How Young Canadian Women Make Sense of their Experiences of Sexting

by

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ABSTRACT

HOW YOUNG CANADIAN WOMEN MAKE SENSE OF THEIR EXPERIENCES OF SEXTING

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Sexting, which refers to the exchange of erotic content via mobile or internet device, is an increasingly common activity among emerging adults (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; PEW Research Centre, 2010; Samimi & Alderson, 2014). Much of the current research on sexting focuses on the associations between sexting and risk or harm, specifically for women (e.g. Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Dir, Cyders, & Coskunpinar, 2013; Perkins, Becker, Tehee, & Mackelprang, 2014). However, emerging research suggests sexting can also have benefits for young women, including experiences of pleasure and opportunities for self-exploration (Bond, 2011; Ringrose, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). The purpose of this research was to investigate how young Canadian women describe their experiences with sexting. Specifically the study answered the following research questions: (1) How/in what ways do young Canadian women use sexting? (2) What role does sexting play in young Canadian women’s lives, sexualities, and relationships? (3) How does sexting impact young Canadian women? (4) What do young Canadian women need to support safe and enjoyable sexting? Thirty women between the ages of 18-25 were recruited online from Southern Ontario colleges and universities and were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis
suggested 7 key themes (in no specific order). Sexting supports: (1) Empowerment: from pleasing others to speaking up more and attending to their own sexual needs; (2) Pleasure: from the expansion of sexual possibilities; (3) Safety and Comfort: sexting was described as safer and more comfortable than in-person communications, but led to increased fears about privacy; (4) Self-Discovery: by aiding in the exploration of sexual tastes and orientation; (5) Optimal Self-Representation: helping women “craft” ideal representations of themselves; and (6) Intimacy and Connection: helping to increase trust, improve communication, and maintain relationships. The women also described the impact of, and how they navigated or resisted, gendered sexual expectations ((7) Sexual Scripts). The study contributes to the literature by helping contextualise young women’s experiences of sexting and illuminating how young women could be better supported in their sexting behaviours. The results of this study can be used inform policy, curriculum and advocacy initiatives.

Key Words: Sexting, Young Women, Sexualization, Empowerment, Risk
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foundation of my degree – and thus I owe future success to them – but they were also personally transformative. It was truly the most enjoyable and meaningful part of my entire degree. Thank you.

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How Young Canadian Women Make Sense of their Experiences of Sexting

The purpose of this research was to investigate young Canadian women’s perceptions of their experiences of sexting. Specifically, the aim of this research was to explore the ways young women perceive their experience of sexting and make meaning of the various contexts and factors that may influence their experiences. The use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with young Canadian undergraduate women provides data on young women’s own perspectives of sexting interactions. Themes generated through the analysis of these interviews help contribute to an understanding of sexting beyond prevalence and correlates and expand our knowledge on sexting to include a more encompassing and holistic perspective of sexuality for females in a digital age.

The research fills three important gaps in the research literature. First, there is a paucity of young women’s accounts included in research on sexting. Secondly, most research on sexting and female sexuality more broadly is focused on risks, oppressive acts, and exploitation (e.g. Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Dir, Cyders, & Coskunpinar, 2013; Perkins, Becker, Tehee, & Mackelprang, 2014). What is missed is an understanding of possible experiences of agency, pleasure, desire, autonomy and empowerment (Bond, 2011; Karian, 2012; Renold & Ringrose, 2013). This research creates space for a more comprehensive viewpoint by exploring various aspects and functions sexting may play in women’s lives.

Finally, perspectives on sexting, and the subsequent implications for young women in terms of wellbeing, has been shown to vary cross-culturally (Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, Valkenburg, & Livingstone, 2014). Currently, knowledge of sexting practices in a Canadian context is scarce. Canada’s anti-cyberbullying law (Bill C-13)
makes it illegal for any explicit imagery to be shared without consent, and for minors to possess any explicit imagery even if exchanged consensually. For those under 18, it is also illegal to take a sexual picture of one’s self and keep it on their personal cell phone, even without intentions to distribute it (Ontario Women’s Justice Network, 2016). To date, girls as young as 13 have been charged with child pornography for sharing photos of themselves with others or with their friends. As a result of the punishments (which included registering as a sex offender, jail time, probation, being barred from the internet without supervision) these girls have suffered severe psychological and social consequences from failing out of school due to stress, shame, or being harassed and bullied (Department of Justice, 2015; Vice Canada, 2015). This law has come under scrutiny and the Supreme Court of Canada has included exemptions for youth who take a photo of themselves for personal use, or for youth close in age who consensually create or exchange sexual content that remains private. However, to date youth under 18 are not legally considered able to consent to activities potentially exploitative which includes sexual image exchange, even if wanted (Ontario Women’s Justice Network, 2016). In countries including the UK, Australia and the US, lawmakers continue to grapple with the best way to prevent exploitation without causing undue harm to youth as they sexually explore (Ontario Women’s Justice Network, 2016). Given the possible implications of this research for the continued development of policy, curriculum, and advocacy initiatives in Canada, this research contributes to the literature on sexting by adding insights from a Canadian context.
Chapter 1: Background/Literature Review

Sexting

Sexting, defined as the exchange of erotic content via mobile or internet device (PEW Research Centre, 2010), is a type of Technology Mediated Sexual Interaction (TMSI; Courtice & Shaughnessy, 2017). Young women today are coming of age in a digitally-mediated world. Emerging adults (those aged 18 to 25) use technology such as email, texting, and social networking in their social relationships (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013). These platforms create the context from which young women come to know, navigate, and contribute to social and cultural messages. Digital and social media, including smartphone use, blogs, chat rooms, and social networking sites especially pervade the romantic relationships of emerging adults (Castenada, 2017) and contribute to how young women form and maintain social and romantic connections (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013). Digital and social media are also popularly used to communicate, consume, and create sexual content in these relationships (Barth, 2015; Castenada, 2017; Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson, & Svedin, 2016).

One example of the communication, consumption, and creation of sexual content that lies at the centre of young women’s exploration of sexuality in a digital culture is sexting. Sexting is one form TMSI (Courtice & Shaughnessy, 2017). TMSIs can include various activities from phone sex, cyber sex, some forms of pornographic interactions (chat rooms, cam interactions) and sexting. There is variability in terms of how sexting is defined and what activities are included in the behavior. Some researchers limit definitions of sexting to nude or semi-nude imagery (Benotsch et al., 2013; Le, 2016),
and others include written word and video (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Samini & Alderson, 2014). Sexting most commonly encompasses the transmission of any sexually explicit material (including text and erotic images or video) via text message and other internet messaging (Meenagh, 2015; PEW Research Centre, 2010; Samimi & Alderson, 2014). However, in the fast paced and ever evolving landscape of digital culture, new apps and mediums of (sexual) communication are always at the disposal of young people. Therefore, sexting, like other TMSIs, can be engaged in via numerous platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and so forth. Further distinctions are made between sexting as a two-way activity between individuals who exchange messages back and forth (which is the most common form of sexting) and sexting as also including messages exclusively sent to others or received by others (Gordon-Messer et al., 2015).

**Theoretical Underpinnings for the Current Research**

**Sexting in Emerging Adulthood.**

Emerging adulthood is the name given to the unique life stage between adolescence and adulthood, ranging from ages 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000). It is proposed that emerging adulthood arose as a distinct developmental period in response to demographic changes in industrialized countries, including increasing levels of education, delays in the need to take on traditional family roles and responsibilities, and variability in employment and romantic relationships (Lanctot & Poulin, 2018). Emerging adulthood, thus, is characterized as a time with the most variation of any life stage when a range of possibilities are available in terms of relationships (single, married, casually dating, “friends with benefits”), family configuration, living arrangements (living with family, friends, roommates, by oneself), employment and education pursuits. As such, emerging
adulthood is said to be a time of instability, yet also one of fostering personal
development (Arnett, 2014; Lanctot & Poulin, 2018). During this stage, emerging adults
face numerous options for future pathways towards adulthood and they get to enjoy a
newfound freedom from the typical constraints of adolescence (having to attend school,
answer to parents). However not everyone experiences emerging adulthood in the same
way; some see this period as a time for self-development and improvement, while others
respond to the sudden transitions from structure and stability as full of uncertainty, and
thus anxiety-provoking (Arnett, 2004, 2005). It has also been argued that not all
individuals progress through an emerging adulthood phase as delineated by Arnett (Hope,
Hoggard, & Thomas, 2015; Silva, 2016) due to varied personal, demographic, and/or
cultural considerations; for example emerging adulthood may not be experienced
universally as expectations for the life course varies across individuals and cultures. For
example, some people may take on responsibilities typically associated with adulthood
(full time employment, parenting, marriage, etc.) earlier and thus do not experience a
prolonged phase between adolescence and adulthood. Scholars have attempted to mediate
these concerns by taking a “person-centred approach” which allows for nuances and
diversity within a particular emerging adulthood population (Arnett, 2007; Lanctot &
Poulin, 2018).

Arnett (2000, 2014) proposed 5 key features of emerging adulthood that may be
relevant to the study of sexting: identity exploration, self-focus, a feeling of being “in-
between,” instability, and possibilities/optimism. With regards to identity exploration,
emerging adults are using this period as a time to try out new roles (such as in sex and
relationships). While identity explorations are said to become more prominent in
adolescence, they may reach their peak intensity during emerging adulthood as individuals are moving more towards making enduring decisions in love, life, work, and ideology (Arnett, 2014). This is said to be a time of finding out “who I really am.”

This stage is also characterized as being more “self-focused”; emerging adults are reportedly less influenced by authority figures, meaning they are free to make their own decisions while having fewer obligations to others (parents, partners, children). This “orientation towards the self” (Lanctot & Poulin, 2018), however, is somewhat limited by emerging adults’ feelings that they are still not “fully adults” – and thus not fully accountable/responsible for their own decisions. The feeling of being “in-between” as Arnett (2000, 2014) puts it, is the last pillar of emerging adulthood where by individuals have not yet felt they meet the “criteria” of becoming an adult (e.g. financial independence, taking responsibility for one’s actions), yet do feel they have moved beyond adolescence.

Emerging adulthood, being a time of “unsettlement,” provides a prolonged opportunity for self-explorations, self-realizations, and constructing one’s identity (Arnett, 2000). The liminality between adolescence and adulthood may be particularly relevant when exploring the sexual, and sexting, lives of emerging adults. Developmental processes relating to relationships and sexuality are significant to this period; emerging adulthood is a time in one’s life course where many patterns of interaction in relationships are tried out, especially in the sexual realm (Castaneda, 2017). Dating and sexuality in emerging adults tends to emphasize couple relationships and physical and emotional intimacy (Arnett, 2000; Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1995). Sexting is considered one of the ways emerging adults communicate and express sexuality and
Sexting enables emerging adults to convey sexual information and also enhance intimacy and satisfaction in relationships (Byers, 2011; Castenada, 2017). However, more so than in any other period, the absence of adult role constraints (such as expectations of marriage and commitment) and adult supervision (i.e., having their own phones, computers, and privacy) in emerging adults provides space for individuals to experiment (sexually and otherwise) and explore for their own sake in an effort to collect desired life experiences (Arnett, 2000). Because the centrality of this age period for relational and sexual development, the ubiquity of sexting in Western cultures, and the concerns over sexual risk in young women, studying sexting at this particular stage is especially relevant (Castenada, 2017). Emerging adulthood therefore, is a useful frame to consider the sexting experiences of young Canadian women.

**Sexual Script Theory.**

Sexual script theory was first introduced by Simon and Gagnon (1986) as a way to explain human sexual interactions as socially learned behaviors. Simon and Gagnon posited that sexual scripts are a template or guide for what is considered socially and culturally appropriate for men and women. Scripts operate at three levels: The cultural level, the interpersonal level, and the intrapsychic level. The cultural level is the macro level guide that shapes our sense of the world and ourselves and helps answer the questions of what sex is, how it happens, and what gender roles are “appropriate” for that particular social location. The scripts at this level are developed based on experiences of sex education, faith, family values, peers, and media. The interpersonal level refers to the interactions between partners negotiating their own individual scripts to shape a mutual
script of routines, expectations, body language. These scripts are developed over time through ongoing shared interactions that help partners identify, for example, how sexting happens (i.e., how do they decide when a sexting interaction will take place, how consent is negotiated, when it escalates, when it finished, who initiates etc.). At the intrapsychic level, scripts consist of individual preferences, fantasies, meanings of sexual interactions, and physiological responses. As related to sexting, an intrapsychic script may capture how a participant made sense of and defined positive experiences with sexting (i.e., nothing bad happened vs. mentally enjoyable vs. arousing) and also whether one feels they pleased others and/or got their own needs met. Interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts are influenced by cultural scenarios, however shifts in these micro level scripts can, over time, influence macro level cultural scripts.

There are many types of scripts, from virginity scripts, to hookup scripts that dictate what sex is and how it happens, and also to scripts that posit how men and women (should) act within sexual encounter. Prominent sexual scripts endorsed on North American university campuses draw from gendered norms, which suggest men and women take on different roles in sexual relationships (McCabe, Tanner, & Heiman, 2010; Sakaluk, Todd, Milhausen, Lachowsky, & Urgis, 2013; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). For example, men are more often expected to be the sexual aggressors – driven by physiology, while women are to remain more sexually passive. McCabe et al. (2010) examined 20 men’s and women’s interpretations of sexuality and how gender expectations influenced their own meanings of sex and sexuality. The authors reported that women felt they were expected to limit or suppress their experiences of, and talk about, sexual desire and pleasure. Other popular sexual scripts dictate males should be
more experienced and readily sexual than females as part of their natural development (Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Seal & Ehrhardt, 2003; Wiederman, 2005), whereas females should be protected from impositions of sexuality and remain the “gatekeepers” of sexuality rather than agents of their own developments and desires (Wiederman, 2005). Other scripts suggest women’s attractiveness ought to be highly valued (Menard & Cabrera, 2011) and that women should aim to please their male partners (Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2012).

It is suggested these scripts are not only culturally specific (and thus not universal across all cultures or backgrounds) but are also always shifting as they are responsive to a globally changing historical and cultural environment. Sexting, thus, provides a useful framework for contextualizing emerging adult’s perspectives on their experiences of sexting by situating their narratives within a social climate that imposes, starting in childhood and adolescence, different sexual expectations on men versus women. SST theory applied to sexting would suggest that there are gendered rules for sexting behaviour, and specifically that women who sext might be perceived as behaving inappropriately sexually. Indeed, research findings from studies on sexting as a gendered activity support the tenets of SST (e.g. Hasinoff, 2016; Ringrose et al., 2013).

Broader discourse around sexting is also imbued with gendered narratives. Hasinoff (2016) suggests that popular ideas and advice about sexting found in magazines are not grounded in evidence, but rather reproduce and reflect widely shared beliefs about gender and sexuality. She says these beliefs are used at worst, as evidence, and at best as “common sense.” Her analysis of sexting advice provided in mainstream media demonstrates that gender norms and scripts are endorsed; Men are expected (and
encouraged) to initiate sexting while women are seen as recipients, requesting consent is advised only for male target audiences, and advice for female sexting continues to prioritise men’s pleasure. When it comes to privacy, Hasinoff notes that while men are encouraged to not share pictures of their penis in case their partner ridicules them or their mates tease them, women are advised to not show their face lest they experience harassment, personal trauma, or an increased risk to their personal or professional reputation. These findings suggest that the stakes of unauthorized distribution of images are gendered (Hasinoff, 2016) and there remains a double standard when it comes to potential outcomes of sexting. Barriger (2014) points out that the impulse to blame the victim (the sexter whose privacy has been violated) – as opposed to platforms, policies, and other people whom reinforce damaging gendered and sexual scripts – continues to be more harmful to women. An understanding of the scripts and “double standards” that young women may adhere to consciously or unconsciously guides the researcher in exposing and interrogating the impact these scripts and standards may have on how young women make sense of their sexting experiences.

Sexual script theory, therefore, not only provides a useful and widely used framework through which to better understand young women’s patterns of gendered interactions during sexting experiences, it may provide the foundation from which researchers can begin to interrogate young women’s complex experiences of sexual pleasure, desire, arousal, and agency alongside their experiences of risk, objectification and exploitation.
Prevalence and Correlates of Sexting

Prevalence of Sexting.

There is a plethora of studies examining the prevalence of sexting among youth and emerging adults (See: Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Lenhart, 2009; Reyns, Henson, & Fisher, 2014; Ricketts, Maloney, Marcum, & Higgins, 2014; Temple, Paul, Van den Berg, & Le, 2012; Yeung, Horyniak, Vella, Hellard & Lim, 2014). It is estimated that sexting is a common practice; anywhere between 4% and 72% of young women have sexted by the time they reach the 24 years of age (Benotsch et al., 2013; Lenhart et al., 2010). In emerging adulthood alone, estimates of sexting engagement range from 20% to 61% of the population (Ferguson, 2011; Samimi & Alderson, 2014). A recent review of the literature raised concerns about the variation in statistics depicting sexting engagement (Cooper et al., 2016). It has been suggested that due to inconsistencies in definitions of sexting, methodologies, sample sizes, and participant demographics, reliable data regarding sexting prevalence remains elusive. This concern is raised in other reviews of the literature as well (Doring, 2014; Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014).

The prevalence of sexting is consistently shown to increase as youth age and enter into young adulthood and intimate partnerships (Cox Communications, 2009; Dake et al., 2012; Doring, 2014; Lenhart, 2009; Mitchell, Finkerhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; Rice et al., 2012; Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaita, & Rullo, 2013). Emerging and young adults engage in sexting behaviors to a greater extent than adolescents (Klettke et al., 2014), with sexting behaviors overall being most common in the emerging adult stage (those age 18-24) (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013). Further, sexting is positively associated with
positive attitudes towards sexting (Lenhart, 2009). These findings suggest that those who view sexting favorably are more likely to engage in sexting behavior, or that experience with sexting may foster positive attitudes towards the behavior (Ferguson, 2011; Strassberg et al., 2013). Many studies have documented that individuals who report engaging in sexting behaviors also are more likely to report being sexually active (e.g. Dake et al., 2012; Dir et al., 2013; Houck et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2012; Sorbring, Skoog, and Bohlin, 2014; Temple & Choi, 2014; Temple et al., 2012).

Findings related to gender vary by study. Several studies have found that sexting rates are comparable for young men and young women (Castaneda, 2017; Dake et al., 2012; Lenhart, 2009; Rice et al., 2012). However, in one study, young men were more likely to sext (Jonsson, Priebe, Bladh, & Svedin, 2014), and in others, young women were more likely to sext (Martinez-Prather & Vandiver, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; Reyns, Henson, & Fisher, 2014). It seems that differences can be partially accounted for by examining whether the definition of sexting in each study includes sexts being self-produced and sent or texts being received, or forwarded. For example, Mitchell et al. (2012) asked 1560 youth between the ages of 10-17 via a telephone survey whether they had ever created, sent, received or forwarded a sext that included erotic text and/or imagery (nude, semi-nude). Girls were more likely to send self-produced sexts, and boys were more likely to receive sexts. Strassberg et al. (2013) administered a questionnaire to 606 private high school students asking about their sexting behaviors and found 49% of males received sexts (compared to 30% of females) and of those males, 27% had forwarded the content to others. These gender differences continue as boys and girls enter into emerging adulthood (Martinez-Prather & Vandiver, 2014). Reyns et al. (2014)
conducted a survey with a sample of 1,929 college students between the ages of 18 and 24. Being a young woman increased the likelihood of sending a sext by 5 times and significantly decreased the likelihood of receiving a sext. Gordon-Messer et al. (2013) also surveyed 3,447 emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 24. Participants were asked whether they had ever sexted (i.e., sent a sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo or video of themselves to someone else) using their cell phones and/or whether they had ever received a sext (i.e., a sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo or video of someone else they know) on their cell phones. Young men were statistically more likely to receive sexts than young women. The difference in gendered rates of receiving and sending photos may be accounted for by cultured expectations; cultures that sexualize and commodify the female body can translate into sexual and gender scripts that suggest to some women that sharing nude photos is an expectation of intimate relationships, a way to achieve status, or to attract or maintain a partner (Wilkinson et al., 2016). The same messages are not often geared towards young men. Instead, scripts about masculinity and expectations of gender power in relationships teach young men that young women’s sexualities and bodies can be leveraged for social currency (e.g. Ringrose et al., 2013; Wilkinson et al., 2016). Lenhart (2009) offers that, consequently, sexting does not always happen as a 1 to 1 ratio whereby one female sends one male a photo. Young men report receiving photos forwarded to them from peers (Ringrose et al., 2013). Strassberg et al., (2013) also posits that while less likely, young women could be sending the same photo to multiple recipients which could also contribute to the discrepancy between young men and women.
Correlates of Sexting.

**Individual Factors.** With regard to participant characteristics (including psychological wellbeing, personality factors, impulsivity, self-control), emerging evidence, though varied across studies, supports several associations with sexting behaviors. In a sample of 611 American undergraduates (mean age 21), phone sexting was found to be associated with sensation seeking, impulsivity, lack of planning, and negative urgency (meaning a lower ability to regulate negative emotions and a higher likelihood of experiencing neuroticism, low conscientiousness, and disagreeableness) (Dir et al., 2013). Other researchers have reported correlations between sexting and lower emotional awareness and lower self-efficacy for managing emotions (Houck et al., 2014), high levels of neuroticism and low levels of agreeableness (Dir et al., 2013; Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013), histrionic personality traits (Ferguson, 2011), and experiences of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and having ever been bullied (Dake et al., 2012). Links between sexting and individual traits are tentative at best and have not been replicated. Studies vary widely in terms of sample, methods, and definitions of sexting, and these variations likely contribute to inconsistencies in results. Indeed, several studies have found no direct correlations between sexting and negative individual or psychological wellbeing (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Temple et al., 2014).

**Relational Factors.** Sexting primarily takes place within the context of intimate relationships (Wilkinson et al., 2016). Even when those relationships are casual, transient, or un-committed, sexting is still generally considered to be a relational activity (meaning it is rare to find individuals who sext others without receiving in return, or vice versa). Sexting has been found to be related to several other variables pertinent to
interactions and/or experiences in romantic relationships (see Hendrick, Hendrick, & Reich, 2006). For example, studies have demonstrated associations between sexting and sexual satisfaction in relationships (Parker et al., 2013) and sexual pleasure and arousal in relationships (Burkett, 2015; Ferguson, 2011).

Researchers have explored the association between sexting and harm as it pertains to interpersonal violence, bullying, coercion, peer pressure and sexual compliance. In a study assessing motivations for sexting in 498 individuals aged 15-18 years, girls more so than boys reported pressure from peers and romantic partners to sext (Walgrave, Heirman, & Hallam, 2013). These findings are replicated in emerging and young adult populations; Henderson and Morgan (2011) collected self-report questionnaire data from 468 participants recruited from a southern US university psychology class. In this study of participants aged 18-30 a slightly higher percentage of young women reported pressure to send sexually suggestive texts compared to young men (though results were not statistically significant) and young women also indicated more feelings that sexting led to “severe negative consequences” (p. 36). It must be noted that participants were asked whether feeling pressure ever led to sexting, not necessarily whether they experienced pressure to sext.

