

**“If a girl’s photo gets sent around, that’s a way bigger deal than if a guy’s photo gets sent around”: Gender, sexting, and the teenage years**

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Rosemary Ricciardelli, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Michael Adorjan, University of Calgary

**ABSTRACT**

Youth, particularly female teens, are encouraged to self-monitor and be responsible for their actions online in order to avoid harm from cyberbullying, ‘sexting,’ and other forms of cyber-risk. Highlighting findings from 35 focus groups with Canadian teens regarding sexting, we show the continued saliency of a gendered double standard applied to the online distribution of nudes. Our sample of male and female teens ( $n=115$ ) from urban and rural regions, aged 13-19, underscores the relatively lower ‘stakes’ involved with sexting for male teens. We explore this trend with specific reference to the salience of hegemonic masculinities and the gendered aspects of public and private spaces, both online and offline. Public exposure of nudes has potentially serious stigmatizing consequences for youth. We highlight teen experiences sending and receiving images of male penises (‘dick pics’), which is an under-researched aspect of sexting. We show the relative ubiquity of receiving ‘dick pics’ among female teens, exploring various reactions, and male motivations for doing so from male and female standpoints. Policy implications are discussed with specific reference to school-based cyber-safety programs, which our participants indicate remain highly gendered, neglecting epistemological questions around male experiences and responsibility.

**Key words:** Sexting; social media; masculinities; gendered double standard; youth; teenagers

## INTRODUCTION

The social landscape of youth includes a virtually endless online space where relationships, including friendships and romantic partnerships, are established, reinforced, as well as broken (boyd 2014). Digital spaces, however, are too often permeated by misogyny, patriarchy, and structured by dominant and often archaic or repressive gender norms (Bailey and Hanna 2011; Bailey et al. 2013; boyd 2014). Bailey and Steeves' (2015) interviews with female teens in Canada further illustrates how such spaces fail to challenge sexism and the oppression of women, as apparent in the age-old double standard through which the actions of males versus females online are interpreted. Online, for example, male behaviors are constructed as 'pranks' and normalized, while females' as 'dramatic' and 'slutty', particularly when the behavior takes the form of digital sexual expression known as 'sexting' (Marwick and boyd 2014; Ringrose et al. 2013).

Lee and Crofts (2015, 454) define sexting as "the digital production of sexually suggestive or explicit images and distribution by mobile phone messaging or through the internet on social network sites... extending it to the sending of sexually suggestive texts." Practices that fall within the broad category of sexting include words and prompting that range in sexual suggestiveness as well as the sharing of digital nude or semi-nude images referred to as 'nudes' or, if of male genitals, 'dick pics.' Sexting, in all its forms, is common among youth and adults. In the U.S., scholars studying the prevalence of sexting among youth suggest that anywhere between four to 40 percent of teens have sexted (Bailey and Hanna 2011; Lenhart 2009; Ringrose et al. 2013), with upwards of 30 percent of youth having sent a "nude" and 45 percent having received a "nude" (Englander 2012). While similar statistics are not as readily available in Canada (Canadian researchers frequently cite findings concentrated in the U.S.), a recent

survey of 800 16- to 20-year-old Canadian youth found 40% have sent a text, and 60% have received one (Bresge Feb 6, 2018). Other studies suggest Canadian teens engaging in sexting is “far from common behaviour” (Johnson 2015, 345). Johnson (2015, 345-346) reports that “of the 24 percent of students [he surveyed] in grades 7 to 11 with cellphone access who have received a sext directly from the sender, just 15 percent (or 4 percent of all students in grades 7 to 11 with cell phone access) have forwarded one to someone else.”

Defining youth in our study as teenagers between the ages of 13 and 19 years, we draw on focus group discussions to show that sexting and discourses around sexting are gendered, interlaced in gendered norms with patriarchal undertones, and are thus repressive for both male and female youth, albeit, arguably, to differing degrees. We also recognize that the sensations youth derive from sexting (e.g., anxiety, freedom) suggest sexting represents a form of gender experience with gendered risk of consequences that can be disempowering and oppressive for persons of any gender.

It must be noted that in most U.S. states and all of Canada, youth less than 18 years old can lawfully engage in consensual sex or sexual acts. Yet, despite a Supreme Court ‘personal use exemption’ permitting consensual distribution of sexts in certain contexts in Canada (Sealy-Harrington and Menuz 2015), it remains a criminal offense (e.g., child pornography) for youth to photograph their sexual acts and possess, share, or distribute said photographs. Hasinoff (2013, 450), speaking to legislation in the U.S., explains: “all parties involved in explicit teen sexting are potentially child pornography offenders, whether they are victims, perpetrators, or consensual participants”. Thus, it is in the content of digital sexual images that ‘innocent’ behaviors can become ‘criminal’ and feelings of vulnerabilities can become dominant despite the intentions and the conditions under which such photos were first created. Bailey and Hanna (2011, 441) advise

that “in their own long-term self-interest, it would probably be prudent for teens to avoid capturing and sharing with their partners widely distributable digital memorializations of their sexualized self-representations and sexual activities.”

