisor, Associate Professor Lauren Wild, who patiently read and re-read various pieces of nonsense I sent her, and kindly and carefully added her expert touches until those nonsenses were something approximating psychological science.

To the Tea-Crew: Brie, Jade, Kels, Kim, Lex, Rhiannon, and Taryn… thank you for saving my sanity.

To Isabelle Bensryd, my beautiful wife and best friend, thank you for your patience and your support. Thank you for taking up the household slack whenever I couldn't. Thank you for the hugs. Without you, I would never have reached the heights I have. This work is dedicated to you, and to the year we spent sexting each other, keeping our flame alive across fifteen thousand kilometres.

Free from the parental and institutional constraints common during adolescence, and not yet bearing the full weight of grown-up responsibilities, emerging adulthood is a period often characterised by increased sexual experimentation (Arnett, 2000). For most emerging adults, the social landscape is dominated by online, digital communication, and sexual communication, or sexting, is no exception (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013). Sexting, broadly defined as the exchange of personal, sexual images or text messages via mobile devices or the internet (Hasinoff, 2015), is an increasingly popular activity among emerging adults, and of growing interest to psychologists (Courtice & Shaughnessy, 2017; Madigan, Ly, Rash, Ouytsel, & Temple, 2018).

Psychological research is regularly criticised for its persistent bias towards the maladaptive aspects of youth development and behaviour, and this is especially true where new technologies are concerned (Ayman-Nolley & Taira, 2000; Davidson & Ellis, 2019). Sexting research is no different, and the majority of psychological sexting research focusses on its deviant aspects: its associations with maladaptive behaviours such as drinking, drug use, and violence, as well as the dangers it poses in terms of the law, bullying, and the distress that may result from the public disclosure of private material (Courtice & Shaughnessy, 2017; Döring, 2014; Madigan et al., 2018; Soster & Boland, 2019). The picture that emerges from this 'deviance discourse' is one of sexting as an inherently harmful act, a view that has come to be criticised as overly simplistic (Döring, 2014).

A small but increasing number of researchers have begun to adopt a 'normalcy discourse', a view of sexting as a normal part of adaptive sexual development (Döring, 2014). From this perspective, emerging adults derive a sense of empowerment from sexting, use it to aid in self-expression and in the construction of their sexual identities, and find it both safe and pleasurable (García-Gómez, 2017, 2019; Hasinoff, 2013; Lee & Crofts, 2015). Evidence suggests that emerging adults experience fewer negative effects from sexting than previously

thought, and that the risks are comparable to other aspects of sexual development (Dir &
Cyders, 2015; Drouin, Coupe, & Temple, 2017; Madigan et al., 2018).

Emerging Adulthood

Young adulthood, once thought to extend from the end of adolescence until the age of
40 (Erikson, 1950), no longer explains developmental trajectories in modern industrialised
societies. The transition from adolescence to adulthood has grown to such an extent that it
now constitutes a distinct developmental period: emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).
Emerging adulthood extends from 18 to 25 years, and is characterised by increases in identity
exploration, a focus on the self, and new possibilities. Becoming independent and accepting
responsibility for oneself become crucial goals (Arnett, 2007, 2014). These goals, along with
diminishing parental and institutional oversight, and a lack of normative demands to 'settle',
make this a period of heightened sexual exploration (Arnett, 2000).

The Act of Sexting

The literature contains a multitude of varying, and wildly inconsistent, sexting
definitions (Courtice & Shaughnessy, 2017). Some include photos but exclude texts, while
others focus exclusively on mobile devices to the exclusion of the internet. Some researchers
separate sending and receiving, while others look only at mutual exchange. Focus might only
be on private spaces, or could include public postings. Age ranges are inconsistent, with
research on 'adolescents' including participants well into their twenties, whereas 'adult'
studies could focus primarily on student populations. The result is that sexting prevalence
reports range from 1% to 78% (Barrense-Dias, Berchtold, Surís, & Akre, 2017). A meta-
analysis of adolescent studies reports a sending prevalence of 15%, and a receiving
prevalence of 27% (Madigan et al., 2018). In their meta-analysis, Courtice and Shaughnessy
(2017) report an adult prevalence of 41% for sending, and 61% for receiving, suggesting that
sexting prevalence may at least double in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In a

small, non-representative South African study ($N = 401$), more than one-third of adult participants considered sexting an important part of their relationships, and associated sexting with confidence, while more than two-thirds saw sexting as appropriate within relationships (Schloms-Madlener, 2013).

Most sexting studies neglect to report the context within which sexting occurs, but those that do report that sexting is more likely within relationships than with casual partners, and that while men are more likely than women to sext outside of relationships, women are more likely than men to sext within relationships (Drouin et al., 2017). Within the deviance discourse on sexting, sexting outside of relationships has been associated with exposure to early physical abuse and domestic adversity on the one hand, and increased substance abuse later in life on the other (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, Lu, Temple, & Ponnet, 2018; Yoder, Hansen, & Precht, 2018).

Sexting, overall, has been linked to alcohol abuse, violent upbringings, dating violence, and bullying (Morelli, Bianchi, & Baiocco, 2016; Van Ouytsel et al., 2018; Yoder et al., 2018), but such investigations have been criticised for their tendency to feed into a moral panic about the declining morality of youth (Thurlow, 2006). Sexting may instead play a significant role in the development and maintenance of romantic relationships, the creation of trust, and in bonding (Döring, 2014), and may therefore be integral to sexual development, sexual empowerment, and the development of sexual competency during emerging adulthood (Graham, 2004). Research within the normalcy discourse highlights the unauthorised sharing of sexts, subsequent bullying, and potential limitations to education or work opportunities as the primary risks from sexting, but also shows that emerging adults are well aware of these risks (Dir & Cyders, 2015; Döring, 2014).

Aim and Objectives

Undeterred by its apparent risks, emerging adults increasingly engage in sexting. Psychologists, focused predominantly on its deviant aspects, know little of the role of sexting in adaptive sexual development, or about the ways in which emerging adults make sense of sexting in their everyday lives. The aim of this research was therefore to address this deficiency by investigating and describing sexting during emerging adulthood.

Four objectives were defined. The first objective was to determine the prevalence of sexting. The second was to describe the contexts within which most sexting occurs. Three contexts were of interest: within relationships, with people known personally, and with persons known online only. The third objective was to find out what emerging adults themselves think of sexting, and to gauge their attitudes toward its adaptive potential. The fourth objective was to explore emerging adult attitudes towards the risky aspects or negative consequences of sexting. Together, these four objectives may point the way towards a better understanding of why, despite the risks, emerging adults keep on sexting.

Methods

Sexting Definition

The importance of a definition of sexting that is both comprehensive and explicitly stated became clear from the literature reviewed. Such a definition should include the media types, the actions performed, the modes of transmission, the sexual characteristics of the sexts, and the relationships status of participants (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Drouin et al., 2013; Madigan et al., 2018). For the purpose of this research, a definition that could encompass all aspects of sexual communications was devised. Media types included text, photo, and video. Actions performed included both the sending and receiving of sexts. Transmission modes included messages sent via mobile devices or the internet. Sexual characteristics included messages that are nude or sexually suggestive, and used for sexual

purposes. The definition that emerged from these criteria, and which was used on all measures, was the following: Sexting is the creation, distribution, and reception of nude or sexually suggestive images or videos or sexually suggestive texts, via mobile devices or the internet, usually for sexual purposes.

Research Design and Setting

The exploration of a new and under-researched area, such as the adaptive potential of sexting, requires a pragmatic approach to scientific inquiry; in other words, a practical approach with a focus on human experiences (Tashakkori, Teddlie, & Teddlie, 1998). Quantitative or qualitative methods, on their own, may struggle to explain how emerging adults understand sexting, or why they sext despite the risks. A mixed-method design integrates both quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for a more robust analysis, and a more nuanced eventual understanding (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006).

This research adopted a cross-sectional, partially mixed, sequential, dominant-status design (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). It is a two-stage design, partially mixed because different instruments were used during different stages (not mixed within stages), sequential as stages did not overlap, and dominant status because the quantitative component is emphasised in satisfying the goals of the study.

The study was conducted at the University of Cape Town, and participant recruitment and data collection occurred during August and September of 2019. A small pilot study preceded stage one, and was used to establish testing procedures and identify minor mistakes on the stage one self-report sexting survey. Stage two consisted of a single focus-group interview with participants drawn from stage one. A visualisation of the research design can be seen in Figure 1.
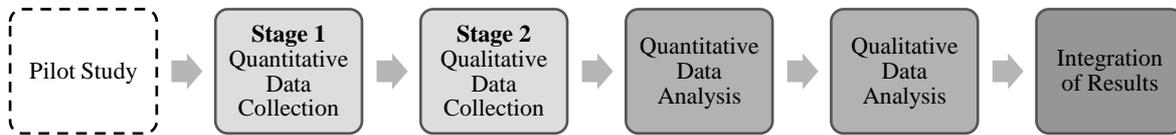
Figure 1. The structure of the two-stage, sequential, mixed methods research design.