There may be a distinction between perceptions of sexting and actual experience of sexting. For example, a widely cited statistic posits that 51% of females sext because of pressure or coercion. This statistic comes from the Sex and Tech Survey (2008) which asked teens “What do you think are the reasons that girls send/post sexy messages or pictures/video of themselves?” Rather than “what reasons do you have for sending/posting sexy images.” Thus, the statistic is derived from the perceptions of a
sample of youth in regards to girls in general rather than assessing participants’ personal motivations. It is also notable that most of the participants in this student reported never having sexted themselves (Lee & Crofts, 2015).

However, these findings are in line with those from the popular National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy Survey (2008), in which young women reported that they believed women feel pressure from young men to send sexually explicit texts or imagery. Of the 1,355 participants aged 14 to 24 surveyed by MTV and the Associated Press, 61% indicated feeling pressured themselves to sext at least once in their life (2009). It seems some young women consider this pressure to sext from romantic partners a type of consensual “sexual compliance” for the purposes of relationship maintenance (Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Renfrow & Rollo, 2014). However, unlike in the study above, it has been suggested that in many studies the wording of questions, or strategic sampling, may have led to a false belief that pressure was a main reason for sexting. Lee and Crofts (2015) proposed, “that when young women are expressly asked about their sexting motivations they rarely express pressure or coercion as the key driver” (p. 464).

Nonetheless, recognizing experiences of victimization is important and necessary. The findings of one study supports a relationship between being forced to sext and abuse/control in current and future relationships (Drouin et al., 2015). In this study, 480 undergraduate students were surveyed to better understand the relationships between sexting coercion, physical sex coercion, intimate partner violence, and mental health and trauma symptoms. Almost 1/5 of participants reported engaging in sexting when they did not want to (through repeated asking, being made to feel obligated). Concerningly,
participants who reported sexting coercion and physical sexual coercion, indicated that, in retrospect, sexting coercion was experienced as more traumatic than physical coercion. Trauma was measured using a brief trauma measure by Testa, Vanzile-Tamsen, Livingston, and Kos (2004) and a revised version of the 40-item Trauma Symptom Checklist by Briere and Runtz, (1989). These participants also exhibited more feelings of depression, anxiety, and generalized trauma response. Those who had experienced sexting coercion were more likely to have also experienced physical sexual coercion and other intimate partner violence. The authors suggest that sexting may be used as a digital avenue for victimization in already abusive relationships. Acknowledging the seriousness of intimate partner violence, victimization, and trauma is important. However, overall experiences of victimization are reportedly rare (Cooper et al., 2016; Perkins et al., 2014). Whether youth and emerging adults experience differing levels of victimization, including whether experiences of victimization drop off as individuals age, is unclear; A review of the literature shows that less focus is placed on asking about experiences of victimization when studying emerging adult populations compared to studying girls or high school populations.

Behavioral Factors. Sexting has been associated with having engaged in sex at a young age and having engaged in sexual behaviors considered risky (such as having had multiple sexual partners, unprotected sex, and oral and anal sex) (Benotsch et al., 2013; Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014; Dake et al., 2012; Englander, 2012; Ferguson, 2011; Perkins et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2012). Dir et al. (2013) demonstrated a relationship between sexting and having had casual sex and O’Neal, Hagal, Cummings, Hanse and Ott, (2013) found sexters were more likely to have used
substances such as tobacco or drugs with sex. Other studies demonstrate relationships between substance use and sexting in general (Benotsch et al., 2013; Dake et al., 2012; Dir et al., 2013; Englander, 2012; Perkins et al., 2014; Reyns et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2014). Dir et al. (2013) used self-report questionnaires to assess the relationship between sexting, sexual risk and substance use in a sample of 611 university students with a mean age of 21. Problematic alcohol use was significantly associated with sexting and problematic alcohol use significantly mediated the effects of sensation seeking and negative urgency on sexting behaviors. Benotsch et al., (2013) administered an online questionnaire to 763 undergraduate individuals that asked about sexting, substance use, and other sexual behaviors, including how many sexual partners they had had, whether they had sexted and how many times, and their drug and alcohol use. Participants were specifically asked how many times they had engaged in sexual activity with someone (for the first time) after sexting with them. Participants who engaged in sexting were more likely to report high-risk sexual behaviors in the past 3 months (e.g. unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners, having sex after using alcohol or substances) and more likely to report substance use in general. Sexting was also found to be a prelude to sexual activity; in total, 32% of participants reported having sex with someone for the first time after having sexted with them. Benotsch et al. (2013) also found that sexters reported a higher number of lifetime sexual partners, higher incidents of vaginal and anal sex over the past three months, and were more likely to report having ever had an STI. However, the authors caution that while associations existed, they could not account for the quality of the relationship or the directionality of a relationship between sexting and any sexual or risk behavior.
Motivations for Sexting

Inquiring about young women’s reasons for sexting can help expand our understanding of sexting beyond prevalence and correlates of risk. Young women report multiple motivations for sexting that primarily centre around relationship maintenance, seeking and developing sexual knowledge and skills, and gaining social status/attention (Cooper et al., 2016). Contrary to popular beliefs, “pressure” is not commonly reported as a reason to sext (Lee and Crofts, 2015), however some young women do report having experienced pressure to sext at least once in the past (Englander, 2012).

Findings from several studies suggest that for young women (and young men), sexting is used as a way to gain peer respect and popularity, or maintain status in a peer group (Bond, 2010; Lenhart, 2009; Lippman & Campbell, 2012; Ringrose et al., 2013 & Vandeen-Abeele, Campbell, Eggermont, & Roe, 2014). Vandeen Abeele et al., (2014) found, in their sample of 1,943 Flemish adolescents and emerging adults (aged 11 to 20), that among participants who reported higher social status and popularity, frequency of both sending and receiving sexts increased. In fact, for every one-unit increase in self-perceived popularity, odds of sexting rose by 70%, and for every one unit increase in need for popularity, odds of sexting rose by 64%. Young women in particular were twice as likely to have engaged in sexting with every increase in need for popularity. This study suggests there may be a complicated relationship between social status and sexting, particularly for women.

Within the context of intimate partnerships, individuals report that sexting is a means of sexual expression and communication (Doring, 2014). For young women especially, digital sexual expressions/communications often come at the request of their
romantic partners (England, 2012) or are initiated by the young woman as a way to surprise her romantic partner (Lenhart, 2009) or to keep her partner interested or maintain intimacy (as in the case of long-distance relationships) (Drouin et al., 2013). Outside of a committed relationship, similar themes are found; young women report using sexting as a way to attract a desired partner and/or to initiate wanted sexual activity (England, 2012; Henderson & Morgan, 2011; Kopecky, 2011; Lenhart, 2009; Temple & Choi, 2014). As part of a focus group on motivations for sexting within or outside of a relationship, young women reported that sexting was used to gain or maintain the acceptance or attention of a potential romantic interest, or to assure status among their male peers (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Sexting has also been used to have fun, to flirt, and as an expression of desire and pleasure (Dir et al., 2013; Henderson & Morgan, 2011; Perkins et al., 2014; Renfrow & Rollo, 2014; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011). A majority (66% of female participants and 60% of male participants) reported “to be fun and flirtatious” as their main motivation for sexting (Lenhart, 2009).

Much of the literature on motivations for sexting has supported the idea that sexting is one means by which young women “practice” being sexual or experiment sexually and romantically (e.g. Bond, 2011; Lee and Crofts, 2015; Strassberg et al., 2014; O’Sullivan, 2014). For some individuals, sending a sext is an innocuous or non-sexualised activity such as a joke, to have fun, to get a laugh, or to relieve boredom (Albury, Crawford, Byron, & Mathews, 2013; Bond, 2011; Chalfen, 2009; Lenhart, 2009). A focus group comprised of 30 individuals between the ages of 11 and 17 revealed that humorous or “practice” sexts (meaning sexts that test the waters of comfort around sexual interactions) were sent to same gender peers and opposite gender peers (Bond,
2011). O’Sullivan (2014) posits that experimental sexting fulfills a common human desire to experience nascent sexuality. Bond (2011) suggests that sexting is a way for individuals to virtually explore their developing sexualities and romantic relationships through the digital exchange of erotic text and imagery. Other studies have suggested that these forms of sexual exchange, whether in a sexual context or for sexual purposes or not, are still beneficial in enabling young women the necessary practice of sexual expression and identity exploration (Dir et al., 2013; Henderson & Morgan, 2011; Lenhart, 2009).

**Risk Narrative**

There is a perception that sexting is risky (e.g. Dilberto & Mattey, 2009; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Van Gool, 2014). However, authors of prominent risk-association studies assert that data does not support that sexting itself is cause for concern (Benotsch et al., 2013; Dir et al., 2013; Perkins et al., 2014). Despite minimal evidence of sexting being inherently risky (i.e., associated with or contributing to risky sexual behaviors, depression, substance use, exploitation), and evidence showing young women’s motivations to sext often reflect positive and adaptive experiences, popular and professional responses to sexting have presented a narrative of risk and concern (see: Megan’s Story; Brown Newsletter; NASN School Nurse). In these examples, sexting is viewed as a gateway to negative sexual outcomes.

It is possible discussion on the positive aspects of sexting lacking due to anxieties about the sexualization of young women. Sexualization is a portmanteau word for “sexual socialization” which connotes two important meanings (Duschinsky, 2013). As popularly understood, sexualization is to make something sexual in character or quality (Rice & Watson, 2016). In this sense, concerns over sexualization are justified as they speak to a
potentially damaging imposition of sexuality onto individuals, and may underlie concerns that some youth use sexuality in exchange for social value (Erchull & Liss, 2013; Rice & Watson, 2016). Vandeen Abeele et al., 2014 found that for young women, a desire for popularity increased their sexting. Academic literature published by the American Psychological Association (2010), Bailey, (2011) and Papadopolous (2010) has emphasized that sexualized activities like sexting carry inherent dangers, particularly for girls and young women.

The purpose of The Bailey (2011) review titled “Letting Children be Children,” for example, was to help stem a perceived epidemic of children being overly sexualized and pressured by media messages and imagery to “grow up too fast.” In the Report of the APA taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls (2007), any sexualization is constructed as damaging to girls regardless of context/experience. The Papadoplous Sexualization of Young People Review (2010) intended to examine sexuality among young females and the impact of objectification. This report aimed to ask how “sexiness” came to be associated with value for females in an attempt to stem sexual violence against women. It is important that reports such as this call attention to the potentially damaging effects of overly-sexualized imagery on girls’ and young women’s self-image (as a result of the portrayal of them as objects and hence more likely victims), especially in the absence of other media representations. However, it has been argued that the report implies that sex and sexuality can only be damaging for youth, especially females, and that young women have no sexual agency (Smith, 2010). Reports such as this have been critiqued for lacking empirical evidence, not considering young women’s perspectives on their experiences and how they make sense of sexualization or their sexualized behaviors, and drawing
their data from parents’ or other adult’s opinions (Veraa, 2009).

The implications of these reports (e.g., APA, 2007; Bailey, 2011; Papadopolous, 2010) in terms of the conceptualizations, development, and framing of new research on sexting in emerging adults have been far reaching and have reinforced a fear based discourse. This risk-based framework is especially evident in the literature on sexting in the legal, educational, and medical contexts where the focus rests on impacts and outcomes of sexting for mental health, wellbeing, and reputation at the expense of knowing a fuller picture of the experience of sexting. Consequently, the data collected are used to explain or justify intervention, punitive measures, or legal regulation of sexting (e.g. Comartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2013; Dilberto & Mattey, 2009; Ostrager 2010; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014; Zhang, 2010).

In such explorations, sexting is framed as a “deviant behavior,” a “problem” or a “danger” demanding immediate attention. For example, Zhang (2010) highlights several cases in the United States where minors have been prosecuted or charged with child pornography for possessing “indecent” photographs of themselves. In one famous case, two young females were made to attend a training camp aimed at learning appropriate sexuality because they had been in possession of semi-clad photographs of themselves on their own phone (see Miller v Skumanick). In many states, sexting is considered a felony for those under the age of majority. Dilberto and Mattey (2009) characterize sexting as the “gateway” drug to sexual activity and suggest to parents and schools ways to prevent children from acting on this “temptation.”
Sext-ual Double Standards.

It has been noted that concerns over negative impacts of sexting have focused disproportionately on young women as opposed to young men (Bailey & Hanna, 2011; Lee & Crofts, 2015; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013). In one Australian policy video (“Megan’s Story”) created as a response to the “problem” of sexting, a young woman takes a semi-nude selfie and sends it to a desired partner. Her smiling face turns to dismay when she enters the classroom to face an array of frowning peers and teachers as the photo was disseminated beyond the intended recipient. In this video, Megan is at the mercy of her photo and is made to suffer the social and punitive shame for taking photos of her naked breasts. The young men in the video who view or forward the sext are not brought under scrutiny. The message is clear: Policy responses (like this and others) meant to warn young women of the dangers of sexting are only warning young women of the damaging repercussions of sexting on their social value and reputations (Albury & Crawford, 2012).

This gendered discrepancy is reflected in youth accounts of sexting. Girls and young women have reported experiences of “slut shaming” (being chastised or harassed if others made their sexting behaviors public), whereas boys more often report being applauded for sexting (and receiving sexts, in particular) (PEW Research Centre, 2010; Ringrose et al., 2013). For example, in focus group discussions exploring attitudes regarding sending and receiving sexts, a vast discrepancy existed between boys and girls regarding the extent to which they were judged for their sexting practices (Lippman & Campell, 2014). In their sample of 51 adolescents ranging from age 12 to 18 years, 30% of the girls reported being harshly judged, called a “slut,” “insecure,” “attention seeking”
or “crazy,” and the boys admitted to thinking poorly of girls who sexted, asserting that they “lacked self-respect.” Girls who opted out of sexting were not immune to judgments, rather they were painted as “goodie girls,” “prudes” or “stuck up.” Conversely, none of the boys reported experiencing judgment for their sexts or decision not to sext. In their study, Ringrose et al. (2013) noted that whereas girls were often called “slag,” “slut” or “sket” for sexting, boys were awarded “ratings” for possessing and distributing imagers of girls’ breasts, which acted as a type of social currency. For some boys and young men, sexting as a way to gain social status reflects problematic ideas about gender and power; boys and young men have reported tagging, sending, and forwarding sexts of girls and young women in an effort to maintain a social image or gain status among their peers (Ringrose et al., 2013). Ringrose and colleagues suggest this is because of boy’s socialization and identity formation within wider gendered structures; the process of distributing images signals to male peers their masculinity (2013). They say demonstrating a power to acquire images and make decisions about their distribution (without recourse) is a way for boys to act out messages that men (should) have power over women in relationships. It is unclear whether the same double standards are experienced in emerging adult populations.

**The Potential Benefits of Sexting**

Emerging research supports the potential that sexting holds positive value for some individuals as they grow and develop their sexual selves (Bond, 2011; Burkett, 2015; Ferguson, 2009; Lee and Crofts, 2015; O’Sullivan, 2014; Stocker, 2014). The benefit of digital spaces for young women in terms of sexual wellbeing, self-definition, and expression has been previously established (Hiller & Harrison, 2007; Pascoe, 2011).
Out of 176 high school students, 49% reported using technology to communicate about sexual health with partners (Widman, Nesi, Choukas-Bradley, & Prinstein, 2013). Girls were more likely to use technology, compared to offline communication, to discuss HIV, pregnancy, and sexual limits. This suggests technology is beneficial for girls in setting and maintaining comfortable sexual boundaries and asserting their needs. Importantly, rates of consistent condom use were three times higher in the participants who used technology to discuss sexual health.

These findings are mirrored in emerging adult samples: Broaddus and Dickson-Gomez (2013) interviewed 20 African American individuals aged 18 to 25 about the use of technology (e.g., text messaging, sexting, social media) and sexual health behaviors. Participants reported that text messaging provided them more comfort, disinhibition, ease of communication, and privacy. Many participants reported textual communication enabled them to engage in conversations that may be more difficult face to face, especially regarding requests to use a condom. One participant explained text messaging enabled her more agency in requesting safer sex. In her response, she stated that using a digital medium helped her advocate for the use of condoms during sexual activity more assertively and with confidence. She also explained how sexting helped situate her request to use a condom in a fun and sexy way, while also ensuring that her partner showed up prepared with condoms, so as to avoid difficult decisions once physical intimacy commenced.

Other digital spaces such as the internet, text, chat rooms, social media and forums have been shown to benefit youth in terms of enhancing communication and social connection (McBride, 2011), enabling members of the LGBT+ community to gain
sexuality education, find relationships, and share coming out experiences and safer sex practices (Baumgartner, Sumter, Valkenberg, & Livingstone, 2014; Hiller & Harrison, 2007). Digital spaces have also been shown to provide safe and comfortable spaces for young people who identify as anxious, introverted, or shy (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Broaddus & Dickson-Gomez, 2013). Digital media such as social networking can potentially provide emotional connection for people who have experienced sexual trauma or bullying, or simply help inform them of gaps in their sexual health knowledge (Bond, 2010; Widman et al., 2013). The potential for sexting to provide similar adaptive or beneficial experiences for young women is becoming recognized in the literature (Cooper et al., 2016). Renold and Ringrose (2013) suggest sexting may provide needed space for young women to develop awareness of their sexual feelings and desires and resist cultural prescriptions and constraints concerning women’s sexuality. For example, sending erotic imagery in a fun or flirtatious manner is reported by some as a means to establish sexual agency, meaning the capacity to act and interact in a way that achieves a desired result (Richards & Calvert, 2009).

Research also indicates that within the context of a relationship, sexting is associated with bonding, trust, and mutual affection (Burkett, 2015; Ferguson, 2009; Hasinoff, 2013; Karian, 2012; Lenhart, 2009; Renfrow & Rollo, 2014; Stocker, 2014). The possibility of textual communication, such as sexting, to facilitate more open and confident negotiations of sexual pleasure, desire, and agency was demonstrated in a study by Broaddus and Dickson-Gomez (2013). One young woman explained how sending an erotic image of where she wanted to be touched or kissed, or a text with a description of what she wanted sexually, helped her build anticipation. She also suggested sexting prior
to sexual activity provided a sense of comfort or safety as she had clearly stated what she needed to have done to experience pleasure, and negotiated the parameters or expectations of the upcoming interaction.

Other more direct associations between sexting and sexual pleasure have been found. In the Sex and Tech Survey (2008) participants were asked how receiving suggestive messages or nude/semi-nude pictures/videos made them feel. The responses were positive with 53% reporting feeling turned on, 44% reporting feeling excited, 40% reporting feeling happy and 27% reporting an increased desire to hook up with the sender. A critical review of the sexting literature demonstrated that while authors tended to highlight the negative associations with sexting, young women were more likely to report motivations associated with pleasure or desire (Lee & Crofts, 2015).

A survey of 207 Hispanic-American women between the ages of 16 and 25 aimed to capture elements related to contentment with sexual relationships (Ferguson, 2011). Participants were asked to rate the likelihood or frequency of engaging in or holding certain attitudes about sexting, high-risk sexual activity and experiences of pleasure in sexual behaviors. The girls and young women who enjoyed sex were more likely to sext and most young women reported sexting to be an exciting part of their sexual lives and that sexting was significantly associated with sexual pleasure. Similarly, a 56-item questionnaire assessing sexting behaviors and experiences administered to 366 emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 26 showed that the act of producing erotic images could be considered to be a ‘pleasurable experience’ (Stocker, 2014). However, limited information can be inferred from these data about the lived experience of pleasure during sexting.
Sexual arousal has recently emerged as a potential relevant factor in the experience of sexting. In a recent study of Finnish youth, arousal and anticipation of physical intimacy (desire) was cited as an after-effect of sexting (Nielsen, Paasonen, & Spisak, 2015). Participants as young as 13 years old reported that sexting felt pleasurable and arousing. For example, one 13-year-old reported “I don’t think messages about sex are harmful at all. Of course, some little kids thinking about boy-bug-bacteria may find them really gross. But I get on a really good mood from messages that turn me on” (p. 476). As such, sexting may have a positive impact on sexual functioning, facilitating sexual arousal and desire.

Rationale for Current Study

It is known that sexting is a common activity among young women as they explore sexuality and relationships in a digital world (Benotsch, et al., 2013; Dake et al., 2012; Lenhart, 2009; Lenhart, et al., 2010; Reyns et al., 2014; Ricketts et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2012). Sexting generally takes place in romantic relationships, and is used to attract or maintain a partner, to flirt, explore and have fun, or to achieve social status (Bond, 2010; Cooper et al., 2016; Lee and Crofts, 2015; Lenhart, 2009; Lippman & Campbell, 2012; Ringrose et al., 2013; Vandeen Abeele et al., 2014). A major assumption prevalent in the research literature is that sexting, in and of itself, is harmful (Crimmins & Seigfried-Spellar, 2014; Dake et al., 2012; Englander, 2012; Perkins et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2012). The narrative of risk and harm stems from a heavy focus on sexting in adolescent and young girl populations where fears and anxieties over childhood sexuality are especially prominent (Dauda, 2010; Egan and Hawkes, 2009; Lamb, 2010; Smith 2010; Valenti, 2009; Veraa 2009). As such, the sexting literature is
heavily focused on associations between sexting and poor health outcomes (e.g. Dake et al., 2012; Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Dir et al., 2013; Houck et al., 2014; Walgrave et al., 2013). Some scholars have argued that assumptions of risk have inadvertently biased the selection of study variables (Lee & Crofts, 2015). Experiences of coercion, victimization, lack of consent, pressure, or exploitation indicate that sexting can be an unpleasant or risky experience for some girls (Drouin et al., 2015). However, research indicates these experiences are reportedly rare (Gordon-Messer, et al., 2013; Lee & Crofts, 2015; Temple et al., 2014), and that harm from sexting most often stems from double standards that disproportionately chastise girl’s sexting compared to boys’ (Albury et al., 2010; Albury & Crawford, 2012; Bailey & Hanna, 2011; Lee & Crofts, 2015; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013). Sexual scripts that dictate how men and women ought to behave sexually are currently endorsed on major university campuses (Sakaluk et al. 2013). However, less is known about how the prominent narratives of risk and harm presented in youth are adopted by and inform emerging adult’s experiences of sexting.

Emerging adulthood is a stage characterized by intense exploration (Arnett 2000; 2004). It is possible that sexting play an important role in emerging adult’s developmentally appropriate self-explorations (Lee, Crofts, McGovern, & Milivojevic, 2015). Research indicates that sexting has positive and adaptive benefits for some, including offering young women opportunities for sexual exploration and development of sexual selves, increased sexual communication, and experiences of desire, pleasure and arousal (Bond, 2010; Burkett, 2015; Ferguson, 2009; Lee & Crofts, 2015; O’Sullivan, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Stocker, 2014; Widman et al., 2013). Emerging adulthood
may be the ideal stage to study sexting as it provides a glimpse into the intersection between sexual risk narratives and opportunities for sexual self-growth, and may help contextualize the claims made regarding sexting and risk and opportunity.