In this paper, we explore the attitudes and perceptions of youth related to cyber-risks involved with digital sexual expression. Specifically, we examine how perceptions and experiences are shaped by wider gender expectations reinforcing differential consequences for female and male teens. In doing so, we add discussions of gender, particularly hegemonic and other forms of masculinities, to the existing debates within digital media fields (see below). While our findings reinforce existing qualitative research findings focused on both female teens views of cyber-risk and sexting (e.g., Bailey and Steeves 2015) and deconstructions of cyber-safety campaigns directed at largely white, heterosexual, and middle-class females (Karaian 2014), our sample also includes the voices of male teens. As such we seek to advance knowledge about the gendered positionality of sexting, especially in the area of distribution of ‘dick pics.’

### **Gender, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Risk**

Online spaces continue to embody the “age-old double standard where sexually active boys are admired and ‘rated,’ while sexually active girls are denigrated, shamed, and despised as ‘sluts’” (Ringrose et al. 2012, 12; see also Ringrose et al. 2013). The ‘double standard’ being that, traditionally the behaviors of men are governed by different ‘rules’ than those of women (Crawford and Popp 2003). Gendered norms, including established sociological archetypes, can be traced back to Freud’s (1912) conceptualization of the Madonna-whore dichotomy. Here a female’s desirability is strong when she is innocent and conservative (e.g., Madonna) yet dissipates—she loses her sexual appeal as a longtime partner—if she freely expresses herself sexually. Not surprisingly given this rhetoric, Feltrin (2013) in a review of Canadian policy on

“Respectful and Responsible Relations” online, found that cyberbullying often results in gendered sexualized violence, encourages derogatory and defamatory comments, and can be exploitative.

Avenues of gender exploration and presentation online include communication and displays of aggression. Females, it is argued, engage in relational aggression (e.g., gossiping about classmates, talking behind a friend’s back) because these are considered socially acceptable ways for ‘girls and women’ to express aggression rather than being physical aggressive (e.g., fighting, punching) as normalized and condoned among ‘boys and men’ (Connell 1995; Crick and Grotpeter 1995). Female aggression, moreover, is quickly labeled as ‘drama,’ a rather negative and entirely gendered interpretation that is increasingly common for female behavior on- and offline. Marwick and boyd (2014, 13-14) reveal the gendered underpinning of drama in explaining that “regardless of the actual participants in a dramatic situation, ‘drama’ in the abstract is conceptualized, dismissively, as a ‘girl thing’ [and] serves to underplay the seriousness of girls’ concerns.” Online, drama then is just one more way that conventional gender positions are interpreted and policed along heteronormative, patriarchal, and other rather archaic and oppressive gendered lines—creating a space for the reconstitution of masculinities as dominant.

Although hegemonic masculinity remains a debated concept (see Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Hall 2002; Messerschmidt 2012), using the term as conceptualized first by Connell (1995; see also Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985) and then by Connell with Messerschmidt (2005), reveals the oppressive nature of gender constructs within the hierarchical (and oppressive) structure of gender relations. Ricciardelli and colleagues (2015, 494) explain that: “according to this definition, hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to, and

occupies a position of superiority over, femininities and all other masculinities, legitimizing the hierarchical structure of gender relations by ensuring that subordinate masculinities are positioned at the bottom of the gender hierarchy.” Given this hierarchy, gender is navigated through strategic and successful self-presentations, necessitating the successful navigation of uncertainties, risk, and gender; all subjective concepts that are relational, dynamic, and interactive yet fluctuate across time and space with a person’s social positioning and context (Hannah-Moffat and O’Malley 2007). In this way, hegemonic masculinities remain salient in understanding our participants’ discussion of sexting.

Sexting can be understood as a risk-informed behavior that is evidenced in the production of gender. Scholars focused on gendered-risk, particularly concerning females, show that “gendered understandings of risk produce new responsibilities and patterns of action, as well as new strategies for the definition, control and neutralisation of risk” (Hannah-Moffat and O’Malley 2007, 2). Perhaps it is in this context, again reflecting the gendered double standard and seeming female oppressiveness in online spaces, that females online, not males, are thought to require greater surveillance and protection from sexual exploitation as they are positioned as “something innocent, pure and at risk of contamination through active desire” (Ringrose et al. 2013, 307; see also Egan 2013). Koskela’s (2006) research, for example, situates youth perceptions and practices regarding online risks within the broader sociohistorical context of neoliberal self-governance and surveillance. Moreover, Milford (2015, 64) argues “too often, popular discourses neoliberally and patriarchally responsabilize girls and young women to self-protect against potential online risk, or recommend that they be protected through legislative initiatives, accepting online risk and gendered constraints as inevitable... .” In these contexts,

risks and opportunities are tethered to each other online but also feature as significant for negotiation during adolescence in general (Livingstone 2008).

### **Gendered Risk across Private and Public Spaces**

Youthful self-exposure to online spaces through webcams and video blogs highlight the agentic and active ways youth are approaching risk through information and communications technologies which can be seen as ‘fun’ (Koskela 2006, 172). Despite the vie for agency and self-determination, particularly in teens’ pursuit of self-discovery and intimacy, the lens of gender helps to illuminate structured inequalities between the experiences of males and females. Understandings of gender, masculinities, and femininities both inform and are shaped by online spaces. For example, online masculinities can suggest notions of ‘traditional male socialization’ that exaggerate conventional masculine ideals (Connell 1995; Messerschmidt 2012) while devaluing feminized traits (e.g., empathy, emotional fragility). This creates gendered challenges such as what Bailey and Hanna (2011, 11) referred to as “certain gendered patterns” across extant literature on sexting. They found that more females are likely to send sexts and report feeling pressured by a male to send nude or semi-nude images in comparison to males (see also Englander 2012; Ringrose et al. 2012).