Sampling Procedure

Participants in all stages of the study comprised convenience samples drawn from the student population of the University of Cape Town. Two official avenues for participant recruitment were used: the Student Research Participation Programme (SRPP) of the Department of Psychology, and the Department of Student Affairs (DSA). The SRPP involves undergraduate psychology students in university research through a mandatory points system (students are free to choose which research projects to engage in, or they may complete other non-research tasks for points), and the DSA provides a campus-wide emailing system for circulating calls for voluntary research participants.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The conventionally agreed age range for emerging adulthood ranges from 18 to 25 years (Arnett, 2007), and as such defined the age criteria for all stages of this study. South African law classifies the creation, dissemination, or possession of nude or sexually explicit depictions of persons under the age of 18 as child pornography (Republic of South Africa, 2009). To minimise exposing participants to the risk of self-incrimination, students with partners under the age of 18 were excluded from this study. Students who participated in the pilot study were unable to participate in stage one, and participants in stage 2 were drawn from stage one or the pilot study.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to evaluate the sexting survey for ease of understanding, to ensure that its use of language was culture- and gender appropriate, to aid in the creation of

a script to standardise its repeated administration, and for timing purposes. A call for participants was sent out using the SRPP, and 19 participants aged between 19 and 22 completed an early version of the sexting survey. Participants were also required to complete a response form on which they indicated any items that were ambiguous or difficult to understand, inappropriate or insensitive, and any general comments they may have had. Based on this feedback, the sexting attitude survey received a number of minor edits, and one major adjustment: to accommodate non-binary gender participants all references to opposite-gender were changed to other-gender. A step-by-step script for administering the sexting survey was created, and the minimum and maximum times required for administration were set to 30 and 45 minutes respectively. No data collected during the pilot study was used in any later statistical analyses.

Stage One: Self-report Sexting Survey

      Participants.

      Participant characteristics.

      A total of 108 participants successfully completed the sexting survey. Age ranged from 18 to 24 years, with a mean age of 20.3 ($SD = 1.56$). Further participant details are presented in Table 3 in the results section.

      Sample size calculation.

      The sample size for stage one of the study was calculated by means of an *a priori* power analysis using the G*Power (version 3.1.9.4) software package (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). A bivariate correlation model, two-tailed, was selected. A power of $1-\beta = 0.95$, and $\alpha = .05$ was assumed. In the absence of comparable effect sizes from existing sexting research, Cohen's (1988) convention for correlations of a medium ($p = .3$) effect size was used. The resulting required sample size was 138.

Participant recruitment.

Calls for participants went out via the SRPP system and the DSA. Unlike SRPP participants, who benefit from participating in research by gaining points required for the fulfilment of their degrees, DSA participants gain no direct benefits from participation. To compensate, DSA participants were offered the chance to win a R500 voucher in a lucky draw. All participants signed up for specific time slots by means of online forms.

Measure.

A self-report sexting survey (Appendix A) was created specifically for this study. Items were based on the various aspects of sexting that emerged from the literature. The sexting survey was divided into four sections. The structure of the survey and the broad content area of each section can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Structure of the self-report survey for stage one.

Section	Items	Section
A	3	Demographics.
B	6	Sexting prevalence (by context).
C	11	Statements representing sexting as positive.
D	8	Statements representing sexting as negative.

Except for section A (demographics), all sections contained Likert scale items. Likert-scale items with four response options were selected as the most appropriate measurement, as four options would maintain sufficient reliability while maximising both ease of use for participants, and later scoring (Matell & Jacoby, 1971). Likert choices for determining prevalence (section B) were never, rarely, occasionally, and frequently. Choices for determining attitudes (sections C and D) were strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree.

Demographics

The study collected three types of demographic data: age (continuous), gender (woman, man, or non-binary), and relationship status (long term [over six months], short term [under six months], and not in a relationship).

Sexting prevalence (by context).

Items stipulated that participants should consider only their behaviour in the 12 months prior to completing the sexting survey. Prevalence was measured in three contexts, and in two directions per context. The three measurement contexts were (a) sexting within a relationship, (b) sexting with people known personally, and (c) sexting with persons known online only. The two directions are (i) initiation of an exchange (to count as an exchange, the other person needs to have sent a sext back), and (ii) reciprocation of an exchange initiated by another (to count as an exchange, the participant needs to have sent a sext back). This configuration provided for a total of six items measuring successful (reciprocated) exchanges of sexts. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine internal consistency. The internal consistency of individual context pairs (a), (b), and (c) were $\alpha = .86$, $\alpha = .89$, and $\alpha = .93$ respectively.

Two dichotomous items measured lifetime sexting prevalence as a yes/no response. The first required participants to indicate if they had ever sent a sext, while the second required participants to indicate if they had ever received a sext. The two items for determining lifetime sexting prevalence had a combined $\alpha = .63$.

Failed sexting (by context).

Failed sexting attempts were measured similarly, using contexts (a), (b), and (c) above. In place of directionality, two conditions of failure were measured, these being (i) failure to respond (no reciprocation) and (ii) negative response (rejection). This configuration provided for a total of six items measuring unsuccessful sexting attempts. The six items used

for determining failed sexting attempts had a combined Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$, and the internal

consistency of individual context pairs (a), (b), and (c) were $\alpha = .22$, $\alpha = .36$, and $\alpha = .89$

respectively.

Statements representing sexting as positive (a normalcy discourse).

Eleven statements presenting sexting as positive were developed from the literature

on sexting. The developing normalcy discourse on sexting suggests that sexting may be

considered empowering, used for self-expression, pleasurable, and more (García-Gómez,

2017, 2019; Hasinoff, 2013; Lee & Crofts, 2015), and the eleven items are constructed from

these works. For a full list of items, see Appendix B. The internal consistency of the items in

this section was high, with Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$.

Statements representing sexting as negative (a deviance discourse).

Eight further statements, this time presenting sexting as negative, were developed

from the literature on sexting. The incumbent deviance discourse on sexting characterises

sexting as dangerous, and linked to alcohol abuse and other maladaptive behaviours (Morelli

et al., 2016; Yoder et al., 2018). At the same time, however, more measured researchers

admit that sexting's main threats may come instead from non-consensual sharing, or bullying

(Dir & Cyders, 2015; Döring, 2014). The items in this section are developed from these two

areas of research, and may also be found in Appendix B. The internal consistency of the

items in this section was acceptable, with Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$.

Items not included in this analysis.

Both the positively and negatively worded sections mentioned above included a

further 22 (2 x 11), and 16 (2 x 8) items respectively. These items duplicated those described

above, but were focused on social norms and required participants first to consider the same

items in relation to their same-gender peers, and second to consider them in relation to their

other-gender (opposite-gender) peers. These additional items were excluded from this

analysis due to space constraints, but may be included in a future analysis.

Procedure.

Data collection took place in the Department of Psychology, in groups no larger than

27 (the maximum capacity of the venue). Five SRPP sessions and three DSA sessions were

scheduled, allowing for a maximum of 216 participants. Before each session, the venue was

prepared by placing a consent form, as well as an envelope containing the sexting survey, at

each seat. Participants were conducted from a waiting area into the venue, together.

Participants were given an opportunity to read and sign consent forms, which were then

collected. No late participants were allowed to enter after this point. At this stage, participants

were instructed to open the envelopes, complete the sexting survey, and to wait quietly until

all other participants had finished. The researcher then walked around to each participant,

who inserted their completed surveys into a sealed, slotted container, which was opened only

after each data collection session. After all surveys were collected, participants were thanked,

provided with a brief verbal explanation of the research, given debriefing forms and stage

two sign-up forms, and then allowed to leave or ask questions of the researcher.

Data preparation and coding.

Prior to performing statistical analyses, participant responses were recategorized into

binary classifications. Relationship categories (long term, short term, and none) were recoded

into currently in a relationship (long term, short term) or not currently in a relationship

(none). To aid in determining sexting prevalence, frequency items (never, rarely,

occasionally, and frequently) were recoded as never sexted (never), or sexted (rarely,

occasionally, and frequently). Agreement items (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and

strongly agree) were recoded as disagree (strongly disagree, disagree) and agree (agree,

strongly agree). This was necessary for statistical analysis, as a number of items received no,

or very few responses in either the strongly disagree, or strongly agree categories. Original

frequency distributions can be seen in Appendices B through E.

Prevalence: overall, and by context.

Four binary measures of 12-month sexting prevalence were constructed; one for

overall prevalence, and three for sexting by context (within relationships, with people known

personally, and online only). For each context, two items determined whether an exchange

had occurred: successfully initiating an exchange, and successfully reciprocating an exchange

initiated by someone else. Sexting in any context meant that sexting (overall) had occurred.

Data analysis.

Data were analysed using SPSS (Version 25.0). Cronbach's alpha was calculated

separately by category to evaluate the survey's internal consistency. Frequencies and

percentages, for demographic data and individual items, were reported as descriptive

statistics. There were no surveys with missing items, so none were excluded from the

analysis. Because item distributions were non-normal, inter-item differences were examined

using non-parametric tests (Clason & Dormody, 1994). Spearman's rho correlation was used

for the main analysis, and results were verified using chi-squared tests. No Spearman's

results of significance were contradicted by the chi-squared tests, and therefore only

Spearman's r_s is reported. *P* values under .05 were considered statistically significant. All

tests of significance were two-tailed.

Stage Two: Focus Group Interview

Participants.