The most effective way to explore the likely complex role sexting plays in young women’s lives is through qualitative study; interviews that give women space to speak to the impact of risk narratives and the opportunities sexting may afford them, as well as any important contextual factors that influence young women’s perceptions of their sexting experience would be an asset to our understanding of sexting more broadly and would fill a gap in the literature. Currently, qualitative research exploring young women’s own experiences and perceptions of sexting is limited (Lee & Crofts, 2015). Of the qualitative research that exists, three studies included emerging adults (see Burkett, 2015; Le, 2016; Yeung et al., 2014) and the rest focused on girls and adolescents (ages 12-18) (e.g. Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2012; Stanley et al., 2016). Of the studies examining emerging adults, one focused on general attitudes towards and perceptions of consequences of sexting in an Australian population (see Yeung et al., 2014), and one focused exclusively on young people’s perceptions of sharing visual imagery (see Le, 2016). Burkett (2015) conducted qualitative analysis on interviews from 40 young people aged 18-25 about their experiences with sexualized culture in general, with sexting being one aspect of sexualized culture. Her study highlighted the contexts in which sexting takes place for young people, their motivations for sexting, and their feelings toward sexting. Her results supported that sexting is an activity that can be experienced as negative and harmful in some contexts (when photos are shared without consent, for example), as well as positive and pleasurable in some contexts (increasing
However, her analyses did not separate young men’s perceptions of sexting from young women’s perceptions of sexting. Scholars have called for increased attention to young women’s voices (e.g. Cooper et al., 2016) specifically the meaning of sexting for these young women (e.g. Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013). Highlighting young women’s voices would allow for more targeted support and advocacy initiatives that consider emerging adults’ own needs, and more accurately reflect their experiences.

As Canada continues to explore the most effective law, policy, curriculum, and advocacy responses to sexting (e.g. Ontario Women’s Justice Network, 2016), the inclusion of Canadian samples in sexting research is especially needed. Young Canadian women are increasingly using digital technologies as a sexual platform (O’Sullivan & Gibbings, 2012), with sexting being one example of this. Scholars have begun to examine sexting in Canadian populations (e.g. Karian, 2012, 2014, 2015; O’Sullivan & Gibbings, 2012) however, the bulk of available research draws heavily from international perspectives of sexting. Developing health interventions that draw from young Canadian women’s narratives would make them more relevant, salient, and impactful for young Canadian Women. As such, the purpose of this study was to interview emerging adult Canadian women between the ages of 18 and 25 to develop an understanding of their experiences of sexting.

**Research Questions**

The research study was designed with the following questions in mind. These questions guided the development of the interview questions:

1. What meaning do young Canadian women ascribe to their experiences of
sexting?

2. How do young Canadian women make sense of sexting experiences that are conflicting/confusing/ or may include multiple layers (including positive, ambivalent, negative)?

3. What factors, elements, conditions, contexts support positive perceptions of sexting experiences

4. What factors, elements, conditions, contexts contribute to negative perceptions of sexting experiences

5. What do young Canadian women need in order to support their safety, wellbeing, and sexual autonomy/exploration during sexting interactions?

However, in the process of conducting the interviews and analyzing the transcripts, research questions were reviewed to determine how well they fit the data. Braun and Clarke (2017) suggest that during thematic analysis, research questions are not fixed, but rather can evolve throughout the analysis process. The final research questions that best fit the data are as follows:

1. How/in what ways do young Canadian women use sexting?

2. What role does sexting play in young Canadian women’s lives, sexualities, and relationships?

3. How does sexting impact young Canadian women?

4. What do young Canadian women need in order to support their safety, wellbeing, and sexual autonomy/exploration during sexting interactions? (This final question will be answered in the discussion section).
Chapter 2: Methods

Recruitment

Participants were recruited between March and August 2017 from colleges and universities across Southern Ontario (including the University of Guelph, York University, McMaster University, Humber College, University of Western Ontario, University of Waterloo, Ryerson University, Brock University, and Algonquin College) by using physical signage (Appendix A) placed in cafés surrounding university campuses, social media platforms, and word of mouth. Although interviewees came from all three sources, candidates were primarily attracted to the study through social media websites. The two social networking websites that were used were Facebook and Twitter. The colleges and universities selected for recruitment were all located in Southern Ontario, and each have multiple Twitter boards and Facebook pages geared towards students, with thousands of followers each. Recruiting using similar strategies across academic institutions provides some consistency in terms of participants’ current life context (i.e., all were currently enrolled students), while allowing for the inclusion of students from multiple cultural, ethnic, and educational disciplines and backgrounds.

Recruitment was approached differently between the two social media platforms, as they operate in different ways. When using Twitter, messages were sent every few days to college, university, and student association Twitter accounts, as well as other college and university-based Twitter handles geared towards the student population (Appendix B). This message contained details about the study and a link to a prequalifying survey that prospective interviewees could fill out, which were then evaluated for compatibility with the recruitment criteria. When using Facebook to reach
potential candidates, a post was created that included a photograph containing details about the study (Appendix C), and a link to the same prequalifying survey. This post was then posted on a central Facebook page created for the purpose of providing information about the study. The central page was then shared to college, university, and student association Facebook accounts. As these accounts were “tweeted at” or “posted on” rather than posted by the organization itself, ethics from these institutions was not sought. Interested participants were invited to share the page to their personal profiles as means to attract more potential participants. Sharing on personal profiles meant that the recruitment material could then be viewed by their friends, and these new users could share the post as well. When recruitment appeared to be lagging, key influencers (meaning individuals identified as having a significant following) on various university and college campuses were asked to post the recruit materials on their Facebook and Twitter accounts so as to potentially reach a wider audience. This process then continued, with new users being able to see the post every time a new individual shared it, until the proper participant saturation was reached through analysis. Pages were then shut down so as not to continue to attract more individuals.

**The Effectiveness of Social Media in Recruitment.**

Social Media Recruitment (SMR) has demonstrated success in attracting a broad range of participants in a variety of locations and settings (Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmet, & Christakis, 2008), and in bypassing some constraints posed by traditional recruitment channels. Facebook and Twitter in particular, have demonstrated a capacity for swift recruitment above and beyond other social media streams. The use of social media also shows promise for the current study on female sexting and wellbeing. Studies
demonstrate SMR can lead to increased numbers of young women participating in follow-up studies and increased success in targeting young adults for studies on health and risk behaviors (Jones, Saksvig, Grieser, & Young, 2012; Lohse & Wamboldt, 2013; Ramo & Prochaska, 2012). Further, SMR has been shown to yield a higher percentage of female respondents (Gu et al., 2016). This is likely because women represent 77% of all Twitter users and women aged 18-29 represent 35% ($n = 95$ million) of all Twitter users (PEW Internet Research, 2015). Demographically, millennials and university-aged individuals were found to be heavy users of these sites, and are frequently connected to social media through cellular devices. This has proven to be especially meaningful for recruitment in the context of this study, as women of this age range are the desired participants.

In addition to these benefits, social media has shown to be effective in reaching diverse groups and populations. In a 2010 study, it was found that recruitment of non-heterosexual women was facilitated by the use of social media, as they could remain anonymous in the initial stages of the interaction, and would be safe from potential prejudice. This proves to be especially salient for this study, as the research aims to include a range of sexualities, and SMR increases the chances for diversity among participants (Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013).

**Inclusion Criteria**

This study used selective sampling of young women whom have engaged in sexting. Selective sampling refers to the generation of a sample that is not random, but rather one that fits the criteria set out by the researchers (Draucker, Martsolf, Ross, & Rusk, 2010). With selective sampling, researchers attempt to recruit participants with the
relevant characteristics and experience with the phenomenon to be explored (Daly, 2007) and for whom the topic of study is personally relevant and whom can offer a meaningful perspective on the phenomenon. Selective sampling is useful for the current study in helping to find a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant. This study selected specifically for participants whom had previous experience with sexting. In addition, age, gender identity, being enrolled at a College or University in Southern Ontario, and English-language comprehension were the domains for eligibility in the current study.

Eligibility was not limited to cis-gender and heterosexual women to combat some of the limitations of previous studies. Self-identified young women were eligible for this study. The current literature has heavily focused on the dangers of sexting towards young women more so than young men. Therefore, interviewing young women allows for an expansion of the dialogue around sexting and young women’s safety. The sample was not limited to heterosexual individuals, as much of the available research has focused on heterosexual individuals to the exclusion of women of various sexual orientations.

University aged women ages 18-25 were eligible to participate. Research shows that sexting behaviors increase depending on age and undergraduate women are more likely to engage in sexting, and sext more on average, than other age demographics (Strassberg et al., 2012). The ages between 18 and 25 also mark an important developmental stage: emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007). Emerging adults are of particular interest because they are in a period of self-exploration, developing relationship norms, learning to accept responsibility for oneself, and beginning to make independent decisions (Arnett, 2007; Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004) and are purposefully using digital
media as means of social, sexual, and self-identity exploration during this time (Davis & Weinstein, 2017). Participants had to have been enrolled at a University or College in Southern Ontario. This criteria was selected due to the proximity to the primary researcher, as well as to go beyond the experience on a single campus and to introduce variability in participant characteristics.

**Snowball Sampling Through Social Media.**

The current study also used chain sampling, or ‘snowball sampling’ to recruit participants. Snowball sampling is a practice whereby past participants of the study refer potential new participants. Snowball sampling has been shown to contribute to a feeling of trust between the interviewer and the research participants, as they have been referred by a mutual acquaintance that has already participated in the study. This is especially salient in this study, as the topic of sexuality, in this case, sexting can sometimes be regarded with a certain degree of trepidation.

**Procedure**

The sample was recruited through internet sources and coffee shops using posters as previously outlined. Interested potential participants were able to directly access a Qualtrics pre-screening questionnaire via a link and/or QR code available on each Facebook, Twitter, and physical coffee shop posting. The screening questionnaire (Appendix D) asked questions that determined eligibility for the study including age, gender, sexual orientation, having had personal experience with sexting, language comprehension, and current university enrollment. Participants who did not meet the eligibility criteria, or whom were enrolled at a university outside the demographic area, were thanked for their interest and informed that they were not selected for the study due
to eligibility. Participants who met the eligibility criteria were asked at the end of the questionnaire whether they were interested in continuing with the study. Those who said yes were automatically taken to an informed consent (Appendix E) and study information page. Potential participants were invited to read the informed consent and were given the option to accept or decline consent. Participants who declined consent were automatically taken to a page that thanked them for their interest and time in completing the survey and assured their personal information would be removed. Participants who accepted the conditions of consent were asked to electronically sign the letter and then provide their contact information so they could be contacted to discuss availability for a face to face interview. Participants provided their real names on the consent form; however, these names were removed for transcribing purposes and pseudonyms are used when presenting the results.

Participants responded to the recruitment efforts on an ongoing basis. The first participants to respond who met the eligibility criteria were selected for participation. Participants were contacted by thanking them for their interest and inquiring as to whether they were still interested in participating. If yes, the participant and researcher negotiated a time and location for a face-to face-interview. If a participant did not respond to the first attempt at contact, there was no further follow up so to assure that no participants felt pressured to participate. Interviews took place between June and September 2017.

For face-to-face interviews, a private study room was reserved at a public or school library, or graduate office space where the participant was enrolled. All rooms were enclosed rooms in public buildings to ensure privacy and anonymity of the
participants and safety of the participants and interviewer. Upon meeting, all elements of the study were explained to participants, and the consent form verbally reviewed. Participants were provided the opportunity to ask questions, and then verbal consent was obtained. After the semi-structured interviews took place, participants were provided the opportunity to ask any questions and invited to contact the researcher at any time should they wish to clarify, add, or remove any data. Two participants opted to contact the researcher after their interview to clarify an answer they provided and to expand on their interview after they had time to reflect. The original protocol was followed which included negotiating where and when to meet a second time. No participants contacted the researcher requesting removal of data. For their participation in the study, participants received a $10 gift card redeemable at various popular establishments (Grocery chains, Tim Hortons, Starbucks, etc.) The gift card was given to participants before the interviews got underway, so that no participants felt pressured to answer all questions or complete an interview just to receive the incentive. Participants were assured that they could stop the interview at any time without affecting their receipt of the gift card. No participants decided to withdraw partway through, and all participants answered every question with the amount of depth and breadth they felt comfortable giving. As per the REB Paying Research Participants Guidelines, participants taking place in a face-to-face interview signed and dated that they received the gift card.

**Semi-Structured Interviews.**

For the purpose of this study, sexting was defined by the participants themselves (i.e. whether for them sexting includes photo and/or video exchange, erotic text or otherwise and whether it takes place over a cell phone or other digital medium or app). This
definition was purposely kept broad in an attempt to the capture the perceptions and complexities of young women’s lived experiences of sexting. Participants were asked about their definition of sexting during the interview.

Participant interviews were semi-structured (Appendix F) and were expected to take between 1 and 2 hours. Interviews took approximately 45 minutes to 1.25 hours to complete and lasted a mean time of 52 minutes. Structured interviews have a pre-determined and rigid set of responses, and unstructured interviews tend to be more exploratory and in-depth (Daly, 2007). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to prompt discussion using pre-determined open-ended questions, while maintaining an opportunity for the researcher to explore particular themes or responses further using follow up questions (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interviews are appropriate for small-scale studies involving a moderate number of participants (Drever, 1995) and have several noteworthy benefits. For example, they allow the researcher to focus on key research questions, offer a reference point so the researcher can concentrate on participant’s responses, and can help facilitate analysis by creating general domains for themes to be developed (Daly, 2007). For this study’s process, a general interview structure was developed in advance in collaboration with the primary investigators, regarding the depth and breadth to be covered with regards to the topic of sexting, as well as a guide of the main questions to be asked. The flow of the interview, including any follow up questions, were influenced by participant’s responses and emerging themes. Therefore, the process of each interview was developed collaboratively during the interview between researcher and participant. Semi-structured interview formats give the person being interviewed freedom with regard to what to talk about, how much to say,
and how to express it (Drever, 1995). Thus, using a semi-structured interview format allowed the researcher to maintain focus by drawing from the interview guide, while also allowing for natural flexibility in the conversation as it unfolded differently for each participant (Daly, 2007).

**Interview Guide.**

The interview guide was a list of questions about young women’s personal experiences of sexting, their perceptions of these experiences as good, ambivalent, or negative, their attitudes and opinions on the benefits or drawbacks of sexting, what contextual factors supported positive and pleasurable experiences, and how girls and women can be further supported in exploring digital sexualities. While the study was exploratory in nature, the questions were developed based on themes and gaps in the research literature. The guide consisted of main questions (with options for follow up questions). The initial interview guide contained 20 questions, however after conducting 14 interviews the researcher met with the primary investigator to discuss what questions could be added or dropped based on how the interviews had progressed thus far. The second iteration of the interview guide resulted in one question being re-worded, one question being deleted and two questions being added based on feedback from participants (Appendix F).

To ensure comfort for participants, an outline of the interview guide was provided at the outset of the interview. Participants were also invited to share what levels of breadth and depth and detail that felt personally meaningful and comfortable for them. To help establish rapport between the interviewer and participant (Fontana & Frey, 1994), the interview began with questions regarding the women’s demographic background and
relationships (Appendix G), then moved into questions about personal definitions of sexting and attitudes and impressions of sexting overall. The interview then proceeded into questions about personal experiences of sexting. At the beginning of any question that may be substantially personal (questions about experiences of pleasure and arousal for example) the question was prefaced with a reminder that the information provided was at the discretion and comfort of the participant. The interviewer also took cues from participants about when more probing questions could be asked. As the interviews were semi-structured, many of the follow up questions were determined at the time of the interview (for example asking a participant to expand on an idea, asking for clarification or following up on relevant comments).

Data Analysis.

The current study used thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a widely used method for identifying, analysing, organizing, and reporting themes within data. The following stages of analysis comprised an iterative process. The data analysis process began as soon as the first few interviews were conducted and transcribed. As the interviews took place, notes were taken about possible emerging themes and trends. These preliminary observations guided how following interviews were conducted, and in a few cases, in consultation with the research committee, interview questions were adjusted to reflect trends that began to emerge. When questions about women’s experiences of sexting could not be answered using the current data, additional questions that could ask more directly about those gaps in our understanding of women’s experiences were developed. For example, it was determined that although most participants were reporting that pleasing their partner through sexting
was enjoyable, and that maintaining their relationship was a motivator for them to engage in sexting, grounding the research in script theory prompted the research team to inquire about what assumptions or beliefs about “women’s role” or “femininity” might be behind women’s experiences of sexting in romantic relationships. Follow up questions about whether there were broader “pressures or expectations” women adhered to were added to the interview guide. Coding did not begin until all interviews were conducted and transcribed.

The analysis was undertaken within a post-positivist framework, which meant observing data and reflecting it back as accurately as possible and without (as much as possible) the influence of beliefs and bias. This framework most closely aligns with that of Clarke (1998) and Bronowski (1956) who describe the aim of post-positivism as an attempt to gain a greater approximation of the truth of the data, while acknowledging the inevitability of researcher bias and the limited ability to claim universal knowledge (as findings are inevitably contextual). In post-positivist science, like in positivist science, precision and attention to evidence are valued. However, unlike positivist stances that focus on observable data exclusively, Bronowski (1956) suggests post-positivist paradigms are better suited for inferable forms of evidence such as self-report data inherent in qualitative methods like interviews and surveys. In post-positivist philosophy, the perceptions of the researcher are also not seen as completely detached from inquiry (Clark, 1998). Rather, the “human” instrument of scientific inquiry – the personal processes and involvement in a study, such as designing the interview guide - are acknowledged as shaping the process (Clark, 1998). In order to capture the participants' understandings of sexting as accurately as possible, the researcher sets aside their own
beliefs, and seeks to see participant’s perceptions of their experiences as they are. Consequently, throughout the process of coding and comparison, bracketing was particularly important so as not to introduce particular beliefs, lenses, or biases into the results (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Bracketing is the process of keeping track of one’s thoughts regarding the data throughout the analysis and functions as an intermediate step between coding and the first draft of the completed analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Throughout the analysis, notes were kept to aid in identifying personal assumptions, lenses, and biases; in comparing and defining codes and themes; as well as in identifying gaps or redundancies in the analysis. This process helped maintain focus on the analysis and on the meanings intended by each participant.

**Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data.** This phase involves immersion in the data to the point of being familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. This included repeated readings of the data, active reading (such as searching for patterns, meaning, etc.), and taking notes or jotting down ideas for initial codings. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise reading through the data set at least once in its entirety before coding so as to identify possible patterns. As the current study utilized recorded interviews, an important step in increasing familiarity with the data included verbatim transcription of the interviews (Bird, 2005; Riessman, 1993). The transcribed interviews were read second time, and the recordings were listened to in their entirety. Notes about initial thoughts, impressions, and questions were taken before any coding took place.

**Phase 2: Generating initial codes.** Coding refers to describing or defining what is happening in the data in such a way that organises data into meaningful groups (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A code aims to capture features of data that are potentially relevant to the
research question (Braun & Clarke, 2017). This second phase of thematic analysis thus involves the production of initial codes. Typically, coding is done line-by-line and progresses through ongoing comparison between participants and incidences to capture nuance and breadth in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Line-by-line coding (having researchers provide codes or descriptions for nearly every line of text) encourages analysis to remain focused on the data presented to see what comes up as opposed to coding specifically to answer specific research questions. At this stage, “code names” (words or phrases that described the data) were assigned to relevant lines and sections of the interviews. For this study, coding was done using an electronic program, MAXQDA, where text can be highlighted and “tagged” using a descriptor word. Multiple “tags” or codes could be applied to the same text. The process of coding involved a “data driven” approach, whereby codes were observed and labeled across the entire data set to portray the content of the data. Data-driven approaches are particularly useful when exploring little-studied topics, or when trying to give voice to underrepresented populations (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Codes were then clarified, changed, or refined throughout the initial coding process. For example, one code that started out as “discussing gender narratives” got broken down into “identifying as a feminist,” “discussing shame,” and “discussing double standards.” Codes that did not identify “key features” (Braun & Clarke, 2017) of the data were dropped (for example, codes such as “sexual experience not related to sexting,” “discussing research,” and “opinion about non-sexting topic”).

**Phase 3: Searching for themes.** After all data was initially coded and collated, an extensive list of codes (185 in total) was produced. In this phase, the analysis was re-focused at the broader level of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was a lengthy
process that involved an analysis of codes to assess how they combined to form overarching themes, sorting codes into potential themes, and ensuring all relevant data extracts were collated into their respective themes. The purpose of this process was to think about the relationship between codes and bring these pieces of data back together into a coherent whole towards providing a broader description of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After consultation with the committee, codes were then condensed in an attempt to capture patterns in women's reports. At this stage, some codes were considered relevant to the study questions and were grouped into themes, while other codes were determined to fall outside the scope of the current study (e.g., women’s stories of sexuality, sexual experiences, or sexual development not related to sexting) or to not have enough substance to hold as a separate theme (e.g., two participant’s descriptions of navigating their asexuality when sexting with partners). At times in this stage, some ideas that were similar in nature ended up being “absorbed” by larger themes (e.g. “Sexting feels more comfortable” and “sexting feels safer” were brought together under sexual safety and “sexting as a place to desire and feel desired” were absorbed under the themes “sexual discovery,” and “sexual pleasure,” respectively).

**Phase 4: Reviewing themes.** In this phase themes were refined. Some themes were merged due to overlap in codes, while others involving multiple points were split into separate themes (for example, upon deeper examination, diverse codes making up an initial theme titled “sexting is a space where women perceive having control” more accurately fit within other themes such as “safety” and “empowerment”). Other themes were rejected because they were outside of the scope of the study (for example a miscellaneous theme comprised of codes where women were sharing stories about their
sexual experiences not related to sexting). In one case, a potential theme related to sexting and consent was rejected due to insufficient support; while it was felt that consent was an important variable with regards to sexting negotiations, and how consent was determined was a question asked in the interview guide, most participants did not elaborate or provide indications that the process of obtaining, negotiating, or clarifying consent was a key feature of how they described sexting beyond “consent is implied/assumed” and “consent is necessary.” Therefore “consent” as a candidate theme was dropped as it did not cohere, and did not contain enough material that represented key features of the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013). Codes that were initially included in the “consent” theme that were indirectly related to consent, including “I can ask for what I want” and “competence in enforcing boundaries,” were then merged into other themes and Subthemes like “speaking up” and “safety.”