With or without such pressures, for some youth sexting takes on a seductive quality that is rooted in the potentialities of experience and thrill of sexual exploration and attraction (Koskela 2002). Traditional gender understandings, however, relegate explicit sexuality to the space of “masculinities” which further informs the ‘double standard’ and may have repercussions for youth online (see Ringrose et al. 2012). Nonetheless, sexting, between willing consenting individuals, can be thrilling due to the emotional sensations underlying sexual attraction, possible intimacy and sexual expression as well as the processes of learning how to express sexual

interest (Hasinoff 2013; Koskela 2002). The element of chance in sexting and the risk tied to not knowing how a sext will be received (i.e., if it will be kept, disclosed, or how the recipient will respond) are inevitable yet always part of navigating private and public spaces online.

Youth are undeniably aware of the public versus private aspect of being online and the ability for the private to transcend into the public (boyd 2008; Lenhart 2009). In her study of 617 college freshmen from a state university in Massachusetts, Englander (2012) showed that 13 percent of those who sexted reported problems because their photo was shown to their school peers. Moreover, despite youth being repeatedly taught that what happens with digital images once sent is outside of their control, nearly 75 percent of her participants who sexted believed their photograph was never seen by anyone other than the intended recipient. Youth then navigate sexual exploration as they choose to share ‘risky’ images with a specific recipient despite the potentiality for the private to become public no matter the degree of trust and interest in relationship seeking and intimacy building eschewed in such actions. As such we turn to explore how gendered expectations and the gendered double standard online shape experiences of sexting, especially in relation to gendered assumptions within public virtual (i.e., online) and physical (e.g., school) spaces, as well as the degree of deterrence versus enticement that youth report toward sexting.

## **METHOD**

Researchers have started to study cyberbullying and related areas of cyber-risk through qualitative approaches such as interviewing youth or engaging in ‘cyber’ ethnographies or ‘netnographies’ (e.g., Livingstone 2008). Recent interview-based research by Valerie Steeves, Jane Bailey and their colleagues focused exclusively on female teens to address important knowledge gaps regarding the lived experiences of Canadian teens online and the interrelated



offline impacts (Bailey et al. 2013; Bailey and Steeves 2013, 2015). Sharing the goal of capturing perceptions and experiences related to sexting, and supporting Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2009), our intention is to use a qualitative design to capture interpretive details and nuances which we mine for depth and meaning, and that can complement the breadth of current survey-based research. Researchers increasingly draw on systematic focus group designs to examine cyber-risk issues, like cyberbullying and sexting (e.g., Lenhart 2009; Ringrose et al. 2012; Vandebosch and Van Cleemput 2008), because such group conversation among peers can produce discussion, illuminating social contexts and personal interpretations which are largely left out of survey-based methods.

We employed a purposive, snowball sampling design whereby initial contacts in various sectors such as schools and universities helped provide references to additional participants. In total, we conducted 35 focus groups with 115 participants aged 13-19 (average age of 15), with an average number of 3.3 participants per group (a minimum of two and maximum of five). Although we aimed for groups with no less than four participants, sometimes not all participants scheduled were able to attend. Each discussion averaged approximately 60 minutes in length. Participants were referred through participating schools in both Western and Eastern Canada, specifically urban Western and rural Atlantic regions. Throughout the paper we refer to the Western, urban locations as Cyber City, and the rural, Atlantic locations as Cyberville (the collapse of multiple locations into these two pseudo-regions ensure the anonymity of participants while facilitating thematic comparisons of the data). Fifteen groups were conducted in Cyber City; the remaining 20 groups in Cyberville. A total of 67 females and 48 males participated.

Participants in every focus group discussed sexting. Regarding sexting experiences and perceptions, gender and age were the primary drivers of difference. The participants were able,

and often did, have their phones present during the phone groups but participants neither discussed nor were asked about their social media handles. There were no discernible differences between rural and urban focus group participants thus location is not a focus in the current paper. Most groups were held with youth of the same gender and age/grade levels; a sampling stratification strategy designed to help ensure participants interacted with others that they would not perceive as threatening and with whom their experience may also resonate (Morgan 1997).

To help participants feel secure in the confidentiality of what is discussed and to facilitate honest disclosures, we did not ask our participants about their sex, if they were cisgender, or how they sexually identified. By not asking questions about sex and sexual identification, we let participants discuss topics like sexting in their own words, raising issues such as homophobia and transphobia where and when relevant to them. We saw no evidence of groups answering questions on such topics differently based on whether the facilitator asking the question was a male or female. Throughout the manuscript, when referring to the gender of each participant, we use the pronouns in which each participant is referred to within their focus group by their peers or how they self-present.

In our examination, we include both males and females because of the importance tied to considering how significant a role gender (i.e., norms governing expectations related to how males and females are ‘supposed’ to behave) plays (Connell 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987). Following the approach of Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008), our discussions began on general, open ground. We asked participants about everyday experiences with technology. Responses were followed up with questions about any concern that was raised by a participant during the introductory conversation—usually concerns were privacy or sexting related. We audio-recorded each focus group to preserve the accuracy of dialogue and enable us to give the

participants our full attention during discussions. Recordings were transcribed for analysis. In the current paper, the idiosyncrasies of speech have been removed.