Sample size and participant characteristics.

Sample size calculation for focus groups is seen as a difficult problem, with no clear

solution in the literature (Tang & Davis, 1995). Based on recent recommendations that focus

groups should comprise between four and twelve participants (Carlsen & Glenton, 2011), a

group size of eight was selected. Out of 17 women and 5 men in the pool of participants, only

six women and one man were able to participate. The final focus group was therefore

composed of seven individuals, aged 20 to 22.

Participant recruitment.

Participants for stage two were drawn from stage one and pilot study participants.

Stage one and pilot study participants could indicate their interest by means of a sign-up form

made available after data collection. Participants were selected using random selection,

stratified by gender to ensure an equal gender representation, and contacted to confirm

attendance. When potential participants indicated they would be unable to attend, additional

participants were contacted until all potential participants had been contacted.

Measure.

The focus group interview was guided by two broad themes, or questions, which

divided the interview into two approximately equal length parts (Table 2). Each theme

contained three 'prompts' to guide the conversation.

Table 2

Focus group themes with prompts.

Is it possible for sexting to be part of normal, healthy sexual development?
Can sexting be empowering?
Can sexting help to build or maintain romantic relationships?
Can sexting help to build trust between partners?
How are the risks of sexting similar to, or different from the risks of other aspects of sexual development?
How does it affect privacy similarly/differently?
How does it affect sexual identity similarly/differently?
Do women and men experience different sexting risks?

Procedure.

The focus group interview took place in the Department of Psychology. On arrival, participants were provided with a consent form to read. The researcher provided participants with a detailed definition of sexting, and explained the aim of the research, the procedure, and the limits of confidentiality. Participants were asked to keep what was said in the interview confidential, but were cautioned that the researcher had no control over participants. Participants were informed that the interview would be recorded, and the recording equipment was positioned in full view of participants. Participants were then asked to sign their consent forms, which were collected. The interview was conducted over 90 minutes. A 30-minute debriefing with refreshments followed.

Data preparation and analysis.

Thematic analysis was chosen for this study due to its flexibility and lack of reliance on any specific theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Assumptions.

Thematic analysis requires that at least five assumptions be made, and these need to be clearly stated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first assumption relates to the identification of a theme. For this study, a theme was identified by virtue of three potential criteria: there must be a degree of group consensus, it must normalise a particular view, or it should express a significant tension. The second assumption is of scope, which for this study was on broad ideas, not detailed aspects. The third assumption was that coding would proceed along theoretical (as opposed to inductive) grounds, and coding was therefore guided by the stated research objectives. The fourth assumption was that themes would be analysed at the semantic level, and as such this analysis involved description and interpretation of what was said, but not how or why it was said. The fifth assumption was of a realist epistemology, focussed on experience and meaning.

Preparation and analysis.

The 90-minute long focus group recording was manually transcribed. Participants were numbered on the transcript, and the starting times of each speaking turn were noted. Analysis followed the six-stage thematic procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), namely familiarisation with the data generating codes, searching for, then reviewing themes, naming themes, and producing the report.

Reflexivity.

Despite the quantitative portion of this report dominating, it remains important to me, as the researcher, to acknowledge and reflect on the active role I played in the construction of meaning throughout this report. I chose the topic of research, reviewed the literature and included or excluded references according to my own judgement, and formulated the research objectives. Also, I did not enter this research from a position of neutrality, but as a person who once spent a year sexting in a long-distance relationship with the woman who later became my wife. I was therefore quite astounded when I realised how easily psychological research has disregarded the positive potential of sexual communication (over modern digital channels), commonly known as sexting. It is unlikely that participants in the interview mistook my attitude towards the topic for anything but enthusiasm, and this likely influenced what they said, even though my participation in the interview was otherwise minimal, and limited to delegating speaking turns or introducing themes and prompts.

Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the University of Cape Town Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee (REF: PSY2019-036).

Anonymity and confidentiality.

The stage one data collection procedure ensured complete anonymity (and therefore confidentiality) for participants. The presence of the researcher during stage two meant that

participant identities were necessarily known, but participants were assured that their

confidentiality would be protected; transcripts do not contain participant names, and

pseudonyms are used in this report. Participants were asked to keep each other's identities

confidential, and were reminded that the researcher had no control over what other

participants would say or do after the interview.

Informed consent and withdrawal from study.

This study required active, written consent from participants, who were able to

withdraw at any time prior to specifically stated cut-off points. The stage one and pilot study

cut-off times were the moment participants inserted their completed (now anonymous)

surveys into the sealed, slotted container. Participants in stage two were able to withdraw

their data until the moment this report was submitted for evaluation.

Consent forms.

Consent forms were provided prior to the start of data collection. These forms served

two purposes: to obtain written informed consent, and to gather the personal data of

participants for administrative purposes. Consent forms contained a comprehensive definition

of sexting, an explanation of the purpose of the study, descriptions of risks and benefits,

information regarding the researcher and ethics clearance, and a detailed explanation of

procedures (including those designed to guarantee anonymity). Consent forms informed

participants of the conditions of withdrawal from the study. Signed consent forms were

collected before the start of any stage of data collection.

Risks and deception.

This study did not involve deception and represented a low risk to participants.

Participants were cautioned not to participate if contemplating their personal sexual

behaviour might be distressing. Participants were provided with information on university

mental health services on debriefing forms.

Incentives and benefits.

SRPP participants received points for completing each stage of the study. Pilot study participants received two points, stage one participants received one point, and focus group participants received four points. The names of DSA participants were entered into a lucky draw for a R500 voucher, redeemable at the Cavendish Square shopping mall. The winner was chosen at random and announced to all participants via email. Participants received no further direct benefit from their participation in this research.

Debriefing.

Each data collection session was followed by a debriefing. Participants were afforded an opportunity to ask questions or give comments. Participants were provided with a debriefing form containing an expanded description of the research purpose, information regarding psychosocial support, and the contact information for the researcher, as well as for the Department of Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

Results

Stage One: Self-report Sexting Survey

Sample characteristics.

Detailed demographic characteristics of the sample can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Sample Demographic Characteristics (N = 108)

Variable	Group		Total
	SRPP (*n* = 79)	DSA (*n* = 29)	
Age (years)			
M (SD)	20 (1.42)	21 (1.75)	20.3 (1.56)
Range	18-24	18-24	18-24
Gender			
Female	65 (82%)	20 (69%)	85 (79%)
Male	14 (18%)	9 (31%)	23 (21%)
Relationship status			
Over 6 Months	37 (47%)	13 (45%)	50 (46%)
Under 6 Months	15 (19%)	7 (24%)	22 (21%)
None	27 (34%)	9 (31%)	36 (33%)

Sexting prevalence.

The majority of participants (82%) had successfully exchanged sexts in the 12 months preceding the study. Participants in relationships at the time of the study had a significantly higher prevalence of sexting (89%) than single participants (69%), $r_s = .24$, $p = .01$. There were no significant correlations between 12-month sexting prevalence and age, or gender. A total of 88% of participants indicated that they had sent a sext at any time in their lives, and 96% indicated that they had received a sext at any time in their lives.

Sexting in context.

Sexting prevalence was investigated within three contexts: within relationships, with people known personally (acquaintances), and with persons known online only (online contacts). Most participants (71%) had sexted within relationships, while some (41%) had sexted with acquaintances, and only a small number (13%) had sexted with online contacts. There was some overlap between contexts, with 30% having sexted both within relationships and with acquaintances, and 6% having sexted both within relationships and with online

contacts. Only 11% had sexted with both acquaintances as well as online contacts. Only 3% had sexted in all three contexts.

Failure to sext.

Failed sexting attempts within relationships were relatively common, with 23% of participants indicating that a sext they had sent was ignored, but only 3% indicated that a partner had reacted negatively. Only 9% indicated that a sext they had sent to an acquaintance had been ignored, and 5% indicated that an acquaintance had reacted negatively. Only 8% indicated that a sext they sent to an online contact was ignored, and 7% indicated that an online contact had reacted negatively.

Sexting as positive (a normalcy discourse).

A total of 94% of participants indicated they would respond positively to receiving sexts within romantic relationships, and 85% indicated they were likely to send sexts within romantic relationships. Sexting within romantic relationships was also seen as pleasurable (89%) and safe (89%). Some significant correlations with age, relationship status, or gender were observed; these correlations can be seen in Table 4. For instance, agreement that sending sexts was acceptable in relationships was significantly higher from participants in relationships (90%) than from those who were single (75%).

Participants considered sexting useful for self-expression, with 84% agreeing that sexting could help with sexual expression. Women were more likely (91%) to support this idea than men (61%). The idea of sexting as empowering received 78% support, and women were again more likely (85%) to support this statement than men (48%). A total of 86% of participants agreed that sexting can be a normal part of their sexual development, with women (93%) giving greater support than men (61%). There was less, but still substantial agreement that sexting can aid in the construction of sexual identity, with 61% supporting this idea. Once again, women (68%) agreed more than men (35%).

Table 4

Spearman's rho correlations between positive sexting items and demographic data.