In phase four, close attention was paid to what Patton (1990) refers to as the dual criteria for judging categories: internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. In this sense it was assessed whether the themes formed a coherent pattern, while still maintaining clear and identifiable distinctions and boundaries. As woman’s accounts were dynamic and complex, at times it was difficult to ensure complete distinction between themes when a quote referred to multiple ways of making meaning that slotted into multiple themes (for example when participants discussed how they made sense of pleasure, desire, and exploring sexual interests). In these instances, attempts were made to stay as close to the intended meaning of the quote as possible, and when there was uncertainty “member checking” was used to clarify or confirm intended purpose of the quote (see Phase 5b: member checking for further explanation of this process). In this
case, participants were asked to comment on the authenticity or trustworthiness of the analysis as a whole, and in specific cases, the participants were asked to substantiate whether or not the meaning intended by a participant’s narrative or quote was captured so as to not misrepresent participant’s views (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It is acknowledged, however, that some overlap exists due to the different ways participants made sense of some of the same concepts, experiences, or terminology (for example, some participants used the terminology “desire” to explain “expressing what they wanted to happen sexually” while others used the term “desire” to express pleasure/arousal.

**Phase 5: Defining and naming themes.** To define and name themes, the essence of each theme must be identified, including what aspect of the data each particular theme captures (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this study, this included identifying what was unique and distinct about each grouping of data and explaining why. It also was a process of uncovering the main message in participants’ interviews to reflect their intended meaning. Themes were defined and named in such a way that reflected the concepts and terminology inherent in the data but also in the theoretical literature that supported the data. For example, theme names were selected to reflect as closely as possible the words that participants used, or the concepts they appeared to be expressing in lay terms. However in a couple of cases, theme names reflected the concepts that participants were expressing using words more recognizable in the theoretical literature (for example participants rarely used the terms sexual “scripts” however their narratives clearly indicated they were referring to a “script”). Theme names thus attempted to complete the detailed analysis that answer the question of what story each theme tells, how it relates to the overall research, and the narratives that emerged from the data (Braun and Clarke,
In some cases where themes were larger or complex, subthemes were added to provide structure to the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this phase, efforts were made to ensure there was no significant overlapping of data or ideas in themes by consulting with research experts in the “learning services” department of the university library and the research committee. An initial report of the data was provided to these experts who were asked whether themes made sense to them conceptually, and whether the quotes selected supported each theme well, whether there were any overlaps in ideas across quotes and themes, or whether there were any ideas or quotes that seemed extraneous, unclear, or misplaced. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert this process of ensuring themes “capture the contours of the coded data” (p. 91) is important for reflecting meanings evident in the data as a whole and thus determining validity of the data. As an additional step, member checking was undertaken with a few participants (4 in total) who previously consented to being a part of this process (see Phase 5b: member checking). In two cases, participants mentioned that relational motivations for sexting was not included in the thematic structure. Some of these relational codes (i.e., intimacy and connection) were initially included in other candidate themes (such as “expressing pleasure and intimacy” and “communicating sexual desires”) while others (i.e., sexting being used for relationship maintenance, sexting taking place in long distance relationships) did not, upon first analysis, appear to combine into a substantial overarching theme. The data was then reviewed a second time and interviews were re-coded with attention to relational aspects of sexting. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that re-coding additional data that may have been missed in earlier coding is an important part of the current stage of analysis. A new theme related to the relational aspects of sexting that appeared to be important to
participants was included. The final themes presented in the following results section represent how young women described their sexting experiences.

**Phase 5b (optional): Member checking.** Member checking, broadly speaking, is the process of checking the accuracy of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). At the time of interview, participants were asked whether they would be willing to be contacted during the data analysis process to verify whether their narratives were being captured and their data was accurately represented. Braun and Clarke (2013) assert that member checking is particularly useful when conducting research that aims to give voice to participant’s experiences as it provides an opportunity for participants to check the credibility and reliability, or correct any misperceptions or misunderstandings of their narratives. Participants who agreed were noted on the master list and then contacted via their preferred contact method and asked if they were still interested in this follow up. Six participants were contacted, five agreed, and one did not respond. Participants met face to face with the researcher. Themes were reviewed verbally and participants were asked their feedback (e.g. whether the themes made sense and accurately reflected the participants interview, whether there were gaps) (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This process of member checking served to ensure that meanings and perceptions that participants wished to portray through their interviews were captured accurately and completely.

**Phase 6: Producing the report.** The final phase of thematic analysis is to clearly and concisely report the data in a compelling and comprehensible way. Themes and subthemes are presented in the Results section below. Direct quotations are used throughout to support the themes and give voice to the participants. Pseudonyms are used
to maintain participant confidentiality. Participants’ identified sexual orientation is shared with their age to provide a more fulsome picture of their identities.

Chapter 3: Results

The purpose of this research was to better understand how young Canadian women describe their sexting experiences. Specifically: How/in what ways do young Canadian women use sexting? What role does sexting play in young Canadian women’s lives, sexualities, and relationships? And how does sexting impact young Canadian women?

Participant Demographics

Over the duration of this study, 30 self-identified women were interviewed on their experiences with sexting. No participants self-identified as transgender, however self-disclosure was left to the discretion of the participant. The majority of participants heard about the study via Facebook posts \((n = 18)\) while the rest heard via word of mouth \((n = 11)\). Only one participant heard about the study from a Twitter posting that a friend had shared. The women were all undergraduate college or university students located in Southern Ontario, with the majority of participants coming from the University of Guelph \((n = 6)\), the University of Waterloo \((n = 5)\), McMaster University \((n = 4)\) and Ryerson University \((n = 4)\). The rest of the participants came from various universities and colleges in the Southern Ontario region. Participants fell between the ages of 18-25 \((M = 21)\) with the majority being between the ages of 21-23 (see Table 2). The majority of women identified as heterosexual \((n = 14)\) and reported being in a romantic or sexual relationship \((n = 18)\). Not all participants who reported being in a relationship were monogamous; four participants reported being in some type of consensually non-
monogamous relationship from polyamorous to “open” to “unspecified but not exclusive.” The majority of respondents were Caucasian ($n = 17$). Participants were varied in terms of religious affiliations. See Table 1 for all demographics.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Responses (from open ended questions)</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
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<td>9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-racial</td>
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<td>Eastern-European</td>
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<td>7%</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Christian</td>
<td></td>
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<td>23%</td>
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<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-religious</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose not to answer</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Sexting Behavior

Participants were asked how frequently they sexted (e.g. infrequent, moderate, and frequent) in order to better understand how participants used sexting. Participants were asked this as part of the open-ended interview format so as to better elicit their own perceptions of sexting frequency, rather than imposing meanings of sexual frequency on them. As such, participants were invited to explain what “frequent”, “moderate”, and “infrequent” meant for them. The majority of participants reported being “moderate” sexters ($n = 17$). For example, one participant reported having sexted around 500 times in her lifetime while another reported having sexted less than 30 times in her lifetime total. Most participants were unable to provide a number or estimate for how many times they had sexted in total. Participants varied in how often they initiated sexting, with responses ranging from “never” to “every time.” The majority of women said they initiated their sexting encounters about half the time ($n = 11$), while a sizeable minority reported they initiated most of the time ($n = 9$). Participants were also asked whom they sexted (and were invited to provide multiple answers; i.e., partners, friends, casual hookups, strangers etc.). The majority of participants reported sexting their romantic partners ($n = 18$) or casual partners ($n = 17$) most frequently.

Participants were also asked how often they felt their sexting experiences were positive. The majority of participants ($n = 20$) reported their sexting experiences were positive 90% to 100% of the time and only two participants reported having few positive experiences (between 10%-30% of the time). Participants were asked to clarify whether a positive experience meant “nothing bad happened” or whether it meant “it was pleasurable and enjoyable.” Participants characterized their experiences as “positive”
because they were “pleasurable and enjoyable.” Participants who reported having few positive experiences reported that their experiences were not necessarily negative or damaging, they were just unremarkable. Most of these participants described their experiences as “meh.” See Table 2 for Participant Sexting Characteristics.

Table 2

*Participant Sexting Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Sexting</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrequent</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Initiating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every Time</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of the Time</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half of the Time</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than Half of the Time</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Whom Did Participants Sext (participants could select multiple answers)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic Partners</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual Partners</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Matches/Online Partners</td>
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<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Partners</td>
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<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hookups</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintances</td>
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<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>How Frequently Sexting was Perceived as a Positive Experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>95-100%</td>
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<td>90-95%</td>
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<td>80-85%</td>
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<td>13%</td>
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<td>65-70%</td>
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<td>50%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-30%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, women were asked how they define and understand sexting and what activities and mediums were included in what they considered sexting. Participants almost unanimously responded that sexting included any sexual or erotic content (pictures, videos, messages) sent across electronic mediums (cell phones, facebook
SEXTING

messenger). One participant included casual flirting type messages as sexting and one participant included skype interactions.

Themes

Seven themes help answer the four research questions related to how young women use sexting, what role it plays in their lives, sexualities, and relationships, and what impact sexting has on them. The final question related to what young women need to support their sexting wellbeing will be further answered and expanded upon in the discussion as it reflects the insights of participants across all themes. The themes (and their respective sub-themes) are presented in no particular order as no theme was more important or prevalent than the others. They are as follows:

Theme 1: Pleasure

Subtheme: Broadening Meanings of Pleasure
Subtheme: My Pleasure Matters
Subtheme: Arousal and Turn Ons
Subtheme: Sexual Fantasy

Theme 2: Intimacy and Connection

Subtheme: Sexting as a Sexual Outlet
Subtheme: Increasing and Deepening Communication
Subtheme: Vulnerability and Trust

Theme 3: Sexual Self-Discovery

Subtheme: Becoming Sexual
Subtheme: What I am Into
Subtheme: Alternative Sexual Interests
Theme 1: Pleasure

This theme sheds light on how young women use sexting and the impact sexting had on them. During interviews, participants compared their sexting experiences to their “actual sex” experiences and reported that sexting enabled them to have pleasure(s) that they often did not get to have in physical sexual activities. This theme reflects an overarching narrative present in the interviews that sexting enabled women to expand their perceptions of and possibilities for pleasure. Women suggested sexting increased possibilities for experiences of pleasure and fulfillment in four ways: (1) Broadening the
Meaning of Pleasure reflects how what pleasure “looked” like shifted for some participants (2) My Pleasure Matters reflects how sexting supported their right to pleasure (3) Arousal and Turn Ons specifically speaks to how sexting helped increase access to pleasure by catering to participant’s particular turn ons or methods of getting aroused and (4) Sexual Fantasy reflects how sexting provided opportunities to create specific scenarios or fantasies that may not be possible or practical in person.

**Broadening Meanings of Pleasure.**

Nadia (23; Pansexual) explained how sexting was a medium through which she could expand what pleasure meant to her, in contrast to physical encounters that she said were constricting:

> With actual sex, there’s this huge pressure. That pleasure is orgasming and orgasming is the only pleasure. We forget so much about other forms of sexual pleasure that aren't orgasms. Don't get me wrong, orgasms are awesome and I think everyone should have them all the time. But that shouldn't be the be all end all goal of sexual relations. I feel like a lot of partners, especially male partners, assume, well the goal is orgasm and so that's the only thing - I need an orgasm. Well I think there can be physical pleasure without touching. So with sexting, maybe I’m not touching myself every time. Maybe it's more akin to mental pleasure. But if I'm washing the dishes and I'm reading these text messages, I still get that tingly feeling. So I'm still getting that physical pleasure, but I'm just not in my room wearing lingerie and touching myself. But I'm still getting that physical pleasure. Or mental pleasure - like feeling good about yourself just as a sexual person. And social pleasure, I think also comes into play. Because you're just feeling sexual and feeling good about your sexuality, which is something that can be very difficult to find in our society because of the whole women can't be sexual creatures.

Isobel (22; Straight) also shared that sexting meant an expansion of how she could conceptualize pleasure, and thus experience pleasure. For her this meant using sexting as a medium to explore sensuality in ways she did not in in-person sex. She explained the importance that sexting plays for her regarding sensuality and pleasure:
I think that sexting has been really big for me in understanding pleasure without necessarily anyone having to achieve orgasm. Sexting has also been a really big thing for delayed gratification. I feel like sexting has been a lot more important to me than like ... Or at least at this stage, it's been more important to me than physical sex, when I'm thinking about sensuality. Sensuality for me is a lot of teasing and a lot of dialogue, and so sexting let's me get that dialogue, and it let's me do it over a bunch of different mediums, I feel like sexting has been really big for the development of my attitudes about sensuality and how I see sensuality, is I express it largely through sexting mediums, as opposed to in person. And that is so much more fulfilling to me right now.

My Pleasure Matters.

One impact of sexting was that it helped women feel, and assert, that their pleasure mattered. For many women, expanding ideas of pleasure meant acknowledging that their pleasure was important, and working to create space for experiences they would enjoy. For example, some participants, like Sandra (19; Straight), said that sexting was a profoundly transformative experience because it enabled her a small liberation from the pressure to serve a partner and created a space that made possible her own sexual pleasure:

So I guess I realized that with sexting I was able to take pleasure, and I also figured out at the same time to let go this feeling of guiltiness – guiltiness about taking pleasure. So definitely when I'm actually in bed with somebody, I am a lot more selfless. In bed, I'll give up more to please my partner. Whereas via sexting, I can be a lot more selfish. I want what I want. And then I can actually get those needs met.

Arousal and Turn Ons.

However, women’s perceptions of pleasure went beyond just making space for their enjoyment or the realization of being entitled to enjoyment. Women spoke about using sexting as a activity where very specific arousal needs could be met because encounters were created specifically for what turned these women on. Sexting was seen as a way to get “exactly what they were looking for” as women said sexts could be
“tailored” right to their desires. The specific desires varied across individuals and tastes differed; some women reported needing pictures and videos, others reported they felt it was “hot” to discuss previous sexual encounters they had had with a partner, while other’s preferred made up scenarios or exchanges of internet porn. However, more so than other stimuli, the need for words and stories as opposed to visual or tactile stimuli came up in many interviews. One participant, Lucy (21; Heteroflexible) shared that she would specifically request stories from her partners because stories and words turn her on more than visual stimuli and she said sexting was pleasurable because it is like “porn written just for [her].”

Shannon (22; Straight) also spoke about the potential for sexting to be more physically arousing because it is primarily text based. She elaborated, suggesting sexts stimulated her imagination which enabled her to “access” and experience more pleasure:

I think [sexting] is a wonderful thing, and I think it can turn you on in ways sometimes physical contact can't. For myself, I am very word oriented. Reading a dirty message from my partner turns me on like no other and that can be a different turn on compared to physical touch because you get to imagine it. I think the imagining of it is part of it and the reason why it's sexy or can turn you on because you get to imagine it in your way.

Shannon’s account supports what many participants spoke about which was that sexting was more an autonomous activity. Participants suggested because sexting was removed from a physical realm, they felt more “authority” to interpret or create a sext that catered to their wants and desires.

**Sexual Fantasy.**

Many participants spoke about using sexting as a way to explore pleasurable fantasies. Participants in relationships, in particular, expressed that they purposefully used sexting to create “scenarios” where by in person they may just have “regular sex.” When
referring to fantasy, participants spoke about how sexting created space for them to experience a type of sexual encounter that they (or their partners) otherwise (purposefully) wouldn’t do in person. For some participants using sexting as fantasy was helpful when there were sexual incompatibilities. Whether it was because there were physical limitations (i.e sexual functioning concerns, bodies not “fitting” well), because participants knew the “reality” of their fantasy wouldn’t translate to pleasure in person, or because their partners felt uncomfortable with certain requests, participants reported that sexting helped them explore pleasurable sexual experiences that otherwise would never be physically explored, but were none the less wanted and enjoyable. For example, Jocelyn (20; Straight) shared that fantasy helped her “act out” a particular scenario that she knew in person was physically inaccessible:

Sometimes it just does not make sense because bodies don't work that way sometimes, they just don’t fit well together. Like, I am a very tall human being. Picking me up is not easy, but imagining it is so, so hot…and so [with sexting] he still gets to participate in that. So it’s like we get to do it, in a sense. And yeah, I get that thing that I want.

For others the incompatibility may be more about being interested in something that turns them on that a partner's not really into. Christi (21; Straight) shared an experience whereby she and her partner purposefully would use sexting as a way to create and enact certain sexual behaviors without it having to be physically “real.” She explained that this allowed them to enjoy something while still maintaining their physical safety, comfort, and relational integrity:

I think my experience with sexting is that it gives people a space to maybe ask for things or say things that they wouldn't normally ask for in person or do in person. So, like with my own partner it tends to be maybe things that he would never actually do in real life for example. Like he never wants to hurt me. Like he doesn't feel comfortable with hitting or slapping or anything like that which I don't mind. But he's not good with it. So, that's fine. But he kind of explores that a
little bit more if we're sexting because it gives him space to do it without actually physically hurting me. So I guess my thing would be that it gives people space to explore certain pleasures without it being real. If that makes sense.

These women’s narratives reflect what many participants shared which was sexting is used as a way to experience or act out sexual pleasures that in person are not possible or practical.

**Theme 2: Intimacy and Connection**

This theme helps explain some of the ways young women used sexting in their sexual and intimate relationships. The majority of participants who spoke about intimacy and connection were currently in committed long-term, and long-distance, relationships. Those that were not currently in relationships spoke about intimacy in the context of past relationships. This theme reflects that participants perceived experiencing intimacy and connection via sexting in three ways. (1) Sexting as a Sexual Outlet reflects that sexting provided opportunities for sexual connection that was otherwise not possible (as in long distance relationships), or because sex was not happening (due to stress, busy lives, or growing “too comfortable” in a relationship). (2) Increasing and Deepening Communication reflects that sexting increased communication between partners, and specifically opened up opportunities to discuss things of a sexual nature that were “deeper” and more intimate that may not come out in in-person communication. (3) Vulnerability and Trust as cornerstones of building intimacy.

**Sexting as a Sexual Outlet.**

When it came to long distance relationships, participants spoke about how sexting provided a replacement for them and their partners that helped them maintain connection and intimacy, helped them feel closer to each other when far away, and helped them be
sexual with each other when it wasn’t physically possible. Participants not in long distance relationships shared how sexting provided them a sexual outlet that they had been missing or neglecting because of busy or stressful lives. For some participants this was about maintaining the “spark” in a relationship; they spoke about how sexting with their partner during the day back and forth created a sexual tension that would bring them closer together when they got home from a busy work or school day. Participants shared that where as they might normally “throw on an ugly sweatshirt and watch TV,” the anticipation built from sexting throughout the day helped them maintain a sexual side to a long-term relationship.

Sophie (21; Bisexual) said sexting helped her maintain her sexual connection with her partner she had started to neglect due to the demands of school. She said sexting got them back on track because it reminded her of the fulfillment and enjoyment sex brought:

So grad school's very stressful, so there have been times where I've been very stressed and just super not feeling it and my partner was very not okay with the fact that we were never having sex so a lot of sexting happened during that time and I think it was a good way to kind of remind me that it was something that I enjoyed. 'Cause it was like, "Hey, remember this time we did this?" And I was like, "Oh yeah, I do, that was fun. Let's do that."

**Increasing and Deepening Communication.**

Participants also reported sexting helped them feel emotionally close to their partner (regardless of life-stress, or long distance) because they could communicate with more frequency and depth. Participants shared that sexting helped them deepen their intimacy because they felt they could share more intimate and vulnerable aspects of themselves. For example, Janessa (22; Straight) explained that sexting helped her and her partner get to know each other on a deeper level, which fostered greater intimacy and connection:
Sexting just makes us very open with each other and [have] more communication. I think that was, for me, a way to maybe discover my partner, and explore about him through some other ways….Like to kind of find out what he was into, to tell him what I'm into, I think that was another tool that was available to us, to improve our connection, get more connected on a different level, as well as increase the excitement between us.

Vulnerability and Trust.

Sexting: The process of exchanging photos, or sharing secret desires was reported by some participants to increase vulnerability and trust between partners. Participants reported that this in turn increased experiences of intimacy.

For example Carly (19; Straight) said that allowing herself to be vulnerable with her partner, and trusting him with such an intimate side of herself (despite potential risks) allowed her to experience a greater sense of emotional connection:

I let him have a sexy photo to save and keep. My boyfriend has anxiety that's really strong, especially about relationships, and it was a gesture of trust, where I was like, "You know what? I trust you. I don't think that you would ever stab me in the back with this or anything else, so I want you to have this. This is me trusting you." So [Sexting] contributes to healthy sexuality. It contributes to healthy relationships where you're sexually and emotionally vulnerable and together.

Theme 3: Sexual Self-Discovery

This theme overall shed light on the role sexting plays in young women’s lives, and also how some women use sexting. Many participants made sense of sexting as a tool that played a role in discovering their sexualities. The majority of participants reported that sexting helped them get to know aspects of their sexual selves in ways they may not have otherwise explored (or more quickly than they would have without sexting). Sexting as an activity for sexual discovery was seen throughout the interviews in three ways. (1) Becoming Sexual encompassed the ways that some women described sexting as an activity where they “became” sexual, meaning they discovered that they were sexual, and
had sexual feelings, or that they could give themselves permission to be sexual (in
general or in specific ways). (2) Discovering What I am Into refers to how sexting was
where some participants discovered what they were into sexually (including sexual
interests, and who they want to be sexual with). (3) Exploring Alternative Sexualities
reflects how participants described sexting as a “space” where they discovered and tried
on preferences for kink or alternative sexual interests. (4) Exploring Sexual Orientation
shows how sexting helped some participants discover and solidify their sexual
orientations.

**Becoming Sexual.**

Firstly, many participants shared that sexting played an important role in their
development as it was their first foray into sexual explorations. Particularly, women
described that sexting played a key role in them discovering and accepting that they were
sexual beings that had sexual wants and that those wants were valid and real. Sexting,
they shared, provided them permission to be sexual, and an outlet to become better aware
of, and express their sexuality.

Some participants spoke about sexting being their first sexual exploration. Linda
(23; Bisexual), for example, said sexting played a pivotal role in her coming to know her
sexual side because of the opportunity it provided her to “practice and try on” various
aspects of sex and sexuality. She said it was not only how she first “got sexy” and
experienced sexual desire, sexual attraction and sexual feelings, it was also her first outlet
to explore sexual pleasure.

Like Linda, Shauna (20; Straight) shared how sexting helped her discover her
sexual side:
Maybe then I didn't know how to become sexual... I get a sext that says sexual things, and you're like, 'Oooh, this feels good.' You get a physiological feeling and I didn't realize that that could happen until recently. I don't think I had ever experienced it. I feel like I'm growing as a person. It's just like I'm growing in that field, in that department, the sexual part and sexting is like...guiding me, if that makes sense? I'm realizing that I can be in tune with my sexuality... Because when you come from a place where you're like, 'I don't know what my body is doing right now. I don't know if this is good or bad. I don't know what I like and what I don't like,'... sexting is a way to do that.

For other participants, sexting was about discovering that one had permission to be sexual. Jaspreet (23; Straight) shared that sexting enabled her to get in touch with—and gave her permission to experience—sexual sensations that she used to suppress and ignore due to cultural narratives that did not acknowledge women’s sexuality as something that could be for themselves:

I think in the beginning, I started off being like, "No, I don't want this. No, I don't want this." But now, it's just like, it's okay. I think I'm starting to be more comfortable with my wants and my desires, and obviously, you go through those feelings and you can either act or suppress them, and for a very long time, I was like, "No. I'll just forget about it." Even being with a partner, I was like, "We don't have to do this. I'm fine," but now, it's like, "No. I'm going to act on it. I want this," so yeah. I think sexting, to me, it's 100% a medium where I can be like “I want something.” You know what I mean? So it's like, that to me, is also like I can feel good about myself as this sexual being. I feel like I am being able to be sexual, to have desires.