We analyzed the data using an inductive, comparative approach (Berg 2004) where concepts and theories emerged naturally through the dynamic interaction of participants. NVivo qualitative analysis software, specifically the parent and child node functions, was used to conduct analyses of the data. The initial stages of “widely open inquiry” involved ‘open coding’ of the data (Berg 2004, 278). To this end, initially, all mentions of a particular topic/theme within a session were noted, allowing for comparison across sessions (Morgan 1997). Coding schemes were developed through first-level coding (i.e., parent nodes), involving close readings of the data. Using NVivo, prominent themes emerged through the tracking of coding ‘nodes’ (i.e., emergent themes), both across and within groups.

## **RESULTS**

Our results are structured such that we first unpack the scope of the aforementioned double standard associated among the youth in our sample, taking note of how in expressing sexuality the consequences are direr for females who too often become labeled and stigmatized as promiscuous while boys are emboldened and rewarded as ‘studs’ (see: Bailey and Hannah 2011; Crawford and Popp 2003; Handyside and Ringrose 2017). After we unpack such positioning within the context of youth experiences with sexting and online, we present the eroding borders between public and private communications online; explicitly how communications can transcend from the private to the public sphere with widespread impacts online and offline. In this context we present the risk youth experience when private sexual expression is publicly consumed; recognizing that not all sexual expression is welcome at both private and public levels. Next, we turn to the role of gender in male expressions of sexuality and

the causes and consequences, intended or latent, of engaging in sexting on an online form. Specifically, we focus on how the persistence of the gender double standard has created an online youth social culture where sending ‘dick picks’ is normalized and commonplace. We conclude by exploring the gendered messages around being safe online, always including voices, and thus experiences and interpretations, of female and male youth, and specifically the gendered experiences of males within the context of their experiences of hegemonic masculinities.

### **Sexting and the Salient Double Standard**

Whether or not youth today choose to engage in sexting, gender expectations underpin the norms, such as the aforementioned double standard where girls are labeled promiscuous and boys rewarded as ‘studs’, governing perspectives, actions, and interpretations in digital spaces (Bailey and Hanna 2011; Crawford and Popp 2003; Ringrose et al. 2013). From a coed group of four teens from Cyber City, ages 17 and 18, Victoria explains that for female youth, the consequences of sending nudes are concerning:

I think it’s more of a reputation type thing, I mean breasts themselves aren’t going to affect anything but it’s more of the reputation that they receive from like, ‘oh my tits are all over Snapchat, what do I do now.’

From the same group Frederick, a male age 18, further clarifies:

If a girl is known for sending out nude pictures, then people are going to think that she’s a slut or something like that, but if a guy sends it out...if he’s randomly sending it to somebody then people might think he’s weird, but if say a girl asks the guy for it and he sends it to her, then maybe his buddies are like ‘nice man’...

These excerpts reveal the double standard and the slandering sexting can have on female youth.

The negative stigma attached to being called a ‘slut’ greatly overshadows the neutral designation

‘weird.’ Our findings here are consistent with those of a PEW Internet survey (Lenhart 2009), which also reveals that images of girls can result in the person depicted being judged and negatively labeled (see also Ringrose et al. 2012).

In contrast to females who send nudes (often breasts), the response to males sending ‘dick pics’ often projects the axiom ‘boys will be boys;’ again exemplifying that the gender double standard persists as it appear rather normalized and commonplace for males to send ‘dick pics.’ For example, three 13-year-old females from Cyberville, describe receiving random ‘dick pics’ from males:

Valerie: I feel guys just persuade the girls

Kimberly: girls they won’t even ask for any pictures to guys or anything and [boys]’ll just send you a picture one day

Interviewer: do you guys ever get pictures?

Julia: I got one once

Kimberly: once

Valerie: me too...

In a group of girls from Cyber City, Carmen (age 19) laughing reported that “I can honestly say, if you get a dick pic from some random person, zero out of 10 times, is that girl saying ‘oh shit, I’m going to go have sex with that guy.’” The frequency and flippant ways in which the youth discussed receiving such images clearly suggested that instead of chastising males for sending ‘dic pics’; it appeared to simply something some male youth did.

A group of five males, ages 15 and 17 from Cyber City, were asked their views about female peers’ experiences with sexting. Asked if sexting is “a regular thing girls your age are dealing with?” Shaun replies “some, it kind of depends on your reputation.” Gordan agrees

“yeah”; Bodie adds “if you’re going to send an image back, then probably.” The gendered discourses here are striking. Our female groups describe male teens sending digital nudes as ‘random’ occurrences, normalized, and common place. However, both male and female teens speak about the reputation of females, as determining if they receive nudes randomly or due to presumed promiscuity. Moreover, it must be recognized that there is nothing agentic or stoic about sending such images, thus such acts cannot be thought suggestive of hegemonic or traditional masculinities (Carrigan et al. 1985; Connell 1995); although they do fall in line with notions of laddist masculinities (e.g., boyish variations of masculinities that favor types of risk-taking, pranks, violence, the sexual objectification of women, and sport; see Nichols 2018; Ricciardelli, Clow, and White 2010).

Reflecting the gender double standard and seeming female oppressiveness, males who send ‘dick pics’ are viewed as simply ‘boys being boys’—in essence “lads”—dealing with the hormonal changes of adolescence that normalizes their sexual exploration (Weiss 2009). Females, however, receive no such absolution. They are framed in wider societal responses to cyber-risk as requiring surveillance and protection (Egan 2013; Ringrose et al. 2013). This discourse is also prevalent among our participants, such as one exchange between four females from Cyber City, ages 18 and 19:

Fiona: I’ve heard the phrase a lot that ‘guys will [be] guys,’ so if a guy sends a dick pic, ‘boys will be boys,’ but if a girl sends a nude, like everyone will ...