	Age	Rel.	Gender
Responding positively to sexts within a romantic relationship.	.06	.17	-.17
Sending sexts within a romantic relationship.	.11	**.20**[*]	-.17
Sexting as an empowering part of sexuality.	.01	.19	**-.38**[**]
Sexting as sexual expression.	.08	.07	**-.33**[**]
Sexting as aiding in the construction of sexual identity.	-.00	.01	**-.27**[**]
Sexting as pleasurable within a romantic relationship.	.18	.06	-.18
Sexting as safe within a romantic relationship.	-.01	.00	-.10
Sexting as a normal part of sexual development.	.07	.17	**-.38**[**]
Sexting can help develop new romantic relationships.	-.00	.11	.17
Sexting can help maintain existing romantic relationships.	.05	.18	-.17
Sexting can build trust between romantic partners.	-.12	**.22**[*]	-.09

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note. Gender was coded as 0 = woman and 1 = man. Relationship (Rel.) status was coded as 0 = single and 1 = in a relationship.

Some 77% of participants supported the idea that sexting can build trust within relationships, with those in relationships (83%) more likely than single participants (64%) to give their support. Sexting was seen as helpful for maintaining relationships, with 68% of participants supporting this idea. However, only 41% of participants agreed that sexting can help develop new relationships.

Sexting as negative (a deviance discourse).

Some significant correlations with age, relationship status, or gender were observed, and can be seen in Table 5. There was little support for a link between sexting and substance (alcohol) abuse, with 91% rejecting this idea. There was even more resistance (93%) to the idea that sexting could be linked to verbally, emotionally, or physically abusing a partner.

Women were more likely to reject this idea (96%) than men (83%). Most participants (96%)

rejected the idea that sexting would make one more likely to bully others, with more women

(99%) disagreeing than men (87%). Most participants (85%) rejected the idea that sexting

could open them up to being bullied.

Participants thought the possibility of unauthorised sharing of their sexts likely (61%).

Many participants (69%) expected this to lead to difficulties finding employment, but fewer

(43%) saw this as influencing their ability to complete their education. Women (45%) were

more likely than men (22%) to agree that sexting would affect their education, and increasing

age also correlated with increased agreement in this case.

Participants were asked to consider the relationship between sexting and declining

morality amongst the youth, and most participants (73%) rejected such a relationship.

Women were more likely (77%) than men (57%) to reject a link between sexting and

declining morality.

Table 5

Spearman's rho correlations between negative sexting items and demographic data

	Age	Rel.	Gender
Likelihood to abuse substances, such as alcohol.	.15	-.04	.15
Likelihood to verbally, emotionally, or physically abuse a partner.	-.05	-.05	**.23**[*]
Likelihood to bully others.	.02	-.07	**.26**[**]
Likelihood to be bullied by others.	-.01	.08	.04
Likelihood to have my sexts shared against my will.	.09	.06	-.05
Likelihood that hared sexts may affect future employment.	**-.24**[*]	.09	-.04
Likelihood that shared sext may affect future education.	-.10	.02	**-.20**[*]
Sexting as associated with declining morality in young people.	-.07	-.19	**.19**[*]

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note. Gender was coded as 0 = woman and 1 = man. Relationship (Rel.) status was coded as

0 = single and 1 = in a relationship.

Stage Two: Focus Group Interview

 A complex relationship with trust.

 Talk of trust was a common theme in participants' accounts of their sexting experiences. Participants expressed their awareness of a complex interaction between trust and sexting. Some participants described trust as emerging from the act of sexting, while others mentioned it as a necessary condition for sexting to occur, and most saw it as the first casualty from sexting gone awry. One participant described this complex relationship as follows:

> *It's definitely a very powerful tool, and in that sense can be used to build trust, but can also have a lot of power to really break trust (Anthony)*

 By referring to sexting as a powerful tool, Anthony underscores the influence of sexting on trust. But, for Anthony, sexting's potentially destructive natures rules it out as useful for his sexual relationships, as he goes on to add:

> *I'd say the risk of it being destructive […] of it destroying trust and being harmful outweighs the potential benefits. I think there's definitely better ways to build your sexual relationships and […] sexual identity, outside of sexting. (Anthony)*

 By suggesting that there are better ways of building trust, Anthony seems to suggest that trust building might be a specifically desired outcome from sexting, a goal in a sense. Other participants acknowledge that trust between people is complex, and that, despite the risks, sexting has the potential to build trust:

It's one of the many layers of trust […] you know, there's a bunch of different things in a relationship that build and break trust, and this is one of them. For me it has built a lot of [trust]. (Beth)

For Beth, sexting has aided in building trust, but despite this her relationship might not in fact be entirely trusting. The sexts she exchanged represent just one aspect of a complicated calculus of trust, and a failure to keep intimate emotions private are just as likely to damage the trust between her and a partner:

They didn't share the photos, so then you can trust them, but you tell them a big emotional thing that happened, and they tell all their mates […] so that's why I think it's just one of the many layers that can help, and can help destroy it. (Beth)

Trust might not even be considered until after sexting has occurred, as participants sext spontaneously, and in the moment. For Chloe, trust became a literal afterthought, as the lack of any negative repercussions after sexting resulted in the creation of trust:

When I was younger […] if you were friends with someone and […] you're feeling hot today, and that's just what you guys do back and forth […] without any great idea of trust, but […] like after doing that you trust them cause you're, like, actually that didn't go badly, even though I wasn't thinking about it at the time. (Chloe)

And, as Dawn describes below, the pleasures of sexting may also be greatly enhanced within an already trusting relationship:

If you trust the person you're sending it to, even if it's not someone you're in a committed relationship with, if it's just someone you're exploring this with, and you trust them, and it goes well [...] it can be very empowering, and make you comfortable with your own body, and the body of those people you're exploring it with. (Dawn)

Sexual empowerment.

The ability of sexting to make the sexter feel empowered was repeatedly highlighted by the group. Dawn describes how a partner's positive responses during sexting can increase self-confidence, and can make her feel empowered:

I think it is something that can further your relationship, your own self-confidence, your own empowerment, because it does feel nice for someone to be, like, wow, you're really sexy [...]. And somebody would be like, you're so beautiful, I appreciate you as a being... and your body... and I think that's really beautiful, and empowering. (Dawn)

The feeling of empowerment described above emerges from external factors, the appreciation of a partner. But sexting does not rely exclusively on the positive regard of a partner for empowerment, and the sexter may turn their admiration on themselves. Here Chloe describes the effect of viewing her own sexts:

It can be for your own self though [...] like, sometimes you can look at your [...] own text and your own photo and be like, damn! Like, [...] look at me being a queen! [...]

It can increase your own, you know… you can figure out what you're comfortable

with in showing and not showing, and figuring yourself out. (Chloe)

Chloe is empowered by her exploration of her own sexuality, by means of self-expression. A desire for empowerment may become the very reason why some people sext. Below, Dawn describes sexting for the express purpose of empowerment as healthy in itself.

I think it's healthy if you're doing it because you want to express your own sexuality,

and you want to feel empowered and sexy. (Dawn)

Sexting for the explicit purpose of empowerment does, however, raise some questions. The idea that there are right and wrong ways to empower oneself is articulated by Elly, who suggests that sexting may involve a selfish and manipulative aspect:

I feel like it can be empowering, like personally, like you said […] if you're doing it

for all the right reasons then cool, you're not manipulating anyone. (Elly)

But by focussing on sexting for empowerment, some sexters may also stumble into one of sexting's many complications. While sexting may empower, it is also an explicitly sexual act. If a person sexts with the intention to empower, it is not uncommon for that intention to be misunderstood as a sexual advance, as Chloe and Elly experienced:

You do this, and then you see the person, your friend, again in public and then

suddenly they're upset because now you wrote a cheque that your body can't cash,

because now you don't want to have sex with them, even though you were sexting.

[…] Even though that's something that you made clear […] I don't want to be physical with you, I don't want to do this. It's empowering, it feels good, but then suddenly you don't trust this person […] did they not understand the terms and conditions? (Chloe)

When we did decide to meet, all we wanted to do was have sex. And I was, like, I wasn't sexting with you because that's what I was trying to achieve. I wasn't trying to fill your head with ideas. (Elly)

Consequences and control.

While most participants were able to relate cautionary tales or sexting horror stories, only one participant had experienced serious first-hand negative consequences from sexting. Overall, the group expressed a significant degree of ambivalence towards the negative consequences of sexting, and like Dawn, most considered negative experiences to be exceptions:

I think it's very much give or take. I think for a lot of people it's quite a positive experience, but there are those handful of people who have a really negative experience. (Dawn)

More than just an ambivalence to the negative consequences of sexting, the group also expressed a degree of indifference where the reactions of others were concerned. It seems that, while consequences might be bad, there is a virtue in moving on. Chloe related a story of two classmates, one who reacted with shame and embarrassment when private images were shared in public, and another who simply shrugged it off:

She was so ashamed and so embarrassed, but at the same time I had another friend

whose pictures got shared [...] and she kept going to school, and she was like, well, I

did this, everyone's doing it, like, why are we so alarmed when we see it? (Chloe)

Negative consequences from sexting may not even be necessarily, or irredeemably bad, and

some good may come from them yet. Participants seemed to consider the negative

consequences of sexting as part and parcel of sexual development and learning:

Trying something [new], whether it's a good experience, or a bad experience, allows

you to understand yourself better [...] it's not because it's something bad that, um, it

wasn't somehow helpful. (Faith)

This silver lining was not, however, unconditional. The group agreed that eventual

positive outcomes from negative consequences were contingent on sexting having occurred

on their own terms, and not from coercive acts or other causes outside of their control. This

idea was articulated by Beth, who said that:

If like, by some chance it got out, the only thing that would make me happy with, or

feel okay with the fact that it got out is that I wanted it at the time. Like, I wouldn't

hate on myself, or feel ashamed, because I wanted it. But I'd feel really ashamed if I

did it for alternative reasons. (Beth)

Control might be critical for understanding participants' ambivalence to the negative

consequences of sexting. Sexting provides emerging adults with a contradiction; in one sense,

it enables a new, unprecedented level of control over the immediate situation, while in another it removes from their control the texts, images, and videos that are the very manifestations of their sexual act.