What I am Into.

Sexting also played a role in learning one’s sexual tastes. One of the main benefits of sexting, according to the participants, was the opportunity to get to know their sexual selves much better: their sexual styles and preferences, what they like and what they don't, what their limits are, things they would be into trying and things they would not.

For example, Cat (20; Straight) shared that sexting not only enabled to her understand her sexual tastes, but that it also helped her develop her own boundaries and limits around how she would like to experience them:
I think [sexting] really changed my sexuality…when I first started having sex, I really didn't know what I liked and what I didn't like. But I think having those [sexting] conversations beforehand [where] I'm like, "Oh, you know what? That doesn't work for me. But you know what? This really does" …really helped. I think sexting has done so much for me of just learning about myself about what I like and what I don't like and the type of person I want to be sexual with.

Like Cat, other participants suggested that because sexting helped to get to know their sexual sides better, they felt they could make more informed decisions about when, why, and how to express their sexuality.

Alternative Sexual Interests.

Many participants specifically spoke about using sexting as an activity whereby they could discover more “taboo” aspects of sexuality. They shared that sexting felt like a less awkward medium to broach, in particular, the subject of fetishes or unconventional sexual tastes or practices, which thus helped expand their knowledge of self.

Ava (23; Pansexual) shared how sexting helped her discover alternative sexual preferences with her partner:

I find fetishes come out in sexting, because I feel like the person might be more comfortable saying it over text then saying it in person, being like hey I like to do this kind of stuff and they might feel embarrassed to say it in person…I find a lot of sexting can go into that….you can share maybe those darker, dirtier secrets that you'd wanted to explore, but you're also nervous to mention in person.

One particular way women used sexting to discover the more “alternative” side of themselves and their sexualities was through anonymous sexting or sexting with casual partners. They reported there was more security in sexting someone casual because you may not see them in real life and thus you could feel less inhibited in revealing aspects of their sexual selves they normally keep guarded. Participants shared that sexting helped them feel more bold to open up and share what they called “the weird stuff.”

For example, Dawn (21; Bisexual), shared that having anonymous sexting
interactions enabled her to discover and explore her sexual tastes without feeling or worrying about judgment.

When it’s online, and its someone anonymous, you have like no judgment, like they can judge you all they want, you don't know them, they don't know you. It's almost an experiment. Like hey are other people into this or is it just me? It's allowed me to explore things that I wouldn't normally do face to face with a person which helped me understand myself and my sexual tastes.

Participants who spoke about sexting as an opportunity to explore more taboo sides of their sexualities said that it was a helpful medium because it was “no strings attached”: They shared that the sting of rejection is diminished when something is communicated behind a screen and as a result there is less shame being told no over a text versus no in person.

Sexual Orientation.

For a minority of participants, sexting played a role in helping them discover their sexual orientations. While many of the research participants identified as heterosexual or heteroflexible, a notable minority identified as on the LGBTQA+ spectrum. For many of these women, it was sexting that seemed to play a crucial role in helping them identify, understand, clarify, or confirm their sexual orientations. One of two participants who identify as asexual, Toni (21) shared:

I think definitely in the past [there was] a little bit of confusion I think just of what it means to be asexual…and coming to understand that about myself. I think [sexting] made it more clear just that I wasn't enjoying most of what I thought I was enjoying. I think before when I was younger, I like felt like I was much more of a sexual being and then kind of looking at it from a distance where there's not somebody that's actually physically there with you, you can actually look a little bit deeper at what you're feeling and I guess it helped me realize I wasn't feeling much.

While sexting helped Toni discover her orientation through becoming aware of a lack of sexual response and feelings, others noticed a development of sexual feelings
towards different genders which nudged them to entertain the possibility of a shift or expansion in their orientation. Two participants, Steph (22; Bisexual) and Shauvann (22; Bisexual), for example, discovered an interest in women they did not realize they had because of particular sexting requests involving threesomes. Shauvann shared:

> I guess [the awareness of being bi] would have started because I had past partners who were very inclined to try to get me to sext about doing a threesome and when I would think about that, and when I would talk with them about it, I realized that I really enjoyed the idea of physically being with another woman. That was part of what prompted me to really start thinking about that and exploring my sexuality in that way.

Rhiann (21; Gay) said it was the absence of experiencing sexual feelings, in her case towards men, which led her to solidify her orientation. She said sexting was an activity that enabled her to renegotiate her sexuality because she was able to ask herself why her experiences sexting with men felt unfulfilling to her. She explained that her initial lack of enjoyment in sexting was not because her male partners were not good at sexting, but rather because she was not interested in men. She said she was able to solidify that she was gay through another sexting interaction with a female friend:

> So I had this close friend from high school.... I knew she identified as liking females... So I told her "I think I like girls or whatever," and then she was like, "Well, do you want to ... test that?" We had a [sexting] exchange there and it was just words but it was so memorable because we were close and I just thought it was like a nice thing... for her to allow me to explore that without any kind of judgment.

**Theme 4: Sexual Empowerment**

This theme helped illuminate one of the impacts sexting had on young women. Sexting is an activity whereby women explored and, for the most part, perceived feeling sexually empowered. Participants described sexting as empowering in four ways, broken down into two areas. On the one hand, empowerment was about being sexual for others –
either as taking pleasure in turning someone on or feeling the need to turn someone on for sexual “approval or validation.” The first two subthemes reflect this: (1) Being Sexual for Others. Participants described that there was a power that came from being sexual for others (mostly men) and pleasing them/turning them on and (2) Empowerment is Complicated. A few participants explored the perception of empowerment through a critical lens; these participants perceived that feeling validated sexually was empowering, but remarked these feelings were “complicated” and wrapped up in broader messages about women’s sexuality and notions that sexiness and sexual “performance” may be a culturally sanctioned “empowering” position for women.

On the other hand, empowerment was more about being sexual for oneself and creating more space for one’s own sexual rights. This is reflected in the final two subthemes: (3) Being Sexual for Myself. For other participants, owning one’s sexuality and making it more for oneself as opposed to others was perceived as empowering. (4) Speaking Up. This reflects how women also perceived sexting to be a medium whereby they could have more of a “voice.”

**Being Sexual for Others.**

Participants in the study perceived a feeling of empowerment that came from the ability to please their partners and turn others on. Many women spoke proudly of their ability to please their partners and the feeling of power that came with wielding their sexuality, saying they themselves took pleasure and enjoyment in it. For example, Janelle (25; Straight) shared:

I think that it can be empowering in some sort of sense, like knowing that you have the ability to turn someone on, or get someone off, or whatever. I think that it can definitely be something that's empowering. And I think that's what a lot of people miss, or that's such a misconception, is the fact that we are strictly there to
be pleasurable for a male, but it's like we also get pleasure from it, so knowing that we get pleasure from it or that we were able to pleasure someone is kind of this empowering feeling, I think. It's not so much like this thing where it's like, I was just some vessel for someone to have sex with. I feel empowered sometimes if I know the person and I'm able to get them off just with my words and my imagination, which turns me on. It's more like, oh, I actually benefited from this and I was able to put this person in a vulnerable situation, as well, and have them feel like I pleased them, or whatever.

For Janelle, the ability to turn someone on was empowering for several reasons; she rejected the script that women are passive (and thus did not derive pleasure or enjoyment from having an effect on their partner). She shared that, in contrast to her in-person experiences, she felt her efforts to please benefitted her as well which was empowering. She further explained that there is power that comes from having the ability to affect someone sexually, particularly making them feel vulnerable (typically a powerless feeling), and specifically how empowering it feels to make someone feel vulnerable through the use of just words and imagination.

Like many participants who spoke about sexting as empowering, Hailee (21; Straight) suggested that the feeling of empowerment came from teasing someone without using her body as the medium. She explored how because she was “conventionally” attractive, she was used to being desired or being given a sense of power through no effort of her own. So when she was able to take charge of her sexuality through being suggestive over sexting, she said she felt personal strength because she could be an active participant in turning someone on:

A lot of adult men used to hit on me a lot, and so I knew I was attractive, but I'm like, "… I'm not trying. I didn't ask for your attention..." Whereas, when it came to sexting, it was taking an inherently different medium that had nothing to do, originally at least, with my body - because I wasn't involving photos or video or anything - it had nothing to do with I looked like, but it had everything to do with how I could wield my own sexuality and my own sensuality and what I could do with it, if I chose. So it was like a type of empowerment or sexual power…
Hailee’s narrative suggests that part of what made sexting feel empowering for her was that she was an active participant in the process of creating desire. In her interview she commented on her experience of reclaiming an active role in sexual encounters, rather than being a passive object of other’s desire simply because of how she looked or because she simply “existed” as a young woman. Other participants, including Mira (19; Straight), for example, similarly stated that learning to be “actively arousing” versus “just being arousing by existing” helped them feel more powerful because it helped them resist messages that women are simply objects for men to enjoy. Mira explained that she used sexting to grapple with the question “can I be hot?” (as opposed to “am I hot?”) and that she felt more personal autonomy with this question. She clarified that she doesn’t mean being “conventionally attractive,” but rather there is a power in knowing that one can evoke desire in others.

**Empowerment is Complicated.**

Both Mira and Hailee made sense of “being hot” as something that can be an active and passive experience – something that can feel powerful personally, but something that also happens to many women simply by existing [in a sexualized world]. When participants talked about feeling empowered by turning others on, in all cases these feelings were framed within the context of opposite gender interactions. Most participants did not make sense of their hopes of “being sexy” as an intentional adherence to gendered scripts of being desirable for men specifically, however the interviews often revealed that women carried questions of am I sexy, desirable, and wanted (by men) as important cornerstones of being sexually validated, including developing their sense of themselves as viable sexual beings. Women who sexted other women (or who sexted men and
women), made distinctions in their experiences between being sexy and pleasing “for men” and being “sexual with” women. For example, Mary (24; Pansexual) observed that when she sexted women she did not feel “the same kind of pressure to be sexy in the same way that [she does] with a guy.” She explained that with men sometimes women still feel like they have to “perform sexiness.” She said that with women she felt total liberty to just focus on herself, her body and her needs.

For one woman, Rosalie (24; Asexual), the effort to elicit desire in men was a concentrated and purposeful practice in her journey to coming to understand and make sense of important and confusing aspects of her sexual identity. She described how she used sexting to practice being desired and desirable as a way to feel “normal” and thus validate that she was a viable sexual being:

I was in this period where I think on some subconscious level, I felt that if I engaged in sexual behaviors like sexting, if I do that, then I'm normal and everything's normal and I'm still desirable. A lot of it was proving to myself that I could still be desirable, even though I felt asexual, which is a really, really weird paradox... I guess I was seeking validation from these men, but it wasn't anything about a particular man. It was just in general. It wasn't ever like I saw X person and was like oh, man, I want that person to like me. It was more in general. Wanting to believe about myself that I was desirable, pretty, any laundry list of those adjectives. From the fact that they would want to, in this case, sext with me, that I was desirable to this person, whatever person it was.

While Rosalie described her sexting experiences as “empowering” because they enabled her to feel “normal” and thus “validated” as a sexual being, she also said she personally did not love the term “empowerment.” She explained that she felt her experiences were complicated because what is seen as “normal” sexually may not have fit with what felt “natural” to her. She questioned how something could be empowering when it necessitated enacting a type of sexuality in order to be valid. Two other participants, when discussing their experience as sexual women in general, similarly felt
the term “empowerment” evoked “clichés” about how young women are supposed to “perform sexual liberation” in ways that are pleasing and ultimately consumed by men.

**Being Sexual for Myself.**

While the above women perceived their experiences of empowerment as arising from an ability to please (or a necessity to please) their partners, others perceived their experiences of sexting as being empowering because they were able to be sexual on their own terms/for themselves. Many of the accounts women shared about empowerment generally were situated in the context of decision making around sexting; deciding when to be sexual, with whom, and why (rather than being responsive to other people’s sexual needs). For these young women, decisions were made based on prioritizing what their own values around sexting were, and especially what their current mood was. For example, Elodie (23; Bisexual) shared, “I think that part of what makes me feel empowered [with sexting] is, this is something I'm choosing to do because I feel like it right now, I'm aware of how it makes my me feel”. Like Elodie, many participants articulated that empowerment was less of a conscious act “of resistance to expectations,” and more of a by-product of simply deciding to sext because it suited their moods and felt good in the moment.

Other participants elaborated on this by explaining that sexting was “liberating” because they perceived an ability to put themselves first and be “sexy for [me]” rather than for others. Many women talked about how they would be sexting someone and stop as soon as they were not getting anything (i.e. enjoyment, benefits) out of the experience, regardless of how much the other person was still enjoying the experience. Other participants described sexting as a tool where they could “own” their sexuality or be “the
master of [their] sexuality,” meaning subverting beliefs that a woman’s sexuality, her values and her decisions, exist and are primarily shaped for others. One participant, Desiree (21; Bisexual), explained that for her this meant using sexting as a way to say “yes” to being sexual, and go against the lessons she was taught in high school which encouraged her, as a woman, to say “no” to sexual requests from men. She said sexting helped her re-define what it meant to be a sexual gatekeeper - typically a term referring to women rejecting sexual advances – from a powerless position, to an empowering position for women because it means being in charge of sexual decisions based on what feels right and good [for her], and what [she] wants, as opposed to what is expected.

Other participants similarly made sense of sexting as empowering because they were able to deliberately reclaim an experience for themselves amidst pressures and expectations. For these participants, sexting was perceived as empowering because it was a way of accomplishing an act of “resistence.” In her interview, Mya (25; Bisexual) made sense of her experiences of sexting by situating them within some of her broader academic and personal questions about women’s place in the world, their sexualities, sexual spaces, and status. She shared the sentiment that empowerment in sexting can come from making personal choices based on mood, or needs, or desires, but she further highlights that making these decisions amidst, and actively in spite of, all the risk narratives and pressures attempting to mold and shape women’s sexual expression is where women will really be emancipated. She said sexting afforded her the opportunity to resist and reclaim and feel “kick-ass”:

I'd say women's empowerment is being able to do what they want and when they want without feeling shamed for it, without feeling bad about it by anyone including themselves, or about the internalized feelings of guilt, or misogyny, or pressures and expectations or rules coming in from the outside. Either by
strangers say if a nude was leaked, or family, friends, whoever, shaming them for it, just not having that going on...I definitely feel pretty kick ass when I'm sexting. I feel pretty proud of myself. Like, "Go, me!" Like, "Breaking the boundaries that people think I am or should be." It's a personal thing...I just think it's so empowering, for sure, for females to have that [sexting] that really says, "I'm a sexual being and this is my sexuality and this is how I like to do things." It's so important for people to feel...especially girls and women...to feel validated in their sexuality and that their sexuality is for no one else but for them....I guess sexting kinda allows maybe more space for that.

Speaking Up.

Many participants shared that sexting was a medium where they felt more comfortable speaking up: about what they wanted and did not want, about sexual likes and dislikes, about their boundaries. Women shared that compared to in person encounters, they spoke up more: they felt more supported about advocating for their own pleasure, they asked for their needs to be met more; they felt more confident about enforcing boundaries and demonstrated increased capacity to enforce boundaries, including saying no more clearly and confidently. Many participants described the ability to speak up as having more of a “voice” in sexual encounters and that having this “voice” was not only tied to perceiving an experience of empowerment, but also of equality because they felt that with sexting they had the same space to articulate their needs and desires. Some participants suggested sexting helped them feel more “equal” in a sexual encounter because of their increased ability to speak up. Participants also said that speaking up was directly tied to the comfort of using a digital medium to communicate, and that having this space had immediate and positive impacts on their sexual wellbeing. For example, Bree (21; Straight) discussed the importance of having a space where she could be more assertive, and how for her that meant an increase in getting her needs met sexually:
For myself at least I've really taken sexting as a tool to show my assertiveness in sexuality. The ability to go into a sexual encounter, and say – even just through text - "I am turned on by this and I deserve it." I think it's definitely allowed me to - not demand what I want more - but be more strong and I guess assertive in the ways that I go about getting what I want in a sexual relationship… Sexting gives you more of that voice.

**Theme 5: Sexual Comfort and Safety**

The theme sexual safety reflects how young women used sexting to facilitate more comfortable and safe sexual encounters. The theme also helps answer the question regarding the impact that sexting can have on some participants in terms of negative experiences. Participants described sexting as both a safer, yet at times less safe activity than offline sexual encounters. Two subthemes reflect these layered experiences. (1) Perceptions of Increased Safety and Comfort. (2) Perceptions of Decreased Safety and Comfort. Included in this subtheme are both participants actual negative sexting experiences as well as participants thoughts about potential negative experiences.

**Increased Comfort and Safety.**

Participants declared sexting to be safer for them to develop their sexual selves compared to offline spaces. Participants stated that they felt safer/more comfortable sexting for several reasons; At a basic level, participants said they felt they could explore their sexuality more freely, and without repercussion, as they risk no exposure to infection, disease, or unwanted pregnancies. Participants also perceived sexting as safer in that using a digital medium prevented them from crossing physical limits and boundaries – whether due to pressure or coercion – or because their bodies were not yet ready. Participants also stated that sexting was safer because they wouldn’t feel trapped in a situation where they may not be able to physically exit if they started to feel unsafe, or if they changed their mind about a person or sexual encounter.
With regards to not crossing physical limits, participants shared that sexting was a safer way to explore their sexuality without having to be physically present when that didn’t yet feel comfortable. For example, participants shared that they felt more “at ease” sexting - whether with a partner or a stranger - because there was a “script” one could follow that did not necessitate having to physically engage when they (or their bodies) did not feel in the mood or physically ready. They said that typing something enabled them to still respond and engage sexually without crossing a hard boundary. For example, Jacksonne (18, Bisexual) described sexting as safer and more comfortable because “you can explore what your limits are without having to risk physically crossing them.” She shared that at times she felt she was not ready to do certain sexual things, and so she used sexting as a medium to explore what it might look or feel like with a partner. She said for her this reduced any possible “trauma, regret, or feeling as though someone had taken advantage of [her].” Another participant, Christi (21, Straight), shared that the ability to say no to unwanted advances, or to change one’s mind mid-way through, was easier with sexting because you are more “removed” from a situation. Like many participants, she shared that sexting was “less personal” and thus there was less “obligation” to cater to or give in to another person’s demands. Elodie (23, Bisexual), shared:

I would say [with sexting] there's more opportunity to exit without shame. ... I think part of the thing with being physically intimate, if you started off wanting it, and you lost the mood halfway through, it's hard to exit that scenario. Yes, especially if its a safety thing – but even if not, even if you just lost sexual interest, and you're just not feeling it. You're physically there, and you have to deal with someone being hurt or offended or frustrated. When you are not physically with that person because it’s a screen, it's way easier to disengage that because you're not seeing those reactions.

Participants also reported they felt more confident saying “no” or changing their mind mid-way through an encounter without being in physical danger. Participants
reported that sometimes in person they did not feel they could physically exit a situation even if they wanted to. For some participants, like Mira (19; Straight) this was because they worried they did not have the physical stature or strength to exit and thus they worried they would be “trapped” with a person they felt uncomfortable around. They reported that when sexting they felt more capable and confident exiting such a negative situation.

Other participants, like Isobel (22; Straight), shared how for them, sexting particularly felt like a safer medium to negotiate their sexual boundaries with someone they were just getting to know sexually. Many articulated this as “being in the same room with someone” and trying to negotiate what was OK and what wasn’t felt like a much more “anxiety-provoking” situation. These women shared that with sexting, the “stakes were not as high.” Shannon (23; Straight) elaborated:

It's definitely easier to just say, "Hey I'm done now." And put a phone down. As opposed to saying, "Hey I'm done now." And having to physically leave a house or a room or getting them to leave your room or your house or whatever that looks like. Because there is still the dominating narrative that if you enter into a sexual experience with someone, you do that until, typically the male partner if there is one, is finished….or also, with sex it’s hard if you have that feeling and you change your mind partway through ... sometimes I found, with sexting, I guess depending on the partner, it can be really easy to just change the conversation back to something non-sexual. Or you can just verbally communicate that you are not comfortable at that moment or like if you don't feel comfortable saying that you can just be like, oh I have to do something else so I can't continue with this right now. That is something that is easier when you're sexting as opposed to in person. Because you can just put the phone down or you can walk away. It feels a little bit safer that way.

Shannon’s account further explained that not only are women facing anxieties over potentially not being physically able to exit, or remove a person, but that they also feel a pressure to adhere to a script that suggests that once consent is given it cannot be revoked. Shannon and Elodie’s stories suggest sexting helped some women felt safer
because they perceived more control over resisting such scripts and pressures. Many participants explained how practicing having control over sext translated into more confidence and control in person.

**Decreased Comfort and Safety.**

While the majority of participants reported that sexting was overwhelmingly a positive experience, women also spoke about their fears related to sexting; they shared an awareness of how sexting could pose unique risks that are not always found in in-person interactions. For example, though women did not report having these experiences, they said they still worried about their reputation should others find out they are being sexual. The impact of these worries were that women were hyper-aware and often calculating in terms of how, when, or why they would sext. They suggested with sexting the possibility of one’s sexuality, and sexual practices, being known could go far beyond a group of people, or even a school, and could potentially affect their future job prospects, reputation or employability if content or photos got leaked. Additionally, one woman said she worried whether a man would dox her or blackmail her.

A small handful of participants shared that they had some experiences which negatively impacted how they perceived the experience. These women said they perceived a sexting interaction to be unpleasant when the person they were sexting would say things that were “rude,” “vulgar,” “violent” or “a turn off.” There was also a gender difference reported in violent or aggressive messages; Participants shared that it was men, not women, who were more “crude,” aggressive or violent over sext. In some cases, women reported that it was their boyfriends who seemed to use sexting as “permission” to behave or speak in ways that they did not in person.
Carly (19; Straight) shared one experience where her partner at the time would sext her scenarios and requests that were in stark contrast to his sexual demeanor in person. She recalls:

"You would never say these things to my face, you know that I wouldn't be okay with them, and now here we are." So those I think would also count as not-so-great. So kind of like because it's over text, they feel like they can take the liberty to be a little more crude, graphic, aggressive.

Other participants said they had experienced partners who were persistent or aggressive in requesting sexts or did not take “no” for an answer. While women acknowledged that they can experience persistence and aggression in face-to-face sexual encounters too, that can be difficult to escape, with cellphone or email, women reported being subject to messages at all times of the day and night, repeatedly, even without being physically around the offending party. Though only a handful of participants shared experiences of discomfort when sexting, they explained that they felt a sense of not being able to get away from intrusive messages.