Serena: she’s slut shamed

Fiona: yeah she’s slut shamed, everyone is like how can you put your body out like that...

Beyond the established gendered sexual double standard retaining saliency online for teens today, neoliberal notions of self-regulation and responsabilization also operate with greater intensity for females than males.

### **Coercion in Gendered Spaces: Public versus Private?**

Although youth know that any texted or online communication intended as private has the potential to become public, this knowledge does not always impact their actions. Sexting is a form of risk taking with undefined but undeniable ‘riskiness.’ For example, even among individuals in committed and trusting relationships, the temporality of relationships makes sexting risky due to potentially harmful consequences. Serena, aged 19 from Cyber City, articulates a dimension of this risk:

Personally what I’ve experienced, is with ex-boyfriends, it’s usually them asking you, begging you to send pictures of yourself, it’s never a voluntary, I’ve said ‘no’ because of what I know now that they’re my ex-boyfriends and I hate them, they could do anything... if it [end]’s on a bad note, something terrible can happen and I’ve had that... this guy [who] apparently loved me yesterday is saying these things today and had I sent him a bunch of things, I’d be scared to death that he was going to do something...

Serena’s words reflect the coercive and exploitative aspects of pressure on females to send nudes, even within ‘consensual’ relationships. The threat is emboldened by the gendered understanding that public exposure has potentially serious stigmatizing consequences for females.

The threat of the potential for such images to be circulated extends beyond what is searchable online, as suggested by Ava, age 15 from Cyber City: “just because you Google your name and naked pictures don’t show up, doesn’t mean that there’s not stuff going around;

anyone could have it.” This problem is rendered further complex when threats are made to ‘Photoshop’ faces onto nude bodies and post these publicly if a female does not ‘heed’ the directive to send nude images of herself. The sharing of images intended to be private is difficult to manage for all youth, but the pressure on females to regulate their online activities is often higher.

Our female participants repeatedly referred to responsibility lying with themselves to regulate their sexual expressions online. In response, some purport a form of what we refer to as ‘cyber-abstinence,’ perhaps reflecting the influence of school-based messages. For example, in response to questions about how to handle the risks involved with sexting and using apps such as Snapchat, female participants responded “don’t send nudes” (Patricia, 15, Cyberville), while others suggest “keep[ing] to yourself more...” and to remember “you can’t trust people” (Mary, 16, Cyberville). The discourse these youth engage in resonates with broader societal messages directed at female teens to abstain from sexting or, more generally, posting anything that could brand them a ‘slut’ or deviant (Hasinoff 2013; Karaian 2014). Thus, there is much pressure on teens to monitor online presentations of self, with particularly grave consequences for female youth who ‘overshared’. We see this in the example of the potential for non-consensual dissemination of one’s nude images online. The discourses here evidence the ‘Madonna-whore’ type of dichotomy (see Freud 1912), where the female youth’s innocence and thus desirability dissolves once the nude image is distributed (i.e., now a whore).

What exactly determines who is humiliated by being the subject of a nude digital image, despite their gender or if they are the sender or receiver, is difficult to determine. Unarguably however, a lack of control over the influence and impact of engaging with social media online is perhaps the overarching theme that runs across all of our focus group discussions. Thirty of our



groups made 131 references to not feeling in control of content they post and how it is responded to and taken up. Of these references, 87 were made in all female groups with only 17 made in all male groups—the remaining 27 came from coed groups. However, the manner in which online spaces help to engender a collapse of social contexts (boyd 2008) by obfuscating the boundaries of public and private is especially underscored for female teens for whom public spaces are still largely hostile.

### **Debating ‘Dick Pics’: Gendered Conceptions and Consequences**

Gender norms acutely permeated discussions about males distributing ‘dick pics’ to other female youth, including partners but also others networked socially online. The responses among female participants to questions about male motivations for sending ‘dick pics’ is striking. For example, 17-year-old female youth from Cyberville explained:

Interviewer: do you think it’s the same though for boys and girls, cuz you said boys send the pictures and they don’t care, but girls obviously send them too (Rebecca and Carolyn reply affirmatively). But do you think it’s a different context, like they think something different is going to come of it?

Tamara: I think when a girl sends a picture, she’ll like, ‘oh I like this dude, I think he likes me back, I’m going to send him a picture of my boobs, hopefully he’ll like me more,’ but a dude is like, ‘oh I like my penis, I’m going to send it to this girl, hopefully she’ll like it too, and hop on it’

Rebecca: and send it to 20 girls at once and hope they don’t notice

This excerpt shows a variety of the gendered components that underpin the sharing of digital images, including how some female teens report getting frequently asked to send nudes in return for an unsolicited nude they received or friends that had all received the same ‘dick pic’ from a

male youth hopeful that someone would respond with a nude in-kind. The notion that a seemingly intimate message is sent to multiple people at once in an effort to increase their odds of a reply hampers the sentiment that nude digital images represent a precursor for increased attraction and intimacy in relationships. Here too males are represented from our female groups as rather unconcerned about the public dissemination of their nudes. In contrast, such public dissemination has potentially serious psychosocial consequences for females.