> *When you're sexting you also have the ability to just take a step back, like when you [...] either send a text or receive one, and you, like [...] have a bit of a shock, and you can just put the phone down, get a glass of water, and then think about it. (Faith)*

> *It's beneficial in that I can control what I say, in the sexting, when the sexting is happening, but I have no bearing, no control over what the next person [...] does with what I tell them, or thinks about what I'm telling them, or how the next person reacts to it, and that makes it for me very risky. (Faith)*

The added control over the sexual act that participants gained from sexting may very well point to one of the reasons for sexting's continuing rise in popularity. Participants are well aware of the risks of sexting, but seem to shrug them off. It is not unlikely that participants derive an increased sense of agency from sexting, agency they might not have when in physical proximity to their partners.

Discussion

The overall aim of this research was to contribute to the small, but growing body of psychological research that views sexting not as an act of deviance, but as a normal and potentially adaptive part of sexual development, and able to aid in the development of interpersonal competencies during emerging adulthood. By describing the sexting behaviours and attitudes of emerging adults, this research aimed to bring the discipline closer to an understanding of why, despite the potential for negative consequences, emerging adults keep

on sexting. To satisfy this aim, four objectives were defined: to determine the prevalence of sexting, to describe the contexts within which sexting occurs, to gauge attitudes towards representations of sexting as positive, and to explore attitudes towards the negative consequences of sexting. Satisfying the first and second objectives was accomplished by means of a quantitative, self-report survey alone, while satisfying the third and fourth objectives made use of a mixed approach that relied on blending both quantitative and qualitative data. The findings are discussed below, and are grouped by objective. It should be noted that, unless otherwise specified, prevalence rates refer to 12-month prevalence, and the successful (reciprocated) exchange of sexts. Participants who completed the quantitative survey are referred to as respondents, and focus group participants are referred to as interviewees.

Sexting Prevalence

Twelve-month sexting prevalence amongst respondents was notably higher than expected, based on the most recent meta-analyses, and marginally higher than the highest reported prevalence in the literature (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Courtice & Shaughnessy, 2017; Madigan et al., 2018). Higher sexting prevalence correlated with being in a relationship, and while only a limited number of studies have considered the relationship status of sexters, this finding supports those that have (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Drouin et al., 2017). There is some disagreement in the literature as to whether sexting prevalence differs significantly between men and women, with some studies supporting such a difference (Drouin et al., 2017), and others do not (Madigan et al., 2018); this study found no such difference. Contrary to the literature, no association was found between sexting prevalence and age (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017).

Sexting by Context

This study considered sexting within three contexts: within relationships, with people known personally (acquaintances), and with persons known online only (online contacts). This divide was based on the assumption that relationships during emerging adulthood may be unstable (Arnett, 2014), and that 12-month sexting prevalence may not correspond to sexting within the current relationship context. The results show that most sexting occurred within relationships, with a substantial number of participants sexting with acquaintances, and only a small number of participants sexting with online contacts.

There was a substantial overlap between sexting within relationships and with acquaintances, with three-quarters of participants who sexted with acquaintances also sexting within relationships. This substantial overlap may be explained by the fleeting nature of relationships in this age group (Arnett, 2014), but may also point to the use of sexting as a tool for meeting new people or initiating new relationships.

Not all sexting was successful, even within relationships, and while ignored sexts within relationships were rare (compared to the high number of successful exchanges), they were not uncommon. Negative reactions, at least within relationships, were exceedingly rare. This provides further evidence that sexting within relationships is an accepted practice. A similar proportion of sexts were ignored in the context of sexting with acquaintances, but here negative reactions were much more common. This might be due to a lower perceived acceptability of sexting outside of relationships, or because respondents were more likely to misjudge how a sext would be received. Such misjudgements may be more common for this age group than for older adults, possibly due to a lower level of interpersonal competence during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2014). Sexting with online contacts was fraught with failure, with almost as many ignored sexts as successful sexts, and just as many negative reactions.

Sexting as positive (a normalcy discourse)

One of the most striking findings of this study was a near-unanimous support for the exchange of sexts within romantic relationships. Significantly more support was seen from participants in relationships, raising some interesting questions regarding a link between sexting attitudes and dating. The literature has identified pleasure as a major motivating factor behind women's sexting (Hasinoff, 2013; Lee & Crofts, 2015), and the results indicate that this might also be the case for men.

Trust emerged as a major theme and occupied a prominent position in interviewees' thoughts on sexting and relationships. This was expected, as emerging adults are known to regard trust as an important aspect of their romantic interactions, and are likely to consider the exchange of sexts as an expression of that trust (Döring, 2014; Gala & Kapadia, 2013). While numerical results indicate substantial support for the idea that sexting can build trust, interviewees described the relationship between sexting and trust with a degree of nuance; as multi-directional, complex, and fragile. Trust within intimate relationships is likely critical for intimacy to develop (Prager, 1997), and interviewees suggested that trust within a relationship may multiply the pleasures of sexting. Like trust, the degree to which sexting was considered safe may have numerical support, but the qualitative data indicates that this may be a matter of perception. Interviewees professed a degree of indifference towards the risks of sexting, and this may possibly be explained by the relative rarity of real-world negative consequences (Dir & Cyders, 2015). However, whether trust is built or broken, the sexual experience gained through sexting likely contributes to the positive development of interpersonal competencies during emerging adulthood (Graham, 2004).

Empowerment emerged as a major theme, and interviewees described how sexting was used for self-empowerment, and even how empowerment for its own sake became a driving force behind sexting. Respondents also associated sexting with self-expression, and

the development of sexual identity, perhaps unsurprisingly, as sexual self-expression and self-exploration are considered vital for sexual empowerment (Hasinoff, 2013). These results provide additional evidence in favour of those who argue that sexting represents a normal, adaptive aspect of sexual development (García-Gómez, 2017, 2019; Hasinoff, 2013). However, interviewees also highlighted the limits of empowerment, describing how acts intended only to empower could be understood by others as sexual advances.

Sexting as negative (a deviance discourse)

Public moralising on sexting regularly portrays it as a deviant act, and the majority of psychological research focusses on its maladaptive associations (Döring, 2014; Thurlow, 2006). This study found little agreement with the idea of sexting as deviant, and participants overwhelmingly disagreed with statements linking their own sexting to alcohol abuse, partner abuse, bullying, being bullied, or a moral decline amongst young people.

The unauthorised distribution of private sexts remains, however, one of sexting's most common negative outcomes. Interviewees saw their lack of control over sexts once they have been sent as one of sexting's major drawbacks. A majority of respondents, especially women, considered the non-consensual sharing of their sexts likely, and many respondents agreed that shared sexts could have an impact on their abilities to attain an education or find future employment. Despite a keen awareness of the risks of sexting, most interviewees maintained a cavalier attitude towards these risks, with some saying that sexting's negative consequences may even aid in personal growth. Empirical research shows that, while the negative consequences from sexting may have gripped the public imagination, they are in fact quite rare (Dir & Cyders, 2015). It may therefore be that indifferent attitudes towards the risks of sexting may stem from limited personal experience of negative consequences.

Limitations and Future Research

Conclusions drawn from the results of this study need to be carefully considered, in light of the following limitations. Because participants were mostly recruited from amongst Psychology students at the University of Cape Town, using convenience sampling, the sample was biased towards the levels of education, literacy, class, religious, race, ethnic, and gender make-up of the undergraduate population of the university in general, and the Department of Psychology in particular. Participants were also aware of the nature of the study, and were able to self-select, perhaps biasing the sample towards those with a particular interest in sexting. Students at the University of Cape Town are also more likely to be privileged in terms of internet access (provided for free by the university) and technological competencies than the average South African emerging adult, and may therefore have had more opportunities to sext. It would therefore be unwise to attempt to generalise the results of this study beyond the most immediate context.

Of the 207 students who registered for stage one, only 108 successfully arrived to complete the sexting survey. The relatively small size of the sample is a concern, and limits the degree to which statistical inferences should be drawn. The small number of men ($N = 23$), single participants ($N = 36$), and the narrow age range (6 years) make drawing any conclusions based on gender, relationship status, or age unreliable. Only one man participated in the focus group interview, and as such the qualitative data represents almost entirely the views of women participants.