Dawn (21; Bisexual) also described a former arrangement she had with an older man where he broke the boundaries of what was initially agreed on. She shared that while he likely wouldn’t have been respectful in person either, sexting enabled him to pester her sexually even when she wasn’t around him:

I was in this BDSM sexting relationship. But it was kind of weird because there came a point ... where it was more so, "You have to devote your entire being to my satisfaction." But I was in school. I was like, "I don't have time for this. So the first couple weeks, it was really hard on me because I'd be in school and he'd be like, "No, you have to go to the bathroom and do this right now and send me a photo." And I'm like, "Okay, but I'm in class. You can't do that." And he's just like, "No," and then I'm like, "Okay." And so the first couple times, I would do it and it would be to a point where I would have to straight up ignore his calls and stuff because he persists and persists. You can't get away from that. It got to a point where I literally could not keep up with spending hours a day [sexting] him ... I was like, "I can't do this." He started really really talking back to me, talking
down to me and everything and berating the fuck out of me - you just get all these texts - it was awful. It got to a point where I was like, "Listen, I don't have the time for this, this is not what I signed up for. You are completely crossing this line." There was so much pushback, like he was trying so hard to say, "No, you're in the wrong." And I'm just like, "I want to exit this relationship."

Bronwyn’s account demonstrates that while she felt distressed in the moment, she still felt she had the ability to exert some control over the situation by ignoring calls, and eventually exit the situation without being in danger.

**Theme 6: Optimal Self-Representation**

This theme also helps answer the question of how young women used sexting in that sexting was a tool that allowed women to “tailor” their bodies and interactions with partners in very particular ways that in-person would not be possible, plausible, or as easy/comfortable. The ability to curate one’s image through this digital medium meant an opportunity for women to ensure their self-representations (their words, bodies, knowledge, expressions etc.) would be “just so,” Women spoke about trying to achieve optimal self-representation in two ways. (1) Managing Representations which reflects editing or manipulating their sexts and/or photos and (2) Collaborating with their friends or eliciting their friend’s support in crafting their sexts.

**Managing Representations.**

Women suggested their attempts to tailor their image was done in an effort to enhance or conceal different aspects of their bodies or selves or to elicit a particular reaction from the person they were sexting. Participants described two contrasting aspects of editing/manipulating their sexts: a) this ability to “design” their sexual selves felt liberating in that they had control over how they appeared to others, b) the opportunity to “design” their optimal sexual self felt stressful as a result of pressures to self-monitor and
“perfect” their image. Cat (23; Straight) is one participant who spoke about striving for a type of “visual perfection” that in person could not be achieved:

You can edit things to make sure they are said perfectly right, or for maximum impact. You can really design your encounter to be just so. If I don’t like a photo, it’s gone. If I don’t like a video, it’s gone. It is not sticking around. I think that when I first started sending photos, a big worry for me was, “Oh, god. Shaving. Oh, god. Perfect skin. Oh, no. Is someone gonna see that there’s a pimple on my butt? Oh, no. There’s a scar on my thigh, or I didn’t shave super well.” Those expectations of that kind of perfection definitely weighed on me a little bit when I first starting sexting. But being able to curate my photos kind of made that easier, ‘cause I was like, “Whoops, I wasn’t ready to sext today, and I didn’t shave, but I can just keep my arms in this position and no one will know.” Like it’s all about lighting and angles….and filters, with snapchat or whatever Versus actually having sex, where I’d have to be like, “Oh, god. Shit. Oh, no.”

For Janessa (22; Straight), perfection meant doing some advance planning for upcoming potential sexting encounters. She spoke about archiving certain photos so that she was always prepared with a “good sext” on hand:

I’ve been in situations where I’ve saved particularly good photos for these situations and said, “Yeah, look. This is me right now,” even though I took it like two years ago….Just to save myself time. It’s not necessarily in the middle of the day being like, I should take a picture in case someone asks for it down the road. It’d be more like, if I’m sexting with someone to begin with I’d save a picture that I thought was good, and then use it on someone else down the road, if they were requesting, and I wasn’t wanting to take a picture in that moment or wasn’t feeling it in that moment. Sometimes you’re bloated or you’re in sweat pants and you’re just like, nope!

Janessa and Cat’s experiences highlight a specific desire to “look good” that many participants spoke about throughout their interviews as something they said helped them feel more confident in their sexual selves, and thus more willing to engage in sexual activities.

However, women also bemoaned the digital sphere because of the perceived demands of “perfection.” They shared that because sexting allowed for such curated experiences, there were sometimes more pressures or worries they did not feel in person.
For example, Mary (23; Pansexual) said “There’s really no hiding anything with a sext. Photos can be unforgiving…as opposed to regular sex [which is] based on tactile feelings.” Some participants spoke about how, at times, the expectations of perfection in sexting constricted their confidence, comfort, or freedom to express or explore their sexuality.

For example, Desiree (21; Bisexual) said:

It can be more stressful ‘cause if you’re gonna take a picture or if you’re taking a video, you have to pose and you have to set yourself up, and you look at the picture after, and you’re like, “Oh, no. I look terrible.”

**Collaborating with Friends.**

Other participants spoke about how they would enlist friends to act as consultants to ensure one curated the best sext possible in order to enhance their potential to attract or maintain a partner. For example, Hailee (21; Straight) said:

Oh girls definitely low key group sext. Like there’s a lot of "I wanna say this, but does it sound too cheesy?" Or like, "I took this photo, and I'm really proud of it, but is it actually that good? Will you look at it?" They also get the confidence boost of having experienced people sitting around and being like, "Oh, hold on. You might not have thought of this, but in that pose right there, I can see your tampon string hanging out, girl. Do you want him to see that?" Or we will straight up ask our friends to take photos for us that would look hotter than if we were trying to angle our bodies that way ourselves.

One woman, Nadia (23; Pansexual) went one step further and described an experience where she sexted on behalf of her friend and thus acted as a more experienced “medium” to increase her friend’s chances of attracting her crush:

So sometimes, say, if she's like “help me! I don't know what to say to this person. I want to be sexy. I want to say something that's going to get me to this point in our relationship. I want to have a nice starter phrase” or something like that…. I think that to a certain extent they are, they just don't know how to articulate what they want or what to say. Like they don't know what to do. So you become like a tool for them to improve their experience, like “how do I make things better.” For example, my friend, she was like sexting her crush and she wanted a certain
reaction out of him. She wanted to get to a certain place with him. She wanted something out of that conversation. Didn't know what to say. So like in that moment, I was like trying to not speak for her but I was the one typing being like “is this what you want to say? Is this an idea of what you want to do?” She did ask my opinion and handed me her phone and stuff like that, so but yeah it's definitely, I would say it's more like a thesaurus. Like a nice tool to kind of hone what you're trying to say or your emotions or desires, to get to an eventual goal.

The above narratives highlight how women worked collaboratively to craft sexts that they perceived to have the most “appeal,” “impact” or success in attracting or turning on a partner.

**Theme 7: Sexual Scripts**

This final (but no less important) theme illuminates some ways women could be better supported in terms of having positive sexting experiences. This theme reflects that during interviews, women’s narratives on their sexting experiences were often situated within broader questions and discussions on how they were interpreting and interacting with messages about gender, sexuality, power, and morality. Women’s interviews demonstrated the ways that women took in, tried on, made sense of, and rejected or resisted broader messages about women’s sexuality as it related to sexting practices. Two subthemes best capture how young women described their sexting experiences as they related to broader messages and narratives: (1) Gendered Dimensions of Sexting which reflects an awareness of sexting as a gendered experience (rife with double standards), and (2) Opportunities for Resistance which reflects resisting broader messages and narratives. Specifically, women spoke about resisting the shame and silencing that they perceived was more directed towards women than men.
Gendered Dimensions of Sexting.

When contextualizing how they perceived their sexting experiences, many participants would enter into lengthy conversations about sex in general and what it was like being sexual as a woman in a world that did not value women’s sexual expression. Gendered messages that participants spoke to included ideas that women should be passive and responsive/receptive to men’s sexuality (and that taking charge of one’s sexuality was considered “aggressive”); that young women are pure/innocent and that sexuality is harmful/corruptive for them (and that sexually experienced women are thus impure/damaged/undesirable to men); that women ought to be protected from sexuality, or are the victims of sexuality; that it is not polite or respectable for a woman to be sexual (that sexual women are “slutty” or “dirty”); and that women ought to be subordinate to men in sexual situations. Steph (22; Bisexual) shared that scripts supporting men’s dominance and power affected how men expected her to act during sexting role plays:

Regarding gender interactions specifically, when I was running my NSFW sexting blog, I would get a lot of requests soliciting images and messages from men who want me to take the submissive role. Kind of like, “let's role-play, and I'll be the master, and you'll be the slave, or I'll be the teacher you be the student.” I made a joke like, "Gee, I wonder what I'm going to be in each of those scenarios. I'm like, ah god, why am I always subordinate? Always the one that's following orders?

She further explained that she doesn’t experience the same scripts when she sexts women:

[With women] I genuinely just feel like I'm being listened to a lot more, and I'm being treated as a person. Even though we're communicating through a phone, I feel like I am a person to them. Meanwhile, with men sometimes they're just like looking for a release. For example, with a woman, sexts aren’t like unsolicited violent acts on me, its more like, "I would just love to see you, this is what we would do if we were together, if you would like," but with men its like, "I'm going to come over and I'm going to fuck you up." And its like whoa, whoa, I never said anything about that.
Participants also commented on how they felt subject to different sexting “rules” and “expectations” than men. Most participants made sense of the scripts and messages about sex/sexting as being laden with double standards. One of the most ubiquitous aspects of sexting that women spoke to was that of double standards in the way women’s sexting in particular is perceived and policed by others. As Shauna (20; Straight) puts it, “If a nude is leaked it's much more of a tragedy for women than it is for men.” Many participants said that experiences of being shamed or silenced as a gender double standard were first experienced in the education system where they were subject to “scare assemblies” where women specifically were told that sexting would ruin one’s reputation.

Ava (23; Pansexual), a woman who was studying sexuality and gender studies in university, tried to situate what she called the “sexting panic” within her understanding of broader cultural narratives about women’s sexual expression. She said she perceived that the media warnings and scare assemblies had nothing to do with protecting bodily autonomy or supporting women’s safety, but rather were about imposing morality onto women’s sexual expression:

Why aren't men afraid that their dick pics are going to go viral? I guess it's because no one actually cares...all the news stories, scare assemblies and stuff about the bad stuff with sexting, I don't think it has anything to do with the body itself. It has everything to do with this woman engaged in this immoral behavior, rather than “oh here's some boobs.” Please don’t share other people’s boobs. I think it's the projection of morality and these rules governing us. It's something about purity being pushed on us really…

Opportunities for Resistance.

Participants were invited to speak to how they navigated such social messaging. Many participants said that broader messaging or narratives (especially those coming from parents, or religious teachings) did not have any impact on them or their sexting
decisions but suggested such messages could likely influence “other women.” Most participants reported that when it came time to make decisions about sexting, they simply did what “felt right for them” rather than what was “expected” of them, while some reported actively resisting messages. Participants shared that sexting was an activity where they acted according to their internal feelings of “right/wrong” or values, often asking themselves “is this right for me” instead of “what will others think?” or “what does society want/expect?” For example, Jocelyn (20; Straight) said:

Umm No...I don't think my like religion or cultural background really had any impact on how I thought about things...or at least I don't think [those messages] were something I was totally aware of. I think [sexting] was just something I wanted to do, felt like I needed to do, and just did it. Yeah, looking back, I think that it was considered a negative thing like where I’m from or to maybe like my friends or family…. A woman doing that would be considered…like probably being dirty, and not having high self esteem. It would be considered having a really low esteem of themselves. But it never, I think, influenced my opinion because I consider that I was doing it, considering my own values. The fact that it was a relationship based on trust, I had values behind it. It was my mood, my feelings. It's all on my own exploration I guess.

In particular, the subtheme of resistance reflects that participants wanted to resist sexual shaming. Participants overwhelmingly spoke about “shame” as a prominent message or expectation of their sexual expression as women. They also shared that negotiating sexual messages alongside “doing what felt right for them” was particularly relevant when it came to messages of shame. For many women, engaging in sexting wasn’t necessarily a conscious act of resistance to shame messages, but rather that being in the mood to sext or having a desire to sext would over-ride any lingering feelings or worries about sexual shame. For other women, shame was something that had to be actively questioned, negotiated, and resisted. For many of these women, their interviews indicated how they were working through and justifying honoring their own sexualities
first, while lamenting that messages of shame impose limitations on their sexting and sexual expression. Participants spoke about asking themselves questions such as “should I care about what other people think? Should I internalize these messages about shame?” Participants made sense of sexting and shame as “projected” versus “internal” shame and suggested that without a societally projected shame, they would have no qualms about sexting. For many of these women resistance to such messages was an active and intentional process made possible through sexting. For example, Janelle (25; Straight) explained:

> There's this personal feeling, which is I'm not doing anything wrong, this is wonderful, I respect myself, I'm enjoying this. And then there's the knowledge of the societal narratives, which says oh cover up, you should be ashamed, that's not respectful. So it's like you kind of live two different lives. You're like well wait a minute, I'm proud of this. My body's proud of this. Like there's nothing wrong…but I'm afraid of society judging me. I feel like for the most part I'm like so feminist that those comments don't even affect me. But it is definitely like a societal narrative that I've noticed and that I'm angry at. So sexting has been a way for me at least to bridge that, to kind of say like, "Fuck those narratives"…

Janelle’s excerpt highlights how she holds a tension between wanting to assert her own sexuality while feeling the pressure of external narratives, and how she ultimately uses sexting as a platform to reject or push back against messages that don’t suit her personal sexual goals or feelings.

Another participant, Linda (23; Bisexual), shared a story of how her photos were shared without her consent and how she felt pressure to feel bad and “police” herself more stringently. She said she resisted “victim blaming” by reminding herself that she was not at fault. She said the onus and responsibility for non-consensual outcomes “should not be on women.” As she explained:

> The fact that he showed a couple of my pictures to his friend does not influence my opinion of that experience and it does not make me feel bad about [my
decision to sext]. Because that was his decision, his poor choice. That's not about me feeling shame. I did that [made the choice to sext] respecting my values, so I have nothing to feel ashamed about.

Summary of Results

Among participants in this study, sexting was, overall, perceived as a positive and enjoyable experience. Participants reported that sexting provided unique opportunities to explore their sexualities, bodies, and relationships. Particularly, sexting enabled them to develop their sexual selves in ways they may not otherwise have access to, or that may not be possible or comfortable “in person.”

Chapter 4: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore young Canadian women’s perceptions of their sexting experiences. Specifically, this study investigated how young Canadian women use sexting, what role sexting plays in their lives, sexualities, and relationships, how sexting impacts them and what would support them in having safe and fulfilling sexting experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with young women between the ages of 18-25 who were enrolled in a college or university in the southern region of Ontario. Thematic analysis was conducted on the interview data. Seven themes were created to show the ways young women used sexting, the role it played in their lives, and the impact it had on them. The themes were: Self-representation; Pleasure; Intimacy and Connection; Sexual Discovery; Sexual Scripts, Empowerment; and Sexual Comfort and Safety.

It was found that young Canadian women, for the most part, benefitted from sexting. Sexting enabled young women to explore and discover their sexual selves, increase intimacy and connection in their relationships, and helped them generally feel
more comfortable speaking up about their sexual wants and needs and enforcing their boundaries compared to offline. Sexting also helped women feel pleasure, and was associated with feelings of empowerment and validation. Women shared that sexting enabled them to resist certain sexual scripts around shame and other double standards related to women’s sexual expression. While some women did experience uncomfortable sexting, and many expressed that they still worried about the possible implications of sexting due to prominent risk narratives around sexting and women, sexting was generally perceived as a safer – and enjoyable - medium through which young women could navigate their sexual lives. Taken together, the findings of this study are in-line with similar studies that support more nuanced understandings of sexting and more complex analyses of women’s sexualities beyond simplistic binary frameworks such as empowered/disempowered, agent/victim, subject/object, passive/active (Bond, 2011; Burkett, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013).

**The Role of Sexting in Young Women’s Sexual Lives and Relationships**

The first research question explored the role sexting plays in the sexual lives and relationships of young Canadian women. Many participants described sexting as a tool that played a role in discovering their sexualities; Participants reported sexting helped them clarify who and what they liked sexually, who they wanted to be sexual with and why, what their styles and preferences were and to try out things they were not yet sure about. Participants shared that sexting gave them permission to act on their sexual feelings and desires in ways that they felt more constrained by in face to face interactions, and helped them practice being sexy and desirable, and what that meant to them.
These findings are in line with developmental discourses of emerging adulthood that encourage young people to test and explore different identities, try out different sexual relationships and experiences as components of exploring their broader identity (e.g. Arnett, 2004). The findings are in line with current research that suggests sexting provides optimal opportunities for sexual experimentation, including trying out a variety of sexual experiences enables young people to explore and consider what types of people they are attracted to, what kinds of sexual behaviors they enjoy, and the ways in which they are most comfortable expressing affection and love (Bianchi, 2017; Burkett, 2015; Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011; Worthington, Navarro, Savoy & Hampton, 2008).

**How Young Women Use Sexting**

The second research question addressed the ways young Canadian women use sexting. Participants in this study said they used sexting to be sexual in ways that differed from offline spaces, including exploring more taboo, or alternative sexualities (such as kink, BDSM) and to enhance personal pleasure and arousal by catering to individual desires, fantasies, and tastes. Prior research has suggested an association between sexting and sexual pleasure; For example Lippman and Campbell (2014) conducted focus groups on sexting (and other behaviors) and found their participants (aged 12-18) reported gaining a sense of fun and amusement from sexting and the Sex and Tech Survey (2008) found that even participants as young as 13 reported experiencing pleasure as a result of sexting. In a slightly older sample, Burkett (2015) found that sexting was used to facilitate desire, arousal, and pleasure. Specifically, her interviewees explained that sexting provided a unique way for women to use their imaginations and create sexual visuals. Participants in the current study expanded on this finding by indicating that the
use of imagination allowed them to experience sexual encounters that were not accessible in person (either due to logistics, structural factors such as gender roles, or comfort speaking up), and that were crafted in such a way that catered to exactly what they were looking for sexually.

Relatedly, participants reported that sexting provided a more “low-stakes” opportunity to bring up interests that may be considered “weird”, as they felt they risked less rejection or embarrassment as they may not have to ever see the person. Sexting as a vehicle for accessing and expressing one’s right to sexual pleasures may have important impacts on young women’s sexual selves and relationships.

Participants also talked about using sexting to develop and maintain intimacy and connection. The use of sexting in relationships as a way to maintain closeness, communicate sexual desires, and add “spice” to a relationship has been well established (see Albury & Crawford, 2012; Burkett, 2015; Crawford and Goggin, 2011; Drouin et al., 2013; Hasinoff, 2013; Lenhart, 2010; Walker et al., 2013). That participants reported sexting to specifically facilitate healthy vulnerability, deeper communication, and increased trust through the exchange of erotic content, taboo desires, and personal imagery helps clarify how sexting may be contributing to positive romantic and sexual relationships.

Finally, one of the main ways women used sexting was to “tailor” their sexual interactions to create an “optimal” self-representation. This was done through the editing of sexts and the curation of images (such as striking ideal poses and manipulating lighting) so as to appear as desirable as possible to partners or potential partners, as well as by seeking the support and feedback of their friends. Burkett (2015) interviewed 40
young, Australian, heterosexual men and women adults (18-25 years). She found that young women exchange photos as a way to receive feedback and validation about one’s appearance and femininity. Ringrose et al. (2013) found adolescent girls used Blackberry Messaging (BBM) to help each other attain more male attention for their girlfriends.

The Impact of Sexting on Young Women

The third research question addressed the impact sexting has on young Canadian Women. Sexting is an activity where participants in the current study, for the most part, perceived feeling sexually empowered. Participants described feeling empowered by sexting as it enabled them to carve out space to be sexual for themselves as opposed to others, and to speak up /have more of a voice with regards to their sexual likes, boundaries, and perceptions of sexual rights and equality. These findings are novel and may be explained by the uniqueness of online versus offline communications.

The Benefits of Technology Mediated Sexual Interactions and the Quin A Engine

The process by which young women become aware of their sexualities, and begin to consciously explore them, is called sexualisation. Renold and Ringrose (2011, 2013) suggest sexualized practices such as sexting may provide needed space for young women to develop subjective awareness of their sexual feelings and desires, and may subsequently have positive impacts on sexual agency. The opportunity for positive sexualisation, and feelings of empowerment, may have been possible due to the uniqueness of sexting as a technology-mediated sexual interaction. Technology mediated sexual interactions may pose benefits for sexual wellness and growth that are less available offline. due. This is in keeping with what Cooper (1998) first described as the Triple-A Engine of online communication. Cooper aimed to describe the unique benefits
of online communication, which he proposed were: Affordability, Accessibility, and Anonymity. The Triple-A Engine has since expanded to the Quin-A Engine (Courtice and Shaugnessy, 2017). The Quin-A Engine has 5 tenets: Affordability, Accessibility, Anonymity, Acceptability, and Approximation. These tenets detail how online communications a) lessen socio-economic barriers to accessing resources, knowledge, social connection (affordability), b) reduce physical barriers which can be helpful for minorities in isolated regions, and long distance relationships, for example, (accessibility), c) allow people to conceal part of their identity thus offering minimal fear of social repercussions/consequences (anonymity), d) offer a greater degree of tolerance in many online spaces towards non-normative taboo behaviours (acceptability), and e) have the ability to loosely mimic real world sexual experiences in an online context (approximation). Thus, online communications may provide a foster relational and psychological wellbeing (Meyer, 2003). The five “A”s may help explain why participants in this study described sexting as providing an opportunity for them to express their sexuality and try out sexual partners and styles without physical consequences, anxiety, or judgement.

Research indicates that digital communication can provide a safer space, particularly for sexual minorities, to meet partners, build communities, and express and explore sexuality away from social stigma or discrimination (Meyer, 2003). Hasinoff (2013) suggests sexting provides a safer way of developing and maintaining relationships as it avoids the typical physical risks associated with sex (such as contracting an STI or getting pregnant). Weisskirch and Delevi (2011) posit sexting could be a good vehicle for experiencing sexuality because it allows control of body image, provides more emotional
disengagement, and helps senders to be more assertive. Yeung et al., 2014 proposes this is because digital communication allows users to develop a “cyber self” or a persona that acts as a buffer to protect against the anxieties and limitations of offline interactions. For example, the participants in the current study shared that sexting felt physically safer because they were able to resist coercion, enforce their boundaries more clearly, and speak up and say “no” without worrying about their physical safety being compromised (for example, being trapped or over-powered by a person). A review of other scholars’ findings support that the ability to “approximate” sexual activities online allow individuals to maintain a sexual comfort zone and not push boundaries beyond what they are ready for (Burkett, 2015; Lenhart, 2011; Lippman and Campbell, 2014; McGovern, Crofts, Lee, & Milivojevic, 2016; Yeung et al., 2014).