The sending and receiving of ‘dick pics’ appears normalized and is not thought damaging to a male youth’s reputation, scandalous, nor indicative of moral inaptitude. Instead, male photographs of their ‘junk’ are readily laughed at by some of our female teens, once received, because they are indifferent to the imagery. Janiya reflects:

We had a carpool crew, and there was me and my five best friends throughout all of high school. We joked that we were, cuz *it was just a frequent thing*, where at the end of grade 12, as a grad gift, I’m making a scrapbook and the cover’s gonna be a collage of all the dick pics we got in the last three years, and we did it, this beautiful, bound collaged dick pic collection. So it becomes a funny thing, *I found no one takes it seriously*. When people do that, no one’s like, ‘oh look at you,’ it’s more like you show your friends and you laugh about it, which is kind of terrible (added emphases).

In a different group, 19-year-old Carmen from Cyber City also explains that a lot of her female friends “have got dick pics and stuff, and every single time they do, they gather together as a group as girls and they laugh at that shit...” The idea of creating a scrapbook of ‘dick pics’ evidences just how normalized and commonplace the sexting of such images has become for many female teens—a fact resonating with the predominant patriarchal undertones in online and offline society.

Few of our female participants openly admitted to sending nudes but nearly all females discussed receiving ‘dick pics’ (or knowing friends who have received them)—often unwanted—and other sexually suggestive messages. In Cyberville, a group of three females, age 17 from Cyberville, responded causally when asked if they received “dick pics and all that kind of stuff too?”

Lina: *unwanted ones*, random ones

Ally: I get them all the time...

Zoey: you don’t even want it

Ally: I don’t like it... not even a hello, just a picture

Lina: just send it, you’ll open it and it’ll be oh, ‘we’re eating supper with my mom or something’

Ally: they don’t care where you are

Zoey: it doesn’t make sense, *it’s way more boys than girls sending nudes* (added emphases)

The encroachment into public space (here a family meal) is evident as well, emboldening the argument that public spaces are safer for males. This exchange also raises the important question of whether females are experiencing unacknowledged trauma, to one degree or another, when they dismiss receiving images of male penises with shared laughter. Making a scrapbook of unsolicited ‘dick pics’ is perhaps a form of resistance, but this does not temper the wider onslaught that occurs whereby each unsolicited nude received is a chargeable offence and arguably an assault in the literal sense.

Many male teens may engage in such activity since they may fear no long term consequences. This is reinforced when groups are asked whether or not males are taking any of

this seriously. In response to this question, Janiya recalls “I’ve had guys that are like, ‘what do you mean you showed your friends?’ I’m like ‘well you sent it to me, it’s public property, once it’s online you can’t control it anymore.’” Anna, age 19 in the same group as Janiya, agrees, elaborating:

I always think, if I didn’t ask for it, anyone’s allowed to see it. If I was struck one evening, like man ‘that’s what I want right now,’ then I’m not going to show it to anyone, but if it’s afternoon on the Thursday and someone sends me that, I’m going to show it to everyone, we’re going to laugh about it.

These female teens’ response to the idea of a male not appreciating the sharing of his digital image, dismissing male -authority over control of public space, seems to be direct resistance to the gendering of public space we have thus far highlighted. It suggests that when a male youth chooses to send a nude self-image that is not solicited, it is ‘fair game’ to share the image without concern. This resistance may also be characterized as shallow, unlikely to change the wider discursive dynamics around public spaces and responsabilization but they reveal a stance forged in opposition to wider contexts experienced as obdurate and a new interpretation of the “double standard.”

Such a response however is, in essence, insensitive, and reduces male youth to be unable to share their emotional responses to these experiences. Thus, not only is how female youth reacted to receiving ‘dick pics’ thought problematic—a form of victim blaming where a female is held responsible for her own violated reaction to receiving an unsolicited image—but the fact that males too can be affected by pressures to sext is discounted. Because emotional responses are culturally read as emasculating, male youth may feel unable to express reactions that are not consistent with gendered norms. Victoria, age 17 from Cyber City explained that with “guys

there's also a humiliation factor [when he sends a picture of his penis] ...” Experiencing shame or disinterest in sexting leaves a male youth potentially vulnerable in their identity negotiation as they are thought to stray from gender norms. In consequence, a seeming necessity to pressure female youth to sext is artificially heightened or even endorsed because of this traditional barrier to forthright sexual expression that informs gendered processes of socialization. Researchers in the area have yet to unpack how male teens actually feel about the sending and sharing of such images. Without knowledge of males’ standpoints, it may be assumed that they are indifferent to and collude with wider hegemonically reinforced behaviors.

Assuming all males are uniformly indifferent furthers traditional, largely stereotypical, understandings of males as emotionally indifferent and aggressively sexualized individuals (Connell 1995). Our research provides a glimpse of male perspectives through responses to particular questions asked during focus group discussions, though our findings here remain necessarily tentative. Still, some males in our sample did express some regret over sending ‘dick pics.’ Ironically, their statements evidenced the relatively lighter penalty attached for such transgression. Admitting to having sent ‘dick pics’ to females in the past, Frederick offers:

I know personally me, some of my friends have bugged me about it, for doing that, cuz they found out about it, and they started bugging me about it, cuz they think it's weird for guys to do it, but not for girls to do it, right so, I think there's that part to it.