The use of a previously untested sexting survey, derived in its entirety from the diverse and often contradictory body of research on sexting, resulted in an instrument with a potentially limited ability to gauge sexting attitudes. Additionally, items such as, "if I engage in sexting I am more likely to abuse substances, such as alcohol" (See Appendix B), imply a causal relationship between sexting and alcohol abuse, and are unlikely to have elicited

entirely honest responses. Such poorly worded items potentially contributed to the low internal consistency ($\alpha = .72$) of the section representing sexting as negative.

Future research on this topic is needed, and would do well to consider these limitations, and work towards larger, more generally representative sample sizes, and more robust, more thoroughly tested instruments. This research also suggests other future directions of inquiry, such as the relationship between sexting and trust, and the degree to which sexting may be involved in building new relationships.

Summary and Conclusion

The bulk of sexting research, collectively known as the deviance discourse on sexting, promotes a view of sexting as a maladaptive act. A normalcy discourse, which admits that sexting may have an adaptive function, has emerged in opposition. Because of psychology's tendency to align with the deviance discourse, the role of sexting in development remains a much-neglected area of research. To help fill this gap, this study set out to describe the sexting behaviours and attitudes of emerging adults.

Results indicate that sexting is an immensely popular, and exceedingly common activity for emerging adults. They find it safe, and feel that it may benefit both themselves and their relationships by helping them build trust, experience pleasure, express and empower themselves, and develop their sexual identities. While sexting's ability to empower and build trust stands out as vital, results also show that the act of sexting is fraught with misunderstanding, conflicting perceptions of control, and opportunities for destroying trust. Participants are also keenly aware of, but largely indifferent to, sexting's potential negative consequences. This study shows that sexting, while complex, and not always free from consequences, is an accepted activity that likely plays a significant, adaptive role in sexual development during emerging adulthood. It shows that that emerging adults weigh up the benefits and consequences, and choose sexting.

References

Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens

through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, *55*(5), 469.

https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469

Arnett, J. J. (2007). Emerging adulthood: What is it, and what is it good for? *Child

Development Perspectives*, *1*(2), 68–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-

8606.2007.00016.x

Arnett, J. J. (2014). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the

twenties*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press.

Ayman-Nolley, S., & Taira, L. L. (2000). Obsession with the dark side of adolescence: A

decade of psychological studies. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *3*(1), 35–48.

https://doi.org/10.1080/136762600113022

Barrense-Dias, Y., Berchtold, A., Surís, J.-C., & Akre, C. (2017). Sexting and the definition

issue. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *61*(5), 544–554.

https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JADOHEALTH.2017.05.009

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research

in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Carlsen, B., & Glenton, C. (2011). What about N? A methodological study of sample-size

reporting in focus group studies. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *11*(1), 26.

https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-11-26

Clason, D. L., & Dormody, T. J. (1994). Analyzing data measured by individual likert-type

items. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, *35*(4), 31–35.

https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.1994.04031

Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the social sciences*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Courtice, E. L., & Shaughnessy, K. (2017). Technology-mediated sexual interaction and

    relationships: A systematic review of the literature. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*,

    32(3–4), 269–290. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2017.1397948

Davidson, B. I., & Ellis, D. (2019). (In press). Avoiding Irrelevance: The manifestation and

    impacts of technophobia in psychological science. *Psyarxiv*.

    https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/b9f4p

Dir, A. L., & Cyders, M. A. (2015). Risks, risk factors, and outcomes associated with phone

    and internet sexting among university students in the United States. *Archives of*

    Sexual Behavior, *44*(6), 1675–1684. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0370-7

Döring, N. (2014). Consensual sexting among adolescents: Risk prevention through

    abstinence education or safer sexting? *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial*

    Research on Cyberspace, *8*(1). https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2014-1-9

Drouin, M., Coupe, M., & Temple, J. R. (2017). Is sexting good for your relationship? It

    depends…. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *75*, 749–756.

    https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CHB.2017.06.018

Drouin, M., Vogel, K. N., Surbey, A., & Stills, J. R. (2013). Let's talk about sexting, baby:

    Computer-mediated sexual behaviors among young adults. *Computers in Human*

    Behavior, *29*(5), A25–A30. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CHB.2012.12.030

Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Company.

Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A.-G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G*Power 3: A flexible statistical

    power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior*

    Research Methods, *39*(2), 175–191. https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193146

Gala, J., & Kapadia, S. (2013). Romantic relationships in emerging adulthood: A

    developmental perspective. *Psychological Studies*, *58*(4), 406–418.

    https://doi.org/10.1007/s12646-013-0219-5

García-Gómez, A. (2017). Teen girls and sexual agency: Exploring the intrapersonal and intergroup dimensions of sexting. *Media, Culture & Society*, *39*(3), 391–407. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716683789

García-Gómez, A. (2019). Sexting and hegemonic masculinity: Interrogating male sexual agency, empowerment and dominant gendered norms. In P. Bou-Franch & P. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (Eds.), *Analyzing Digital Discourse* (pp. 313–339). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92663-6_11

Graham, P. (2004). *The end of adolescence*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Hasinoff, A. A. (2013). Sexting as media production: Rethinking social media and sexuality. *New Media & Society*, *15*(4), 449–465. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812459171

Hasinoff, A. A. (2015). *Sexting panic: Rethinking criminalization, privacy, and consent*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Ivankova, N. V., Creswell, J. W., & Stick, S. L. (2006). Using mixed-methods sequential explanatory design: From theory to practice. *Field Methods*, *18*(1), 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05282260

Lee, M., & Crofts, T. (2015). Gender, pressure, coercion and pleasure: Untangling motivations for sexting between young people. *The British Journal of Criminology*, *55*(3), 454–473. https://doi.org/10.1093/BJC/AZU075

Leech, N. L., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2009). A typology of mixed methods research designs. *Quality & Quantity*, *43*(2), 265–275. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-007-9105-3

Madigan, S., Ly, A., Rash, C. L., Ouytsel, J. V., & Temple, J. R. (2018). Prevalence of multiple forms of sexting behavior among youth: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, *172*(4), 327–335. https://doi.org/10.1001/JAMAPEDIATRICS.2017.5314

Matell, M. S., & Jacoby, J. (1971). Is there an optimal number of alternatives for likert scale items? Study I: Reliability and validity. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, *31*(3), 657–674. https://doi.org/10.1177/001316447103100307

Morelli, M., Bianchi, D., & Baiocco, R. (2016). Sexting, psychological distress and dating violence among adolescents and young adults. *Psicothema*, (28.2), 137–142. https://doi.org/10.7334/psicothema2015.193

Prager, K. J. (1997). *The psychology of intimacy*. Guilford Press.

Republic of South Africa. (2009). *Films and Publications Amendment Act, No. 3 of 2009*: Pretoria: Government Printers.

Schloms-Madlener, K. C. (2013). *The prevalence and characteristics of sexting behaviours among adolescents and adults in Cape Town, South Africa*. Retrieved from https://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/10646

Soster, R. L., & Boland, W. A. (2019). Private disclosure; public exposure: An exploratory consideration of gender asymmetries in adolescent sexting. *Journal of Marketing Behavior*, *3*(4), 263–292. https://doi.org/10.1561/107.00000056

Tang, K. C., & Davis, A. (1995). Critical factors in the determination of focus group size. *Family Practice*, *12*(4), 474–475. https://doi.org/10.1093/fampra/12.4.474

Tashakkori, A., Teddlie, C., & Teddlie, C. B. (1998). *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. SAGE.

Thurlow, C. (2006). From statistical panic to moral panic: The metadiscursive construction and popular exaggeration of new media language in the print media. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *11*(3), 667–701. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00031.x

Van Ouytsel, J., Walrave, M., Lu, Y., Temple, J. R., & Ponnet, K. (2018). The associations between substance use, sexual behavior, deviant behaviors and adolescents'

engagement in sexting: Does relationship context matter? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *47*(11), 2353–2370. https://doi.org/10.1007/S10964-018-0903-9

Yoder, J., Hansen, J., & Precht, M. (2018). Correlates and outcomes associated with sexting among justice involved youth: The role of developmental adversity, emotional disinhibitions, relationship context, and dating violence. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *94*, 493–499. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CHILDYOUTH.2018.08.020

Appendix A

Sexting Survey

SEXTING ATTITUDES MEASURE

What is sexting?

The word sexting is a combination of the words **sex**, and **texting**.

Sexting is the creation, distribution (sending or sharing), and reception of *nude or sexually suggestive images or videos, or sexually suggestive texts* **via mobile devices or the internet, usually for sexual purposes.**

A **sext** (or *sexts* for more than one) is what we call the message sent when sexting, and when referring to the action we also use the word sext, as in "to sext".

Maybe you have never sent or received a sext before, and maybe you sext often. Everyone is likely to have different views of sexting, and different sexting habits. This questionnaire asks what **you** think. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Please answer these questions as honestly and accurately as possible. Your answers on this questionnaire are anonymous and confidential. Once you have completed and submitted this questionnaire there will be no way to link your answers to your identity. Please take your time to read the questions carefully.

Note: Because this questionnaire cannot be linked to your identity in any way there is no way to withdraw your answers once you have placed the questionnaire in the box.

Note: Where reference is made to people who are known to you (or others) **personally** or **online only**, this always **excludes** persons you (or others) are in romantic relationships with.