That participants in this study reported that sexting, and perhaps TMSIs more broadly, helped them get to know aspects of their sexual selves in ways they may not have otherwise explored (or more quickly than they would have without sexting), while also protecting them from progressing too fast beyond what they were personally ready for physically or emotionally, suggesting that TMSIs may impact the control young women have over the pace through which they become sexual. As such, sexting may allow young women to renegotiate the usefulness of traditional sexual scripts.

The Negotiation of Sexual Scripts

Masters et al., (2013) describes three levels on which scripts are negotiated: On the first level, personal (intrapsychic) sexual and gender scripts coincide/reflect broader cultural scripts. On the second level, broader cultural scripts are accepted, while exceptions are made for one’s own behaviour at the intraspsychic and interpersonal levels.
On the third level, scripts are transformed, resisted, and/or one’s own script (at the intrasptic and interpersonal levels) are seen as equally valid to the cultural level scripts. He suggests that in order to understand how scripts can shift, one must first identify when, why, how, and for whom scripts are adhered to, modified, or resisted. The findings of this study illuminate the gendered scripts that participants adhered to, when participants departed from traditional norms, and the new scripts that emerged for this particular sample.

**Adhering to Traditional Scripts.**

The findings that young women are using sexting to maintain relationships, to tailor their sexual image in ways that are appealing and attractive to men, and that they considered pleasing their male partners to be empowering, suggest that current traditional gender scripts are still in operation. Current gender scripts suggest women place an emphasis on emotions and intimacy in sexual relationships (Bartoli and Clarke, 2006; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; McCabe et al., 2010) and dictate women ought to service or please men (Vannier and O’Sullivan, 2012; Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner & Irizarry, 2010).

Participants in this study spoke about a sense of enjoyment that came from pleasing their partners. This is supported by a study of emerging adults on college campuses which found women endorse a “performance script” that underlies a desire to please their partners (Sakaluk et al., 2014). This study used focus groups with 39 heterosexual men and women between the ages of 18-26 to investigate the rules of dating, relationships, and sexuality. They found that women “take pride in” the “tips and tricks” (p. 521) they know that arouse their partner.
Participants in this study also spoke about the feeling of validation that came from being able to turn a (male) partner on. A large \((n = 800)\) study on teens’ use of mobile phones conducted by Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell (2010) found that younger girls (between the ages 12-17) may feel they will lose their status if they do not respond to boys’ requests. In a sample of older adolescents and emerging adults Burkett (2015), found the perceived success or failure of her participant’s performances were contingent on the judgments of their (male) partners. The flattery and validation young women receive from sexting, while confidence boosting, may also be due to (hetero) sexual and gender scripts that suggest women (ought to) prioritize appearance, physical attractiveness and sexiness (especially when it comes to men’s evaluations of them) (Dobson, 2011; Gill, 2008; McCabe et al., 2010; Menard & Cabrera, 2011; Sakaluk et al., 2013). Participants in this study did report a pressure to be picture-perfect. My findings are supported by study by Bianchi et al. (2017) who assessed sexual motives, body self-esteem, objectified body consciousness and internalization of sociocultural media models as predictors of motivations to sext in 190 males and females between the ages of 13 and 20. They found – across sexual orientations and age - the more a young person was used to comparing their body to an idealized/unrealistic media model (aka their body self-esteem), the more likely their motive for sexting was to receive confirmation about the adequacy of their bodies.

Erchull and Liss (2013) suggest that in a culture that affords women less political clout, voice, and financial remuneration, girls learn to exchange erotic capital for personal and social advancement. In their study assessing the validity of a scale measuring markers of women’s empowerment, the authors asked whether girls who claim they feel a
sense of power through their sexuality are experiencing a true or false empowerment. The study included administering a questionnaire to 232 self-identified heterosexual and bisexual females between the ages of 18 and 23. Young women who subscribed to the belief that sex is a form of power did not equate this with empowerment but instead with objectification and mental health concerns. Erchull and Liss (2013) caution that girls who equate sex with power may limit themselves from seeking other more wellbeing-promoting and affirming sources of power. Therefore, it is important to contextualize young women’s sexting alongside sexual and gender expectations to maintain “hetero-sexy” (Dobson, 2011) (aka an ideal representation of feminine sexuality).

It is possible that empowerment stemming from pleasing others may be more relevant for women in sexual relationships due to gender and sexual scripts about femininity and heteronormativity. When women’s sexuality ends up being framed within a context of relational narratives, meaning women’s sexuality is considered important only insofar as it supports traditional heteronormative structures (and otherwise women are shamed or told they are at risk), it becomes unsurprising that pleasing a partner becomes so appealing. Further, Gill (2012) discusses how the responsibility of relational effort and emotional labour (in general) rests on women’s shoulders and thus women may feel responsible for maintaining their long distance relationships this way. In this sense, it is possible that participants in this study narratives of sexual empowerment are wrapped up in what is culturally sanctioned for women; being “sexy” and “desired” through pleasing others is personally validating AND socially promoted for women. It is possible that for participants in this study, self-sexualization such as sexting feels enjoyable and
positive in so far as they meet a heteronormative and patriarchal norm for young 
women’s sexual expressions and relational maintenance.

**Resisting, Modifying, and Creating New Scripts.**

Many participants in this study reported their experiences of sexting were empowering 
because the felt able to be sexual on their own terms/for themselves, thus subverting 
beliefs that a woman’s sexuality, her values and her decisions, exist and are primarily 
shaped for others. For participants in this study, making decisions around whom to sext 
and when, and adhering to their own values, boundaries, and moods was what contributed 
to their perceiving sexting as empowering. Sexting resulted in them feeling more “equal” 
to their male counterparts. Some participants even articulated that cultural images of 
women as sexual only in response to other’s needs inaccurately reflected their 
experiences of sexting.

One script that women grappled with was what could be considered a “shame 
script.” Participants in this study described times they wrestled with broader expectations 
around sexual shame and an inevitability that women will, or ought to, experience shame 
for their sexual expression. The shame script may be especially salient during sexting 
because, as Salter, Crofts, & Lee, (2013) suggested, the risk narrative around sexting for 
girls and women perpetuates moral norms that justify treating girls and women’s 
sexuality as an issue to be monitored and regulated. However, in response to these 
messages, participants in this study, for the most part, described experiences of 
resistance, or at the very least, making exceptions for themselves. Many participants 
declared that shame messaging about sexting had no impact on them, but likely could 
influence “other” women, and that their decisions about sexting came from what felt
“right” for them as opposed to what was perceived as “expected” of them (as women). Modifying, or resisting, a shame script may come more easily with age; Compared to adolescents who are said to be more sensitive to pressures, emerging adults tend to be less influenced by authority figures and feel freer to make their own decisions without having to take account of third parties (partner, child, parent) (Sumter et al., 2009).

All participants spoke about what could be considered a “respectability and responsibility” script whereby the onus of responsibility for negative interactions (non-consensual sharing of photos, coercive messaging, aggression, unsolicited graphic photos) should be on the party that shared the messages NOT on themselves for sending photos or sexting. These findings are in contrast to current literature; Both Le (2016) and Burkett (2015) found that when pictures got disseminated without consent, their female participants labeled themselves as trashy, silly, or wrong for sending images in the first place. Hasinoff (2013) also found that self-victim blaming was common aspect of adolescents’ sexting narratives. It is possible that the acts of resistance demonstrated in my sample were also a function of age and/or education; unlike with teens and children, sexual behavior is seen as appropriate and expected among grownups. Therefore, emerging adults may care less about the repercussions of parents and peers as they are more removed from the consequences or implications of being “caught” sexting and more in line with the social expectations of their age group. Evidence also supports that attitudes and beliefs about sex shift in emerging adulthood (Arnett 2007; Lefkowitz, 2005). For example in Lefkowitz’s (2005) study, 46% of students described that during their undergraduate education they became more open-minded, liberal, and knowledgeable about sex and the meaning of sex. The transition to university may help
explain why participants in the current study were less likely to endorse ideas that women are to blame for negative sexting outcomes. A majority of participants in this study described being liberal, feminist, interested in sexuality and sexual rights. This likely occurred as a result of snowball sampling in groups of women who shared a commitment to studying gender and sexuality or were interested in women’s sexuality in general. Therefore these participants may have been more likely to be open to, or engaged with, sexuality ideas and practices that are more resistant to cultural constraints.

The major contribution of this research is that sexting and each theme developed from the data represent new sexual scripts in and of themselves. Within the themes, participants described scripts they use at the interpersonal and intrapsychic level to guide their behavior (for example that sexting is reciprocal and mutual, how consent is negotiated, who can initiate sexting, what activities are appropriate to be doing while sexting, what sexual narratives and images can be shared, who is allowed to be sexual and how much, what sexual risk is, who is responsible for making sexting safer, how boundaries are established, and what/how a “sexual woman” can be in a digital world). It appears sexting in and of itself carries it’s own set of scripts for interaction that may differ from the typical scripts men and women are expected to adhere to offline, and thus sexting may also afford young women a platform that can help women take on or create new scripts that they may transfer into their offline spaces.

The findings of this study support that having the ability to act on behalf of one’s own sexual interests instead of adhering to narrow rules in traditional offline spaces resulted in positive outcomes for participants both on and offline. Increasing opportunities for positive outcomes may result if messages around sexual shame or
“proper” sexuality for girls and women are reduced or eliminated altogether, and the shifts young women are making during TMSIs could help to shift scripts and expectations at broader cultural levels. Shifting cultural level scripts could better accommodate the needs of today’s young women who may be purposefully using digital spaces to improve their sexual experiences and thus advance their sexual equality.

**The Impact of Risk Narratives on Young Women’s Perceptions of their Sexting Experiences**

Many of participants in this study spoke about their fears and concerns related to sexting and the possibility for things to “go wrong,” even if they reported that they did not personally experience any negative sexting interactions. That very few participants in this study reported personally experiencing unsafe or uncomfortable sexting interactions is both in line with and in contrast to other findings in the research literature. Associations between sexting and other sexual sexual risk behaviors have been identified (Benotsch et al., 2013; Dake et al., 2012; Dir et al., 2013; Englander, 2012; Perkins et al., 2014; Reyns et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2014). However, these studies were correlational; they measured harm behaviors in samples of individuals who sexted and did not measure whether sexting caused these harmful outcomes. In line with my findings, Burkett (2015) found little mention of experiences of pressure or coercion, and that non-consensual dissemination of images was not common in her participants. Further, literature suggests that the more “feared” potential negative outcomes of sexting (such as exploitation and victimization) are rare (Cooper et al., 2016; Perkins et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, there is reason for concern related to risks of sexting; Several participants in the current study reported that some male partners used sexting as an
excuse to be more aggressive, violent, or persistent, findings that are mirrored by
Ringrose and Harvey (2015) who found boys reported being persistent, coercive, and
threatening to girls if they refused to text. Media outlets have shared stories of suicides
related to sexting, and Walker et al. (2013) found young women aged 15-20 were more
likely to fall victim to escalated sexting whereby they received sexts that were persistent
or became increasingly sexual beyond what was desired by the young woman. There is
also the possibility that any sext may be misused with ill-intent or circulated beyond its
intended audience.

However, worry about risk may also be amplified by risk and danger messages.
Participants’ awareness of how sexting could pose unique risks that are not always found
in in-person interactions may be a result of the messaging girls and young women receive
about sexting. Several participants shared experiences of having to attend what were
called “scare assemblies” in junior high and high school where by the potential negative
outcomes of sexting such were lectured to them. In a Canadian sample of young women
18-24 years of age, Le (2016) found that even an implicit threat of images being leaked
(such as the result of a scare assembly, for example) could lead to feelings of paranoia or
worry, suggesting that even if there is no actual risk, women remain “on guard” about the
“potential” for things to go wrong. McGovern et al. (2016) furthers that this concern can
persist years beyond when the original image was sent. Indeed, Burkett’s (2015)
terviews revealed that women accepted as “fact” that sexting at any stage or age has the
potential to “go wrong.”

As far back as 1986, Fisher demonstrated that women are given more warnings
about risk and danger in parental communication about sex. Egan (2013) and Tolman
(2012) also suggest that double standards that position girls as sexually innocent and pure, lead to beliefs that girls and young women are more in need of protection from sexual “risk.” It is likely that girls who were raised with these ideas of risk and protection become young women whose perceptions of adult sexting behaviour are shaped by these early messages.

Overall these findings point to a need to educate youth on the importance of respect and boundaries in digital sexual exchanges, while also indicating increased attention be paid to young women’s perceptions of sexting in relation to the current available discourses, particularly around the recognition of sexual harm.

**What is Needed to Support Positive Sexting Experiences for Young Women**

The final research question asked what young Canadian women need to support positive sexting experiences. Overall, the findings suggest that young women would directly benefit from a) the elimination non-consensual and unwanted sexting including the unauthorized distribution of images, persistent and unsolicited sexual messages, and violent or aggressive sexual content (that is unwanted) and b) a shift in narratives around what is sexually appropriate for women and girls compared to men and boys.

Participants situated their perceptions of their sexting experiences within broader observations regarding the messages about gender, sexuality, power, and morality that they had been subjected to. Participants spoke about an awareness that sexting was a gendered experience laden with double standards. These findings are in line with previous research that demonstrates not only that girls and women perceive double standards with regards to their sexuality (Yeung et al., 2014), and also research that underscores that double standards exist in terms of how girls and women’s sexuality is
treated (Walker et al., 2013). For example, Ringrose and Harvey (2015), in their study of young UK based girls aged 13-15, found that more responsibility fell on girls if photos of her distributed and girls were more likely to be called names (such as slag or sket) for sexting than boys. The authors suggested that that the double standards were reinforced by the same boys who requested the photos in the first place, and that these boys were socially rewarded for receiving images. Lenhart (2010), Bond (2011) and Walker et al. (2013) similarly found – across demographics – that negative costs (punishment, bullying/harassment) of sexting happened to girls and not boys.

Research with college student samples indicates that even in emerging adulthood, sexual double standards about men and women’s sexual behaviors are still endorsed (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Milhausen and Herold, 2002). For example, in a focus group study of 18-26 year olds, Bartoli and Clark (2006) found evidence of a sexual evaluation script whereby women who appear sexual were judged negatively. Weiderman’s (2005) work on sexual scripts supports this, suggesting that feminine gender roles are based on ideas of behavioral restraint and personal control. More positive sexting experiences could be supported by equalizing the social and relational context within which boys and girls and men and women learn about “proper” sexuality. Specifically, if women’s sexual expressions were normalized the ways men’s sexual expressions are, fewer of participants in this study may have feared engaging in sexting. When judgment about sexuality operates more favorably for men, women and girls are limited in terms of experiencing the full spectrum of sexual opportunities possible to them.

One specific way a shift in sexual scripts could be accomplished is by updating educational curriculum. Rather than teaching sexting as something that could harm girls’
reputations, it should be approached from the standpoint that sexting is one activity that all genders may use to explore their sexual selves. All genders, but specifically young boys and men, should be educated on how to respect boundaries, privacy, and negotiate enthusiastic consent. More broadly, socio-sexual education (that which is taught implicitly and explicitly in schools, in the home, and through media messaging) should stop damaging narratives that suggest women’s bodies and sexualities are not commodities to be traded or collected for self-esteem or status, and instead promote girls and women as autonomous sexual subjects in their own right.

In terms of policy, girls and women’s sexual autonomy could be better supported by removing policies that punish young women for the unauthorized distribution of their images (including policies in schools that expel individuals who have be found sexting, or ban them from sports teams and legal policies that could result in charges of child pornography or indecency). Normalising sexting as one medium through which young women practice becoming sexual is both in line with developmental trajectories and the proliferation of digital technologies in young people’s lives. Supporting young women’s sexual development needs to start early; beginning in girlhood and adolescence will help create a solid foundation to support young women’s sexual wellbeing as they age.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that it is not women’s sexual choices that out to be regulated or shifted, but rather the broader sexual scripts and contexts within which women’s sexual choices take place. It is hard for women to express the full spectrum of their sexual selves within a structure that is rife with double standards.
Implications

This research makes several notable contributions to the literature; First, by illuminating beneficial aspects and outcomes of sexting, this study addresses the two main limitations of past research: a) the focus on the danger and risk narratives associated with sexting (Egan & Hawkes, 2009; Rice & Watson, 2016) and b) the invisibility of young women’s sexual agency (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009; Rice & Watson, 2016). This study shows that in a sample of emerging adults with some university education, sexting aided young women in exploring their sexual feelings, expressing their sexual wants, defining their sexual intentions, and experimenting with their capacities for action in sexual interactions. Narrowly focusing on the negative associations and outcomes of sexting (e.g. Dake et al., 2012; Doring, 2014; Sorbring et al., 2014) means young women may remain constrained in their efforts to accomplish important developmental tasks, including self-exploration. This may be particularly true within a climate that has traditionally considered young women’s sexting less favourably than young men’s (Ringrose et al., 2013). Findings from empirical research which provide support for positive aspects of sexting may serve to reduce stigma associated with sexting for girls and women, and for the study of sexting to be conducted from a more neutral perspective (Burkett, 2015).

Secondly, the results of this study demonstrate that, at least in this sample of participants, traditional sexual and gender scripts can be purposefully re-negotiated. Further, findings suggest that in some cases, new sexual scripts are emerging that better take into account women’s goals, safety, and desires during sexual encounters. In particular, the results of this study demonstrate ways emerging adults are finding
increasing opportunities for sexual agency, pleasure, comfort, and subjectivity within the new digital climate that affords them opportunities to be sexual in ways not always available to them offline. Through the lens of sexual script theory, this study also provides insight into the sexual scripts young women are endorsing and finding helpful in online encounters and which scripts are hindering positive experiences for them. Considering the ways sexual scripts operate and are navigated/negotiated at all three levels (the intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural level) may help identify junctures for intervention whereby advocates and educators can seek to enhance autonomy for young women.

From a practical standpoint, knowing more about how Canadian emerging adult women use sexting, the role it plays in their lives, and the impact it has on them, may increase opportunities for women to feel more supported in freely exploring their sexual selves. For example, this information could be used to inform Canadian policies, social services, and curriculum. In the past, young women were deterred from sexting with the aim of protecting them from exploitation (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Bond, 2011). Sexual health curriculum promotes a fear-based response to sexting that places much of the responsibility for any negative consequences of sexting (bullying, harassment, non-consensual dissemination of photos) on young women’s shoulders (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Social services and policies around sexting remain limited both in availability and scope, especially in a Canadian context (Ontario Women’s Justice Network, 2016). Grounding efforts to support young women in evidence (i.e., drawing from young women’s own perceptions of sexting) could help inform influential authority figures (i.e. teachers, parents, and advocates) the best way to support young women’s
sexting without denying their rights to sexual expression, and may make any amendments to policies, social services, or curriculum more salient and effective.

Findings also may have practical applications for clinical work. For example, that sexting was reported to contribute to increases in trust, healthy vulnerability, and intimacy in some participant’s relationships suggests sexting may be a helpful intervention for couples seeking couple’s therapy. Research has shown that trust, gratification, and increased communication (specifically about likes and dislikes) is associated with relationship satisfaction, which is subsequently associated with mental and physical health.

Overall, the findings from this study encourage a more nuanced conversation about sexting that acknowledges risk while encouraging and supporting women’s pleasure. The findings that sexting could be adaptive in young women’s lives is consistent with emerging research that suggests young women are purposefully using sexting to enhance their sexual knowledge and increase sexual comfort (Bond, 2011; Burkett, 2015; Lenhart, 2011; Lippman and Campbell, 2014; McGovern et al., 2016; Yeung et al., 2014), and explore their sexuality with less potential for poor health outcomes (Bond, 2011; Lee and Crofts, 2015; O’Sullivan, 2014; Stanley et al., 2016; Strassberg et al., 2014). This study contributes to the body of literature documenting benefits of sexting. Further, this study offers needed insight into young women’s own perceptions of sexting, and highlights young women’s voices; a significant contribution to the literature and a contribution given the preponderance of quantitative research on this topic. Researchers may take up the findings from this study and consider positive
experiences of sexting and benefits of sexting experienced by emerging adult women when conducting larger scale, quantitative research.

**Strengths**

This study included some notable strengths. First, there has been a dearth of research examining sexting from a qualitative perspective (See Anastassiou, 2017; Wilkenson et al., 2016). In particular, limited research to date has presented young women’s own voices and perspectives on their experiences of sexting. The results of this study provided in-depth and nuanced accounts of the role sexting plays in young women’s lives, and offers insight into how sexual scripts are being endorsed, shifted, or even re-invented as young women navigate their digital-sexual lives – all from women’s own perspectives. Specifically, sexting research has largely focused on heterosexual samples, or not considered the sexual orientation of their participants. The current study was inviting of participants representing a range of sexual identities and relational orientations, and gender identities. This study included perceptions of sexting from women in a variety of relational configurations (i.e. poly relationships, casual hookups) and also included perspectives from women of diverse sexual orientations and identities. As such, this study helps expand our understanding of sexting in young women across sexual identity and relational context.

Secondly, little research has examined sexting beyond a risk narrative (Burkett, 2015). This study offers insight into ways sexting may play a positive and beneficial role in some women’s lives, including experiences of pleasure, enjoyment, and empowerment. By highlighting the positive aspects of sexting, this study contributes to the literature in
such a way that expands our understanding young women’s sexual lives and the role
digital technologies may be leveraged to support women’s sexual wellbeing.

Finally, this study offers the perspectives of Canadian women; Canadian voices
have not been well documented in sexting research, with most of the research on sexting
coming from US and UK populations. Participants for this study were recruited from
multiple universities and colleges across the southern region of a large multi-cultural
Canadian province. As such, participants represented multiple cultural and ethnic
backgrounds, multiple religious affiliations and educational disciplines thus providing
increased insight, richness and a more encompassing view into the perceptions of young
women’s sexting, the role sexting plays in their lives and the impact that sexting has on
them.

Limitations

As with all studies, potential limitations of the current study warrant
consideration. Like much of sex research, there is potential that results from this study are
subject to a volunteer bias. Individuals who volunteer for sex research may be different
that the general population (Strassberg & Lowe, 1995). This may be even more the case
for research on sexting. Women whom have not engaged in sexting or whom have had
negative experiences may not be as enthusiastic to share or relive their experiences.
Particularly, women who feel shame related to sexting likely would not volunteer because
of the stigma. Therefore, participants who volunteered for the current study may
represent only a select or limited perspective on the experience of sexting to the exclusion
of other important perspectives. Indeed, this sample largely reported very positive
experiences of sexting. It was noted that even in instances where some readers? Others?
may read an experience to be “coercive” or “exploitative,” participants did not frame their experiences in such ways. Participants in this sample reported generally increased comfort and safety regarding sexting. This may be because when participants defined sexting, they referred to what could be considered a “consent and mutuality” script whereby sexting experiences that fell outside the realm of what was reciprocal, desired and/or asked for (aka unwanted messages, unsolicited pictures) were not considered “sexting.” Perhaps it would have generated a broader range of responses if participants had been asked specifically about technologically-mediated harassment, as opposed to simply asking about “negative experiences with sexting.”