Although Frederick reports that his friends ‘bugged’ him about sending the photograph, unlike females, he did not confess to feeling shamed or having his reputation deeply affected because of his actions; nor did he report concern about the image being shared widely. Frederick’s use of the less overtly gendered descriptor ‘weird’ may seem an odd word choice to refer to the male distribution of ‘dick pics’ as it suggests the male is straying from gendered norms. The adjective

recalls the gender double standard, where females who sext must endure much harsher adjectives describing their actions and their identities. Overall, his experiences are more focused on being teased than wider caustic and degrading consequences. Our discussions with females corroborated the idea that males find it easier to ‘brush off’ shame related to sending ‘dick pics.’ Rebecca discloses:

I feel when you’re one of the guys it’s easier to brush stuff off. That’s not saying guys don’t put up a front and they actually take it to heart, cuz they probably do, but girls I find take it a lot; they’ll actually cry about it, guys probably just be upset obviously, but brush it in front of other people.

The overwhelming pressure on female teens, the regularity of being assaulted with unsolicited ‘dick pics,’ and the dismissal of their right to consensual digital sexual expression is obviated from our focus group discussions. What is also apparent is that male teens seem to be completely unaware (the more reflective comments came from older teens on the cusp of young adulthood) of how females are experiencing receiving unwanted images. Combined with the reported threats of ‘revenge porn,’ the contexts of impunity within which males engage seem self-evident.

### **Gendered “Safety” Messages**

When asked questions about sexting, cyber-safety, and the types of messages they have received, participants discussed experiences related to their schools. Discussions here reveal that messages about cyber-risk and safety, including sexting, are largely concentrated in middle school and junior high school. Programs delivered, however, both in Cyberville and Cyber City were described as reactive (e.g., in response to an incident) rather than proactive (e.g. attempting to prevent an incident) efforts, and gender biased. For example, a group of three 17-year-old female students from Cyberville recalled a “big sexting” presentation related to an incident with

male students sending “nudes to each other” (Lina) that occurred the previous year. In response, Zoey recalls that the school issued talks involving the separation of male and female students. By high school, the group reports, relatively serious incidents online may ‘trigger’ mandatory talks but these are perceived to be largely *ad hoc* reactive responses and directed at females. “It’s not very balanced,” concludes Ally. Another group of female students, aged 15 and 17 from the same high school, raised the same issue. Naya: “it’s like someone takes a [nude] picture and sends it and that goes around the school and then two days later there’s a presentation.” Patricia adds: “Like *every girl gets a talking to*, and then it’s just a presentation for the whole school” (emphasis added). Our participants, like Karaian’s (2014), provide evidence for a gendered underpinning to online risk, as females and not males are “talked to” about being responsible online.

Reflecting on received messages about online safety, Cyber City teens also consider the cyber-safety programming offered in their schools to be frequently gender biased; in essence perpetuating patriarchal and oppressive gender discourses and dichotomies. For instance, from a group of five females who have attended school together for a number of years, Judy (aged 15) recalls, “one time in junior high school, they split up girls and guys and they gave separate conversations.” Janelle (aged 16) jumps in, adding “*the girls’ conversations were a lot longer than the boys’*. The girls’ was maybe two and a half periods and the boys was one period long” (added emphasis). Underpinning the patriarchal assumption that female youth require more “talking to” than male, Janelle’s words also indicate the emphasis placed on female responsabilisation, which is problematic for two central reasons: it (i) forces females to be embedded in discourses that promote powerlessness and suggests that female youth lack agency (and decision making capacities) due to their innate ‘innocence,’ and (ii), trivializes male

experiences thus forcing males to suffer in silence or risk violating the norms of socialized masculinities. To this end, another example comes from Yasmin, an 18-year-old undergraduate student from Cyber City. Reflecting on cyber-safety talks in junior high school, she recalls “it was just generally presented to the class, but you could tell it was directed more to the female students.” This applied especially regarding messages about sexting:

Well in my experience, whenever you hear ‘don’t take nudes,’ it would also be the example of the girl sending the nude to the guy and he was sharing it with his friends, it was never talked about with girls getting dick pics.

The gendered ways in which sexting is approached is notable in the prior excerpts, especially in terms of how incidences of sexting are handled in high schools.

Our participants reveal the importance of not partitioning messages by gender, but also addressed an issue: the ethics, impact, and potential criminal charges that may apply for males distributing ‘dick pics’ to female students. Yasmin elaborates: “when I was in junior high we never, it was never talked about with girls receiving nudes, it was always the other way around.” The youth in our sample referred to cases of school-based sexting incidents and school administration’s very gendered responses to sexting scandals. Ironically, based on our discussions, the sending of male nudes is both common place and normalized yet ignored in programming and talks. Such talks have the potential to have a greater impact if these gendered dynamics are given greater consideration, particularly male practices of sending and receiving nudes.

## **DISCUSSION**

boyd (2014) argues that teens are not so much addicted to social media as they are to each other and, given their highly scheduled lives, seek out opportunities to connect with peers without



being subject to adult surveillance. Englander (2012, 5) quite fittingly suggests that youth engage in sexting because “they often seem to be thinking about is their relationships,” and, we concur that not participating in sexting may leave a teen feeling left out, disengaged from peers, or vulnerable in a relationship which creates pressures to sext. Our findings indicate that sexting is even more common than the four to 40 percent purported in the U.S. (Bailey and Hanna 2011; Lenhart 2009; Ringrose et al. 2013).