Section A: Demographic Information

Please indicate your gender:

  Woman: _ _ _ _ _   Man: _ _ _ _ _   Non-binary: _ _ _ _ _

Please indicate your age in years:

  Age: _ _ _ _ _

Please indicate your current romantic relationship status:

Long term: _ _ _ _ _ _   Short term: _ _ _ _ _ _   None: _ _ _ _ _ _

(Over 6 months)   (Under 6 months)

Section B: Your Sexting Frequency

In this section, please think about your own past behaviour. All questions are phrased as if from your perspective. Please read the questions carefully. Please **circle** or **cross** the appropriate answer. Please answer all questions in this section.

1. **Have you sent a sext at any time in your life?**

   No   Yes

2. **Have you received a sext at any time in your life?**

   No   Yes

3. **In the past 12 months I have attempted to initiate an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I am or was <u>in a relationship with</u>, but they did not respond.**

   | | | | | Not in relationship during this |
   | Never | Rarely | Occasionally | Frequently | period |

4. **In the past 12 months I have attempted to initiate an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I am or was <u>in a relationship with</u>, but they reacted negatively.**

   | | | | | Not in relationship during this |
   | Never | Rarely | Occasionally | Frequently | period |

5. **In the past 12 months I have successfully initiated an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I am or was <u>in a relationship with</u>. (To count as an exchange, the other person needs to have sent a sext back.)**

   | | | | | Not in relationship during this |
   | Never | Rarely | Occasionally | Frequently | period |

6. **In the past 12 months I have taken part in an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I am or was <u>in a relationship with</u>, where the other person initiated the exchange. (To count as an exchange, you need to have sent a sext back to the other person.)**

				Not in relationship during this
Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	period

7. **In the past 12 months I have attempted to initiate an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I know <u>personally</u> but they did not respond.**

Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently

8. **In the past 12 months I have attempted to initiate an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I know <u>personally</u>, but they reacted negatively.**

Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently

9. **In the past 12 months I have successfully initiated an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I know <u>personally</u>. (To count as an exchange, the other person needs to have sent a sext back.)**

Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently

10. **In the past 12 months I have taken part in an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I know <u>personally</u>, where the other person initiated the exchange. (To count as an exchange, you need to have sent a sext back to the other person.)**

Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently

11. **In the past 12 months I have attempted to initiate an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I know <u>online only</u>, but they did not respond.**

Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently

12. **In the past 12 months I have attempted to initiate an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I know <u>online only</u>, but they reacted negatively.**

Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently

13. **In the past 12 months I have successfully initiated an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I know <u>online only</u>. (To count as an exchange, the other person needs to have sent a sext back.)**

Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently

14. **In the past 12 months I have taken part in an exchange of <u>text, photo, or video-based sexts</u> with somebody I know <u>online only</u>, where the other person initiated the exchange. (To count as an exchange, you need to have sent a sext back to the other person.)**

<div align="center">

Never   Rarely   Occasionally   Frequently

Section C: Your Attitudes Toward Sexting

</div>

In this section, please consider your own, current views on sexting. Read the questions carefully. **Circle** or **cross** the appropriate answer. Please answer all questions in this section.

15. **I am likely to <u>respond positively</u> to sexts from <u>a person I am in a romantic relationship with</u>.**

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

16. **I am likely to <u>respond positively</u> to sexts from <u>people I know personally</u>.**

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

17. **I am likely to <u>respond positively</u> to sexts from <u>people I know online only</u>.**

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

18. **I am likely to <u>send</u> sexts to <u>a person I am in a romantic relationship with</u>.**

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

19. **I am likely to <u>send</u> sexts to <u>people I know personally</u>.**

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

20. **I am likely to <u>send</u> sexts to <u>people I know online only</u>.**

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

21. **Sexting can be an empowering part of my sexuality.**

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

22. **Sexting can help me express myself sexually.**

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

23. **Sexting can help me in the construction of my sexual identity.**

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

24. I find (or could find) sexting <u>within a relationship</u> pleasurable.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

25. I find (or could find) sexting with <u>a person I know personally</u> pleasurable.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

26. I find (or could find) sexting with <u>a person I know online only</u> pleasurable.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

27. I find (or could find) sexting <u>within a romantic relationship</u> safe.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

28. I find (or could find) sexting with <u>a person I know personally</u> safe.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

29. I find (or could find) sexting with <u>a person I know online only</u> safe.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

30. Sexting is (or can be) a normal part of my sexual development.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

31. Sexting helps (or can help) me develop new romantic relationships.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

32. Sexting helps (or can help) me maintain existing romantic relationships.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

33. Sexting helps (or can help) build trust between myself and a romantic partner.

Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

Section D: Same-gender Peers

Your peers are the people around you who are roughly the same age as you. Your friends and classmates are examples of your peers. In this section you will be asked about your **same-gender peers**. If you identify as a woman, then the questions in this section refer to other women. If you identify as a man, then the questions in this section refer to other men. If you identify as nonbinary, then the questions in this section refer to other

nonbinary persons. Please read the questions carefully. Please **circle** or **cross** the appropriate answer. Please answer all questions in this section.

34. My <u>same-gender</u> peers send sexts.

      Never   Rarely   Occasionally   Frequently

35. My <u>same-gender</u> peers receive sexts from others.

      Never   Rarely   Occasionally   Frequently

36. My <u>same-gender</u> peers are likely to <u>respond positively</u> to sexts from people they are <u>in romantic relationships with</u>.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

37. My <u>same-gender</u> peers are likely to <u>respond positively</u> to sexts from people they <u>know personally</u>.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

38. My <u>same-gender</u> peers are likely to <u>respond positively</u> to sexts from people they <u>know online only</u>.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

39. My <u>same-gender</u> peers are likely to <u>send</u> sexts to people they are <u>in romantic relationships with</u>.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

40. My <u>same-gender</u> peers are likely to <u>send</u> sexts to people they <u>know personally</u>.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

41. My <u>same-gender</u> peers are likely to send sexts to people they <u>know online only</u>.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

42. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting to be an empowering part of their sexualities.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

43. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting helpful in expressing themselves sexually.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

44. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting helpful in the construction of their sexual identities.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

45. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting <u>within a romantic relationship</u> pleasurable.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

46. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting with <u>a person they know personally</u> pleasurable.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

47. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting with <u>a person they know online only</u> pleasurable.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

48. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting <u>within a romantic relationship</u> safe.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

49. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting with <u>a person they know personally</u> safe.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

50. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting with <u>a person they know online only</u> safe.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

51. My <u>same-gender</u> peers see sexting is as a normal part of their sexual development.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

52. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting as helpful for developing new romantic relationships.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

53. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting as helpful for maintaining existing romantic relationships.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

54. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting as helpful for building trust between themselves and their romantic partners.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

55. My <u>same-gender</u> peers who sext are more likely to abuse substances, such as alcohol.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

56. My <u>same-gender</u> peers who sext are more likely to be bullied by others.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

57. My <u>same-gender</u> peers who sext are more likely to bully others.

       Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

58. My <u>same-gender</u> peers who sext are more likely to verbally, emotionally, or physically abuse a partner.

       Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

59. My <u>same-gender</u> peers who sext are likely to have their sexts shared against their will.

       Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

60. My <u>same-gender</u> peers whose sexts are shared against their will are more likely to have trouble completing their educations.

       Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

61. My <u>same-gender</u> peers whose sexts are shared against their will are more likely to have trouble finding employment one day.

       Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

62. My <u>same-gender</u> peers consider sexting to be associated with declining morality in young people.

       Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

Section E: Other-gender Peers

Your peers are the people around you who are roughly the same age as you. Your friends and classmates are examples of your peers. In this section you will be asked about your **other-gender peers**. If you identify as a woman, then the questions in this section refer to men. If you identify as a man, then the questions in this section refer to women. If you identify as nonbinary, then the questions in this section refer to people who identify as women or men. Please read the questions carefully. Please **circle** or **cross** the appropriate answer. Please answer all questions in this section.

63. My <u>other-gender</u> peers send sexts.

       Never   Rarely   Occasionally   Frequently

64. My <u>other-gender</u> peers receive sexts from others.

       Never   Rarely   Occasionally   Frequently

65. My <u>other-gender</u> peers are likely to <u>respond positively</u> to sexts from people they are <u>in romantic relationships with</u>.

       Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

66. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers are likely to <u>respond positively</u> to sexts from people they <u>know personally</u>.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

67. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers are likely to <u>respond positively</u> to sexts from people they <u>know online only</u>.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

68. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers are likely to <u>send</u> sexts to people they are <u>in romantic relationships with</u>.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

69. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers are likely to <u>send</u> sexts to people they <u>know personally</u>.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

70. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers are likely to <u>send</u> sexts to people they <u>know online only</u>.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

71. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting to be an empowering part of their sexualities.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

72. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting helpful in expressing themselves sexually.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

73. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting helpful in the construction of their sexual identities.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

74. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting <u>within a romantic relationship</u> pleasurable.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

75. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting with <u>a person they know personally</u> pleasurable.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

76. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting with <u>a person they know online only</u> pleasurable.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

77. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting <u>within a romantic relationship</u> safe.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

78. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting with <u>a person they know personally</u> safe.**

        Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

79. My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting with <u>a person they know online only</u> safe.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

80. My <u>other-gender</u> peers see sexting is as a normal part of their sexual development.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

81. My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting as helpful for developing new romantic relationships.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

82. My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting as helpful for maintaining existing romantic relationships.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

83. My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting as helpful for building trust between themselves and their romantic partners.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

84. My <u>other-gender</u> peers who sext are more likely to abuse substances, such as alcohol.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

85. My <u>other-gender</u> peers who sext are more likely to be bullied by others.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

86. My <u>other-gender</u> peers who sext are more likely to bully others.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

87. My <u>other-gender</u> peers who sext are more likely to verbally, emotionally, or physically abuse a partner.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

88. My <u>other-gender</u> peers who sext are likely to have their sexts shared against their will.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

89. My <u>other-gender</u> peers whose sexts are shared against their will are more likely to have trouble completing their educations.

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

90. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers whose sexts are shared against their will are more likely to have trouble finding employment one day.**

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

91. **My <u>other-gender</u> peers consider sexting to be associated with declining morality in young people.**

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

Section F: Your Attitudes Toward the Risks of Sexting

In this section, please consider your own, current views on the risks of sexting. Read the questions carefully. **Circle** or **cross** the appropriate answer. Please answer all questions in this section

92. **If I engage in sexting I am more likely to abuse substances, such as alcohol.**

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

93. **If I engage in sexting I am more likely to be bullied by others.**

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

94. **If I engage in sexting I am more likely to bully others.**

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

95. **If I engage in sexting I am more likely to verbally, emotionally, or physically abuse a partner.**

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

96. **If I engage in sexting I am likely to have my sexts shared against my will.**

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

97. **If my sexts are shared against my will I will be more likely to have trouble completing my education.**

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

98. **If my sexts are shared against my will I will be more likely to have trouble finding employment one day.**

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

99. **Sexting is associated with declining morality in young people.**

      Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

Thank you for your participation.

Remember: Because this questionnaire cannot be linked to your identity in any way there is no way to withdraw your answers once you have placed this questionnaire in the box.

Kindly place your pencil on the table and take a moment's quiet rest until your fellow research participants have all completed their questionnaires.

Appendix B

Unabbreviated Survey Items

Table B1

Unabbreviated statements representing sexting as positive (a normalcy discourse).

Nr.	Item text
1	I am likely to respond positively to sexts from a person I am in a romantic relationship with.
2	I am likely to send sexts to a person I am in a romantic relationship with.
3	Sexting can be an empowering part of my sexuality.
4	Sexting can help me express myself sexually.
5	Sexting can help me in the construction of my sexual identity.
6	I find (or could find) sexting within a relationship pleasurable.
7	I find (or could find) sexting within a romantic relationship safe.
8	Sexting is (or can be) a normal part of my sexual development.
9	Sexting helps (or can help) me develop new romantic relationships.
10	Sexting helps (or can help) me maintain existing romantic relationships.
11	Sexting helps (or can help) build trust between myself and a romantic partner.

Table B2

Unabbreviated statements representing sexting as negative (a deviance discourse).

Nr.	Item text
1	If I engage in sexting I am more likely to abuse substances, such as alcohol.
2	If I engage in sexting I am more likely to be bullied by others.
3	If I engage in sexting I am more likely to bully others.
4	If I engage in sexting I am more likely to verbally, emotionally, or physically abuse a partner.
5	If I engage in sexting I am likely to have my sexts shared against my will.
6	If my sexts are shared against my will I will be more likely to have trouble completing my education.
7	If my sexts are shared against my will I will be more likely to have trouble finding employment one day.
8	Sexting is associated with declining morality in young people.

Appendix C

Frequency distributions of successful sexting by context

Frequency distributions of successful sexting by context.

	Never Count (%)		Rarely Count (%)		Occasionally Count (%)		Frequently Count (%)	
I have successfully initiated an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I am or was in a relationship with.	37	(34%)	9	(8%)	38	(35%)	24	(22%)
I have taken part in an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I am or was in a relationship with, where the other person initiated…	35	(32%)	19	(18%)	34	(31%)	20	(19%)
I have successfully initiated an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I know personally.	77	(71%)	9	(8%)	17	(16%)	5	(5%)
I have taken part in an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I know personally, where the other person initiated the exchange.	66	(61%)	22	(20%)	14	(13%)	6	(6%)
I have successfully initiated an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I know online only.	97	(90%)	2	(2%)	8	(7%)	1	(1%)
I have taken part in an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I know online only, where the other person initiated the exchange.	95	(88%)	4	(4%)	8	(7%)	1	(1%)

Note: All items start with, "In the past 12 months I…" but have been shortened here for layout purposes.

Appendix C

Frequency distributions of failed sexting by context

Frequency distributions of failed sexting by context.

	Never Count (%)		Rarely Count (%)		Occasionally Count (%)		Frequently Count (%)	
I have attempted to initiate an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I am or was in a relationship with, but they did not respond.	83	(77%)	14	(13%)	11	(10%)	0	(0%)
I have attempted to initiate an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I am or was in a relationship with, but they reacted negatively.	105	(97%)	3	(3%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
I have attempted to initiate an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I know personally but they did not respond.	98	(91%)	7	(6%)	3	(3%)	0	(0%)
I have attempted to initiate an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I know personally, but they reacted negatively.	103	(95%)	5	(5%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
I have attempted to initiate an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I know online only, but they did not respond.	99	(92%)	3	(3%)	5	(5%)	1	(1%)
have attempted to initiate an exchange of text, photo, or video-based sexts with somebody I know online only, but they reacted negatively.	101	(94%)	5	(5%)	1	(1%)	1	(1%)

Note: All items start with, "In the past 12 months I…" but have been shortened here for layout purposes.

Appendix D

Frequency distributions of positive sexting items

Frequency distributions of positive sexting items.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
	Count (%)	Count (%)	Count (%)	Count (%)
Likely to respond positively to sexts from a person I am in a romantic relationship with.	0 (0%)	6 (6%)	36 (33%)	66 (61%)
Likely to send sexts to a person I am in a romantic relationship with.	3 (3%)	13 (12%)	41 (38%)	51 (47%)
Sexting can be an empowering part of my sexuality.	3 (3%)	21 (19%)	51 (47%)	33 (31%)
Sexting can help me express myself sexually.	6 (6%)	11 (10%)	58 (54%)	33 (31%)
Sexting can help me in the construction of my sexual identity.	12 (11%)	29 (27%)	49 (46%)	17 (16%)
I find (or could find) sexting within a relationship pleasurable.	1 (1%)	11 (10%)	40 (37%)	56 (52%)
I find (or could find) sexting within a romantic relationship safe.	2 (2%)	10 (9%)	65 (60%)	31 (29%)
Sexting is (or can be) a normal part of my sexual development.	6 (6%)	9 (8%)	72 (67%)	21 (19%)
Sexting helps (or can help) me develop new romantic relationships.	22 (20%)	42 (39%)	40 (37%)	4 (4%)
Sexting helps (or can help) me maintain existing romantic relationships.	14 (13%)	21 (19%)	54 (50%)	19 (18%)
Sexting helps (or can help) build trust between myself and a romantic partner.	8 (7%)	17 (16%)	55 (51%)	28 (26%)

Appendix E

Frequency distributions of positive sexting items

Frequency distributions of positive sexting items.

	Strongly disagree Count (%)	Disagree Count (%)	Agree Count (%)	Strongly agree Count (%)
If I engage in sexting I am more likely to abuse substances, such as alcohol.	60 56%)	37 (35%)	9 (8%)	1 (1%)
If I engage in sexting I am more likely to be bullied by others.	43 (40%)	48 (45%)	14 (13%)	2 (2%)
If I engage in sexting I am more likely to bully others.	71 (66%)	32 (30%)	4 (4%)	0 (0%)
If I engage in sexting I am more likely to verbally, emotionally, or physically abuse a partner.	76 (71%)	24 (22%)	7 (7%)	0 (0%)
If I engage in sexting I am likely to have my sexts shared against my will.	13 (12%)	33 (31%)	54 (50%)	7 (7%)
If my sexts are shared against my will I will be more likely to have trouble completing my education.	22 (21%)	42 (39%)	30 (28%)	13 (12%)
If my sexts are shared against my will I will be more likely to have trouble finding employment one day.	16 (15%)	22 (21%)	54 (50%)	15 (14%)
Sexting is associated with declining morality in young people.	36 (34%)	42 (39%)	18 (17%)	11 (10%)

Appendix F

Ethics Review Committee Letter of Approval

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Department of Psychology

University of Cape Town Rondebosch 7701 South Africa
Telephone (021) 650 3417
Fax No. (021) 650 4104

11 July 2019

Diaan Mynhardt
Department of Psychology
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch 7701

Dear Diaan

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been given by an Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your study, *Healthy Sexting in Emerging Adulthood: A Cross-sectional Study of Student Attitudes at the University of Cape Town*. The reference number is PSY2019 -036

I wish you all the best for your study.

Yours sincerely

Maxine Spedding
Chair: Ethics Review Committee

University of Cape Town
ΨPSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT
Upper Campus
Rondebosch