It is also possible that the current sample represented a subculture of individuals with highly positive sexual attitudes and increased levels of sexual knowledge and education (due to many studying in the field of sexuality) that may impact the reproduceability of the data and the subsequent development of, or shifts in, sexual scripts.

Another consideration that may affect the generaliseability of the findings is that participants spoke both about their current sexting experiences and also offered retrospective accounts as they examined their “sexting journeys” over time. It is possible that given the current socio-political climate (i.e., the rapid and ever-evolving emergence of new digital platforms for communication, the #metoo sexual harassment movement, and the general proliferation of sexting in general) participants may have undergone many shifts in meaning making around their perceptions of sexting (in terms of what is possible, what is acceptable etc.). Coupled with developmental changes, participants may look back on certain sexting experiences and remember them through a new lens, or may
even “re-remember” or reconstruct perceptions of their experiences in ways that don’t necessarily reflect how they were exactly feeling at the time. Longitudinal studies starting in adolescence and capturing perceptions over time, within shifting contexts, would provide more insight into the impact of sexting at various points in a developmental trajectory.

Despite efforts to be inclusive, some important voices were missing. To obtain a sample more homogenous in current life experience and age while allowing for diversity in sexuality and relational orientation the study was limited to undergraduate women. It is likely those who attend college/university may have a level of privilege or exposure to attitudes and ideas (particularly around sex and sexuality) that others without this experience wouldn’t share and this likely influences how young women experience or make sense of sexting. Additional voices, for example including those of trans women, Indigenous women, women of colour, Muslim women, and women with disabilities are lacking, thus contributing to the lack of representation of these women in sex research. Along these lines, the current study, as with much of the literature on sexting, is limited in its consideration of the influence of social-location including race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, culture and class. This type of analysis was beyond the scope of the current research aims but comprises and important future research endeavor.

Another limitation is related to the process of data gathering and analysis. It is possible that during one-on-one interviews, social desirability bias was introduced whereby a participant wanted to “please” the researcher by providing answers that would avoid judgment, or fulfill what they perceived the interviewer would want to hear (Fontana & Frey, 1994). This concern is especially relevant when the subject matter is of
a sensitive or sexual nature (Hosseini & Armacost, 1993). It is also possible that participants in this study described both current day experiences and retrospective accounts of past experiences in their interviews. Emerging adults are in the middle of two competing discourses with regards to sexting; one which frames sexting within a deviance discourse for adolescents and one which presents sexting as a part of a normative, contemporary form of sexual expression and communication for adults (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Hasinoff, 2013; Karian, 2012). It is likely that some women’s accounts included sexting experiences that took place during adolescence and some that took place well into emerging adulthood, and these cannot be clearly demarcated in the data. Future research might specifically ask for descriptions of sexting experiences at specific points in time.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There are several further recommendations for future research on sexting. Purposeful sampling, including community samples and more marginalized voices, would help elicit experiences from different perspectives more reflective of Canadian diversity. Included in this would be to recruit for individuals less likely to traditionally volunteer for sexuality research, or sexting studies in particular. Understanding sexting from the perspective of individuals who may not hold as liberal views on sexuality, or from the perspective of those who may not have had positive sexting experiences, would contribute to a more fulsome body of literature about sexting. This could be accomplished by using anonymous, online surveys where people may feel less stigma when reporting on sensitive or controversial topics.
Much of the current research, this study included, would benefit from an increased eye to intersectionality. The questions in this study’s semi-structured interviews included one explicitly about identity as it related to perceptions of sexting experiences. However this question was not fruitful in terms of participant response? Say why? Too broad or vague? Future research could expand on this question by conducting interviews that explore in depth the ways race, class, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, and other elements of social location influence one’s perceptions and experiences of sexting.

Longitudinal studies would also be an asset to follow women as they age to better see the role and impact of sexting in their developing lives, sexualities, and relationships. Individuals at different developmental stages have different tasks to accomplish. Sexting may play different roles and accomplish different goals in these unique stages and this support would be better tailored if it attended to the specific goals individuals have depending on age and needs.

One final recommendation would be to study boys and men who have sexted, and specifically boys and men whom have ever sexted non-consensually (acted aggressively, violated boundaries or privacy, or forwarded images etc.) Given the current social context and gendered narratives that seem to underlie so much of the actual risk of sexting, understanding boys and young men’s perceptions of sexting would be illuminating. Specifically, though it is acknowledged that boys and men’s experiences of sexting are also likely nuanced, asking what factors contribute to ensuring consent and respect versus what factors contribute to aggression, violence, or coercion would illuminate ways we can educate boys and young men from the outset about respectful and consensual ways of engaging in sexting and ways to hold them accountable in creating safer, and more equal,
sexual spaces for women and all genders (Bond, 2011; Ringrose et al., 2013; Karian, 2012).

**Conclusion**

Results of this study indicate that emerging adult women’s experiences are complex and varied. These findings are consistent with those from recent research (see Anastassious, 2017; Gabriel, 2014) which point to an increased need to “normalize” the act of sexting beyond a positive/negative binary, so that risk may be better mitigated (without limiting young women’s sexual possibilities) and healthy sexual opportunities may be fostered (without ignoring the very real experiences of risk that may be present depending on context, climate, gender, and other demographic variables). My results suggest sexting is a unique sexual activity that can enable some women to be sexual in ways that may not otherwise be available, and further, that sexting may be an activity that is in line with the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood, including using risk taking as a way to explore and try out adult (sexual) roles (Arnett, 2007). Young women in this sample appeared to still grapple with popular scripts and pressures about how to be sexual, when, and for whom. However, it seems sexting enabled them to navigate these messages and scripts in ways that permitted more options to take up or try on different ways of being. Sexting also appeared to help them expand the subject/object divide by acknowledging that young women are acting in their own self-interests as opposed to/or in addition to being acted upon (e.g. Phippen, 2009; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2012; Dake et al., 2013; Strassberg et al. 2013). It is possible that among some women and in some contexts, sexting is as an activity that supports increased sexual subjectivity and challenges structures of gender
power by giving women more voice, choice, and autonomy. Thus, it is possible that, contrary to dominant risk narratives, the purposeful use of personal technology, such as for sexting, may enable young women to resist social and cultural attempts to deny their sexualities, shift dominant understandings of female sexuality as “passive,” and reconfigure the current sexual and gender divide.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Hey! Did you hear about that SEXTING study??

No way!! Tell me more.

ARE YOU ELIGIBLE?

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU IF YOU:

• Are a women
• Are between the ages of 18-25
• Are enrolled in a university or college in Southwest Ontario
• Have ever engaged in sexting (sending or receiving erotic text or images via text or internet messaging)

Study involves a one on one interview that may take approximately 1-2 hours. Get a 10$ Gift card!

Learn More

tinyurl.com/sextstdy

This study has been approved by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board # 1612757
If you have questions or concerns about this research project please contact the primary researcher at rmilhaus@uoguelph.ca
Appendix B: Twitter Recruitment – Tweets and Handles

Tweet options to be sent out:

Calling Woman-Identified Sexters: Tell us your story for a study exploring experiences of sexting in women 18-25 (LINK ATTACHED HERE)

Attention self-identified Women 18-25: Have you ever sexted? Tell us your story. We are conducting a study on experiences of sexting: (LINK ATTACHED HERE)

Let’s Get Sextual! Calling self-identified WOMEN 18-25 who have had experiences with SEXTING for a research study. Get a 10$ gift card (LINK ATTACHED HERE)

Have you ever SEXTED? If you are woman-identified aged 18-25 we want you for our #SEXTstudy. Tell us your story (LINK ATTACHED HERE)

#SEXTstudy Are you a Woman-identified aged 18-25? Have you ever SEXTED? Tell us your story. Get a 10$ gift card (LINK ATTACHED HERE)

Tweets will be sent to the following Twitter accounts/handles:

Student Association of George Brown College @sagbc
Seneca College Student Federation @SenecaSSF
Sheridan Student Union @the_ssu
York Federation of Students @YFSlocal68
York U Students @YorkUstudents
Ryerson Student Life @RUStudentLife
WLU Students Union @students_union
Western Undergraduate Students @WesternUSC
Uof T Student Life @UofTStudentLife
CSA Guelph @csaguelph
Student Life Guelph @UofGStudentLife
UofGH Students @UofGHstudents
Conestoga Students @CStudentsInc
OCAD Student Union @OCADSU
SJU Student Union @StJeromesSU
U Waterloo Student Life @UWaterlooLife
Appendix C: Facebook Advertising

I WANT YOU...

To be part of my research study.

Looking for:

1. Women aged 18-25 currently enrolled in a college/university in Southwest Ontario AND

2. Have had an experience with sexting (sending or receiving erotic or sexual text messages or imagery)

Get a 10$ gift card for sharing your story

For more information and to see if you qualify go to: tinyurl.com/sextstdy
Appendix D: Pre-screening Questionnaire

Q1 With what gender do you identify most?

- Woman (1)
- Man (2)
- Trans woman (3)
- Trans man (4)
- Gender queer/non-binary (5)
- Agender (7)
- Let me tell you how I identify: (6) ____________________

Q2 Please enter the year you were born (e.g., 1978)

Q3 What university or college are you currently enrolled in? (If not currently enrolled in a university/college please select N/A)

- University of Guelph (1)
- York University (2)
- University of Waterloo (3)
- Wilfred Laurier University (4)
- University of Toronto (5)
- Western University (6)
- Ryerson University (7)
- Ontario College of Art and Design (8)
- Guelph-Humber College (9)
- Conestoga College (10)
- Sheridan College (11)
- George Brown College (12)
- Seneca College (13)
- St. Jerome’s University (14)
- Not enrolled or other: ____________________ (15)

Q4 How did you hear about this survey?

- Specific College or University Twitter Account (1) (Please specify): ____________________
- A re-tweet by a friend or follower/someone I follow (2)
- Word of mouth (3)
- Other (4) (Please specify): ____________________

Q5 Have you ever engaged in sexting in the past?
Yes (1)
No (2)
Unsure (3)

Q6 On how many different occasions, approximately, have you engaged in sexting? (Hint: please do not tally up every individual sext exchanged, but rather estimate the overall number of times where you have participated in a sexting experience)

__________________

Q7 Do you consider yourself to be an infrequent, moderate, or frequent sexter?

Infrequent (1)
Moderate (2)
Frequent (3)

Q8 What do you consider sexting? (pick all that apply)

Sending any erotic content via mobile phone, or internet (including email, social networking, chat rooms and forums) (1)
Sending any erotic content via mobile phone exclusively
Sending erotic messages (no imagery/photos) exclusively
Sending erotic imagery
Sending nude or semi-nude photos of myself
Engaging in an erotic conversation via digital media
Receiving any erotic content via mobile phone, or internet (including email, social networking, chat rooms and forums)
Receiving any erotic content via mobile phone exclusively
Receiving erotic messages (no imagery/photos) exclusively
Receiving erotic imagery
Receiving nude or semi-nude photos of myself
Forwarding erotic content to a third party

Q9 What percentage of the time would you say your sexting interactions have been positive?
100% (1)
80-90% (2)
60-70% (3)
50% (4)
30-40% (5)
10-20% (6)
Less than 10% (7)

Second page of qualtrics:

Please enter your name and preferred contact information below:

Name: ____________________
Please contact me for an interview at: ____________________________
Appendix E: Informed Consent Letter

You are invited to take part in a research project to study young women’s experiences of sexting conducted by Robin R. Milhausen, Associate Professor from the Department of Family Relations and Applied Human Nutrition, and Erin Watson, PhD Candidate, from the Department of Family Relations and Applied Human, at the University of Guelph. You are invited to take part in this research because you met the criteria for our study. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. Milhausen at 1-(519) 824-4120 ext. 54397, rmilhaus@uoguelph.ca or Erin Watson at ewatso03@uoguelph.ca

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
We are interested in exploring how young women make sense of their experiences with sexting. We want to learn more about the contexts, factors and elements that influence young women’s perceptions of their sexting experiences.

To be eligible to participate, you must
- Be between the ages of 18 and 25
- Be a self-identified female of any sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion etc.
- Currently be enrolled in a college or university in the Southern Ontario region
- Have had personal experience with sexting
- Have access to a computer

PROCEDURES
If you volunteer to participate in this study, and you meet the eligibility criteria, you will be contacted by the researcher and invited to participate in a one on one interview. Interviews will be with a female researcher and will take place in a private and safe space at a public or college/university library agreed upon in advance by you and the researcher. You will be invited to talk about your sexting experiences and the factors that have influenced how you make sense of these experiences. Interviews will be audio recorded for data collection purposes. Immediately following the interview you will be asked to complete a questionnaire collecting basic personal descriptors (age, ethnicity, education, religion etc.) and information about personal sexting experiences (frequency of sexting, with whom, reasons for sexting etc.) Your participation may take approximately 1-2 hours of your time. Some participants may be re-contacted during the process of the study and invited to engage in a review of their data to ensure accuracy.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
Some participants may feel embarrassed answering questions related to sexting, intimacy, sexuality, and relationships. You do not have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and you may stop the interview or questionnaire at any time. You may also choose to withdraw from the study at any time. The depth of information you provide is up to you and your comfort level. Please note, while you are invited to tell the interviewer if you feel any discomfort, participation in the project is not considered therapy. This project requires interaction one on one with a female researcher. If for any reason you feel uncomfortable taking part, please contact the researcher to discuss possible modifications to the procedure to address your concerns.

If you experience any distress during or after your participation, there are a number of
agencies that offer confidential services. A list of helplines by town and state/province can be found at http://www.yourlifecounts.org/

You can also find qualified sex, marriage, relationship and family therapists via the following links:

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT): http://www.aamft.ab.ca/

American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT): https://www.aasect.org/

Board of Examiners in Sex Therapy and Counseling Ontario: http://www.bestco.info/index.html

Canadian Counseling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA): https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/find-a-canadian-certified-counsellor/

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

While there is no direct benefit to you as a participant, you will contribute to the growing body of literature on sexting and the understanding of women’s sexual experiences more generally. Young women’s perspectives and stories are often not included in sexting research. By broadening our understanding of young women’s sexting, we may begin to destigmatize women’s sexual expressions, and create broader acceptance for multiple factors that impact perceptions of sexting.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION
As a thank you for your participation, you will receive a $10 gift card. Payment will occur at the completion of the interview and questionnaire. Having a full set of information is very important for our analysis so we ask you to please try to complete the interview and questionnaire. However, if you decide to withdraw from the study before the interview or questionnaire is completed, you will not be penalized and a gift card will still be issued to you.

RESULTS

The results of this study will be communicated, in individual and in aggregate (i.e., group) form, through journal publications, conference presentations, vlogs/blogs, workshops, policy recommendations, and the possible publication of a book. Please note you will not receive any money or other benefits derived from any commercial use of the data. The data you provide may also be used in future studies to answer similar research questions. If you would like us to send you a copy of the results of the study, please email to Erin Watson at: ewatso03@uoguelph.ca.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Every effort will be made to maintain your confidentiality. You will be assigned a unique ID code that will be used throughout the study. This will be the only information linking your interview and questionnaire. The list that matches your unique ID code to your personal information (e.g., name, email) will be stored on a password-protected, encrypted computer that only the researchers will have access to. This will be permanently deleted after the study has been completed (i.e., after participants have completed and been paid for the entire study). The data from your interviews and questionnaires will be kept until 5 years after publication of the results. We collect data using a software called Qualtics, which uses servers with multiple layers of security to protect the privacy of the data. Once the data is downloaded from Qualtrics, it will be stored in a password-protected encrypted computer, in a locked office. Please note that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed while data are in transit over the internet. Results will be published in aggregate (i.e., group) form and individual form through the use of participant quotes. It is possible that direct quotations may be identifiable in a way unpredictable to the researchers. If you disclose any identifiers in your open-ended questions (e.g., names or geographical locations), these will be removed/changed prior to publication of the results, in order to protect identification. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected, encrypted computer, in a locked office.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time. If you withdraw from the study at any time you will be compensated for any parts of the study that you have already completed. If you wish for your data to be removed from the study, please email us and we will remove it. Data will be maintained unless you request that your data be withdrawn from the study. If you request that your data be removed, we can remove your data at any time, up until the point where we begin our analysis. Analysis will begin in December, 2017. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don’t want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances necessitate it.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This project has been reviewed by the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board for compliance with federal guidelines for research involving human participants. If you have any questions regarding your rights and welfare as a research participant in this study (REB #16-12-757), please contact: Director, Research Ethics; University of Guelph; reb@uoguelph.ca; 519-824-4120 ext. 56606. You do not waive any legal rights by agreeing to take part in this study.

This project is funded via a Social Science and Humanities Research Council Doctoral Scholarship.
Do you consent to participate in this study?
☐ Yes (1)
☐ No (2)

If Yes Is Selected, Then Skip To Pre-Screening Questionnaire. If No Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Please print this page for your records
Appendix F: Semi-structured Interview Question Guide

1. What do you consider sexting?
   What activities/ mediums would (and wouldn’t) fall under the umbrella of sexting in your opinion?
   In your opinion, do unsolicited sexts count as sexting?

2. What are your overall impressions of sexting in general?
   What would you consider positive aspects of sexting?
   What would you consider to be negative aspects?

3. How have you experienced sexting in comparison to how you have experienced non-virtual sexual communication? (Amended to read: Does sexting provide any unique benefits/challenges compared to offline sexual interactions/communications?)

4. What have been your experiences of developing/sending and receiving sexts?

5. Do your experiences fit with those of others you have observed? How/how not?

Now I’d like to move to talking about some of your specific sexting experiences…

6. Can you tell me about a time you sexted (describe a specific experience)? How did you feel about/make sense of this experience? (Prompt: What was the relational context? Can you walk me through the activity – i.e., where were you, what was the tone of the interaction, who was involved, how did their response affect you, how did you then respond to them, what factors, circumstantial detail, elements contributed to your perception of this experience?)

7. How did you feel about it at the time? (prompt: i.e., What thoughts, feelings, emotions, were you having/going through at that time? Looking back, if your thoughts/feelings have shifted, has your understanding/perception of this experience shifted? Explain)

8. What made that experience significant/memorable?

9. Can you specifically think of a time when you felt uncomfortable, uneasy, or distressed about participating in sexting? Describe the incident.
   What do you think made this sexting experience uncomfortable (Prompt: i.e., what circumstances, factors, elements contributed to this perception).

10. Can you think of a time when you found sexting to be a positive, meaningful or rewarding experience?
    What do you think made this sexting experience so positive for you? (Prompt: i.e., what circumstances, factors, elements contributed to this perception)?
11. Do you have any specific memories of experiences of pleasure/desire/arousal related to sexting? (Prompt: i.e., what circumstances, factors, elements contributed to this perception)?

12. Have you ever experienced any negative outcomes as a result of sexting? (Prompt: i.e., what circumstances, factors, elements contributed to this perception)?

13. What role has sexting played in your life? Has sexting had any impact on your experience in romantic and/or sexual relationships? Has sexting had any impact on how you relate intimately, sexually, and/or romantically with others?

Added question: How is consent negotiated during sexting? How do you choose your sexting partners or how do you decide when and whether to sext or not?

14. Has sexting had an impact on any other non-romantic relationships in your life? (Amended to delete this question)

15. Has sexting influenced your understanding of yourself/who you are (ie. identity) in any way? Explain…
   Does sexting impact your sense of self as a sexual being in any way (ex: in general and as a young woman, more specifically?)

16. A lot of different factors impact our experiences, like our ethnic backgrounds, culture, sexual orientation, dis/ability, economic status etc. In what ways does belonging to any such social groups (gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc.) play a role in how you sext with others?
   Are there any rules/norms/expectations that you have sensed with regards to sexting (Prompt: i.e., in terms of race, in terms of sexuality, in terms of gender etc.)?
   How do you interpret/take up/resist these rules?

17. Have these norms/expectations affected or influenced you in anyway? Have you ever consciously gone against a norm/expectation? Can you describe that experience for me?

Added question: Some people have shared that they help their friends sext. Have you ever participated in an experience like this? Can you tell me about it? (Possible prompts: Who is the party that is “sexting”? How is consent negotiated with the person that is being sexted?)

18. What do you wish young women in Canada today knew about sexting?


20. Given your experiences, how can this society support women in making sexting as positive as possible?
What would you have appreciated/what would have improved your sexting experiences?
What do you think would be helpful for young women your age?
What would be some benefits of sexting that should be made available to women in terms of improving their relationships and sexuality?
Appendix G: Demographic Questions

Q1 With what gender do you identify most?

Q2 Please tell me the year you were born (e.g., 1978)

Q3 What university or college are you currently enrolled in?

Q4 How did you hear about this survey?

Q5 Have you ever engaged in sexting in the past?

Q6 On how many different occasions, approximately, have you engaged in sexting? (Hint: please estimate the overall number of times where you have participated in a sexting experience)

Q7 Do you consider yourself to be an infrequent, moderate, or frequent sexter? Define what that means to you.

Q8 What do you consider sexting? (Hint: Possible options could include…)

- Sending any erotic content via mobile phone, or internet (including email, social networking, chat rooms and forums)
- Sending any erotic content via mobile phone exclusively
- Sending erotic messages (no imagery/photos) exclusively
- Sending erotic imagery
- Sending nude or semi-nude photos of myself
- Engaging in an erotic conversation via digital media
- Receiving any erotic content via mobile phone, or internet (including email, social networking, chat rooms and forums)
- Receiving any erotic content via mobile phone exclusively
- Receiving erotic messages (no imagery/photos) exclusively
- Receiving erotic imagery
- Receiving nude or semi-nude photos of myself
- Forwarding erotic content to a third party

Q9 What percentage of the time would you say your sexting interactions have been positive? (Please explain whether positive to you means “nothing negative happened” versus “the experience was pleasurable and enjoyable”) Does that change your original answer in any way?

Q10 Are you currently in an intimate/romantic relationship?
Q11 Are you currently in a sexual relationship?

Q12 Please tell me your relationship status (Hint: Options could include…)

- Casual dating
- Casual sexual relationships (having casual sex with one or more people)
- Friends with Benefits
- Open Relationship (one or both of us has sex outside of the relationship)
- Polyamorous (one or both of us are in multiple loving and/or sexual relationships)
- Living with one partner, but not married or engaged
- Living with multiple partners, but not married or engaged
- Engaged to a partner
- Engaged to more than one partner
- Married to one partner
- Married to more than one partner
- Other, (please specify)

Q13 How long have you been in a romantic/sexual relationship with your current partner?

Q14 With what gender does your PARTNER identify most?

Q15 Sometimes people identify themselves by race and/or ethnicity. How do you self-identify?

Q16 How would you describe your sexual orientation?

Q17 With whom do you most frequently engage in sexting

- Current partner (common-law, marital, or lover/boyfriend/girlfriend)
- Casual dating partners or potential hook-ups
- Previous partners or lovers
- Tinder or online dating matches
- Friends
- Strangers
- Others (please specify)

Q18 In general, what are your main reasons/motivations for sexting? Does this differ depending on whether you initiate sexting or a partner does? Explain.

Q19 On average, how often would you say you initiate your sexting interactions?

Q20 Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experiences or perspectives on sexting?