Overall, we found that rather than empowering female youth through self-expression, gender inequities underpin the gender double standard that permeates online sexual expression. Likewise, online sexual expression appears infused in shaming and reputation slandering (see also Milford 2015); particularly as directed toward female youth. Consistent with our findings, researchers who have conducted focus groups on teen interpretations document that discussions of sexting reveal a range of responses from those who consider it promiscuous or too risky to ‘no big deal’ (e.g., Lenhart 2009). Suggestively, our participants’ remarks reinforce long term sexual and gender norms and disincentivize any sexual expression among girls and young women. The heteronormative understandings of sexuality appear to prevail as does the traditional understanding of masculinities and gender that reinforce the patriarchal context in which gender remains to be constructed during youth socialization (see Connell, 2005). In this context, we also advance existing studies of female teenagers’ experiences of sexting by including the voices of young males—whose voices are sometimes neglected in such inquiries—as we explored their own responses to sexting, its gendered nature, and their own ostensible culpability in perpetuating the victimization of their female peers. While there is some evidence of older male teens offering reflections and a degree of empathy regarding the negative impact of sending

unsolicited sexts to females, it is telling that we find no evidence of serious cogitation among our male participants regarding the long-lasting and caustic impact upon females in their peer group.

From our focus group discussions, it is clear that sexting is normalized, particularly ‘dick pics’ sent non-consensually to female teens, and that female teens face much greater pressure to regulate their public spheres than males based on starker consequences; a gendered double standard rooted in patriarchy and potential serious stigmatization. It is significant to note that the more extreme outcomes of criminal acts such as ‘revenge porn’ have resulted in teen suicidal ideation and death by suicide (e.g., Gillis Apr 10, 2013; Grenoble Nov 10, 2002). Although few circumstances become this grave, everyday online activities are overshadowed with misogyny and sexualized pressures. That some female participants ‘laugh at’ the sexts they receive from males is, we argue, a form of resistance against this structured and iniquitous context. Yet this resistance remains ‘shallow’; it indicates individualized responses which bear little impact on the wider ‘rape culture’ still apparent in society and online (Rentschler 2014). Moreover it suggests that there is something abnormal about any male who is negatively affected by such responses. Recognizing Pedersen’s (2013, 404) argument that if the focus is on the safety of females online, the underlying message is that the behaviors of males online do “not need safeguards”. We too find that despite this message, and consistent with Pedersen’s findings, “boys are at least as at risk of cyberbullying than girls” (2013, 416).

A number of participants pointed to a lack of support in their school environment where they often grapple most with such issues. Strides toward gendered safety online, we argue, must include messages about sexting that are directed just as wholly to males as females within schools in order to reinforce that males too can feel shamed or harmed by the realities of sending and receiving of nude digital images. Discourses that emerged organically during focus group

discussions placed responsibility to not sext almost exclusively on the female youth. The underlying naïve trust among youth may explain why some sext in the first place, albeit giving in to pressures from soliciting peers or romantic interests or for other personal reasons (e.g., relationship building). Of course, female youth are thought to require ‘protection’ and ‘surveillance’, but not from receiving dick pics from a male friend, acquaintance, peer, or romantic partner, which is normalized, but instead from their potential to share personal ‘nudes.’

There are of course limitations to our study. First, given the wide age range of our participants (13-19 years), the drastic developmental changes that occur during that time frame must be acknowledged. However, we also realize that such an age range is required in order to see changes in youth engagement in sexting as they gather experiences in dating and sexual interactions. Second, given the relative homogeneity of our sample, there is a limited ability to unpack the intersectionality between gender and ethnicity, the role of sexual orientation on youth engagement, and the perceptions of sexting and the consequences of doing so.

Future research that examines the reasons youth feel pressured to sext is warranted to inform policy, gendered safety online, and programming development. Specifically, research on how sexting can be both normalized, particularly dick pics, and simultaneously taboo (e.g., where male and female youth feel pressured to engage in such exchanges yet uncomfortable doing so) is necessary. In particular, we would ask what motivates males to send ‘dick pics’ versus females to send ‘nudes.’ Are there different motivations when sending to a partner in a ‘consensual’ relationship versus a wider array of random recipients? What emotions are experienced after sending such images, especially after the responses they receive? Are there (gendered) pressures from other peers acting to help perpetuate such behaviors and are their behaviors different in light of the age of the youth and the associated development differences?

Given the goals of our research related to discovering gendered attitudes, perceptions and experiences related to cyber-risk, we did not include other ‘stakeholders’ in our sample. That said, future researchers should also explore the perspectives of parents and educators (i.e., teachers, counselors, school principals, and other administrators) to mine in further details of their experiences and responses to findings of research on gendered interpretations of sexting and associated risk. All of these are areas of particular importance given that, undeniably, the online world and how messages of safety and citizenship are being taught to youth online have yet to be influenced, evidently, from the feminist movements of the 1970s and beyond.

Overall among youth, with or without pressures to sext, the moral and legal repercussions that follow such behaviors and the fact that male engagement in digital sexual expression tends to be normalized and ‘acceptable’ cannot be denied. Neoliberal responses to sexting are insufficient as they present solutions based on individual responses to atomistic circumstances instead of a broader sociological topography of digital sexual expression that includes considerations of its enticements and gendered consequences. Our research begins to highlight the voices of both male and female teens in hopes that their lived experiences can inform policy development. We confirm that gendered expectations and a double standard shape experiences of sexting especially in relation to gendered assumptions within public spaces and the relatively little deterrence given the ‘low stakes’ for male youth who send non-consensual sexual content to female youth.

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