TEENS' EXPERIENCES WITH SEXTING: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my Mom and Dad. They taught me the value of hard work while raising me and my brothers and sisters on our family dairy farm in Afton, Minnesota. Most importantly they taught me that rewards from hard work do not come easily or right away, but always come. Although my Dad is no longer with us, I felt his presence throughout my doctoral studies. I am grateful my parents encouraged me to be the person I am today. Their love and belief in me has made the completion of my educational journey possible.

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ABSTRACT

DAWN MARIE MURPHY

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Easy access to social networking sites and smartphones has allowed the Internet to play an increasingly central role in the exploration and expression of adolescent sexuality. Online sexual behavior, in turn, has played a role in the social and sexual development of adolescents. Within a climate of online sexual behavior, a phenomenon referred to as *sexting* has emerged. *Sexting* blends the words *sex* and *texting* and generally refers to the sending, receiving, and forwarding of sexually explicit messages, images, photos, or videos via communication technologies. The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health and emotional well-being from adolescents' perspectives. A constructivist grounded theory study was conducted to explore adolescents' experiences of sexting. Engaging in the culture of teen sexting materialized as the central process and the title for the grounded theory that emerged. There were six primary processes that emerged as part of the theory including engaging in the culture of teen sexting, motivating factors, forming perceptions and feelings, acknowledging and managing risks, connecting mental health and sexting, and finding a sexual self. The findings of the study revealed that sexting is a part of normal sexual growth and development and a part of teen culture. Moving away from a risk aversive stance of sexting toward a normal growth and development perspective shifts the focus from shaming and punishing to helping adolescents process both good and bad experiences related to sexting. Providing guidance to help teens manage the risks

of sexting and work through the tensions experienced during sexting will support emotional well-being and aid teens in finding a sexual identity.
Keywords: adolescent, teen, sexting, mental health, emotional well-being, constructivist grounded theory

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INTRODUCTION

Teens' Experiences with Sexting: A Grounded Theory Study

Easy access to social networking sites and smartphones has allowed the Internet to play an increasingly central role in the exploration and expression of adolescent sexuality (Kerstens & Stol, 2014; Sorbring, Hallberg, Bohlin, & Skoog, 2015). This, in turn, has played a role in the social and sexual development of adolescents (Cookingham & Ryan, 2015; Khan & Coble, 2017). Adolescents frequently cite the media as a source of sexual information, and adolescents seek and receive a great deal of information about sexual behavior and sexuality from the media (Khan & Coble, 2017; Strasburger et al., 2010). The Internet offers teens the freedom to explore sexually related material and topics with ease of access, affordability, and anonymity (Giordano & Cashwell, 2017). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) asserts that media may even function as a "superpeer" (Strasburger et al., 2010, p. 577) in convincing adolescents that sexual activity is a normative behavior for teens. While adolescents are recognized as sexual beings with rights to communicate in privacy to explore their sexuality, intimacy, and relationships, public discussion often centers on the potential risks, harms, and unpleasant outcomes of online sexual behavior (Naezer, 2018; Nielsen, Paasonen, & Spisak, 2015; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013).

In May 2008, Jessica Logan went on a Cincinnati television station to tell her story of sending nude pictures of herself to a boyfriend using her smartphone, who after their break-up, sent them on to other high school girls (Celizic, 2009). The girls harassed

her, calling her a *slut* and a *whore*. Jesse was miserable, depressed, and afraid to go to school. Two months after the interview, Jesse hanged herself in her bedroom. She was 18 years old.

Much of our understanding about teen online sexual behavior comes from media and anecdotal reports about its dangers and risks (Dir, Coskunpinar, Steiner, & Cyders, 2013). Despite these reports, little is known about how and why adolescents engage in the exchange of sexually explicit material online (Dir et al., 2013; Temple et al., 2014). Further, when adults and authorities discover this behavior, consequences can be severe for teens including damage to reputation, loss of future career prospects, effects on relationships, mental and emotional health effects, and legal ramifications including felony conviction, child pornography charges, and sex offender registry (Döring, 2014; Holoyda, Landess, Sorrentino, & Friedman, 2018; Lee, Crofts, McGovern, & Milivojevic, 2015; Lorang, McNiel, & Binder, 2016; Spooner & Vaughn, 2016). Further study of online sexual behavior in teens is needed to increase the understanding of this behavior and the effects it has upon adolescent mental health and well-being.

Background of Technology Use in the Lives of Teens

In a world of increasing technology, using the Internet has become one of the most common activities of today's adolescents (Farber, Shafron, Hamadani, Wald, & Nitzburg, 2012). Often referred to as "Millennials" (Boyd, 2014, p. 281) and "digital natives" (Teo, 2013, p. 51), adolescents in the 21st century have lived their lives entirely during the age of the Internet. The Pew Research Center conducts opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis, and other data-driven social science research using nationally representative, probability-based samples of U.S. households (Anderson

& Jiang, 2018). According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, conducted with 1,058 parents of teens 13 to 17 years of age, and 743 teens, 45% of teens report being online "almost constantly" (Anderson & Jiang, 2018, p. 2). This percentage has increased from 24% of teens reporting they were online nearly constantly just three years prior to the publication of the article (Lenhart, 2015). Teens are among the most enthusiastic users of digital technology, and online behavior has become an integral aspect of their education, culture, and more broadly their daily lives (Allen, Ryan, Gray, McInerney, & Waters, 2014).

Engaging with social media has become one of the most widespread and popular online behaviors of teens (Atkinson & Newton, 2010; Farber et al., 2012; Guinta & John, 2018; Schurgin O'Keeffe et al., 2011; Thomas & McGee, 2012). Social media behavior has become synonymous with any one of the innumerable social networking sites (SNSs) including YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, Google+(Google Plus), Vine, Tumblr, Reddit, Pinterest, MySpace, and others (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Farber et al., 2012; Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012; Schurgin O'Keeffe et al., 2011; Seidman, 2014). Until recently, Facebook had dominated the social media landscape and was the most popular platform among teens (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). In a recent Pew Research Center survey, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat surpassed the use of Facebook, making these sites now the most popular online platforms among teens (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). In addition, the social media environment of teens revolves less around a single platform compared to three years ago. Teens today maintain a "social media portfolio" of several social networking sites (Reid-Chassiakos et al., 2016, p. e3).

Differences related to gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic level are also noted with social media behavior in teens (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Girls report more frequent use of Snapchat, while boys identify with YouTube as their platform of choice. White teens are more likely than Hispanic or Black teens to frequent Snapchat, while Black teens cite Facebook as their social media platform of choice. Lower-income teens are more likely to report using Facebook than teens from higher-income households.

In the last decade, smartphones in particular have changed the way adolescents connect with one another, and to the world through a range of more intimate social and visual media (Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson, & Svedin, 2016; Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012). While teens' access to the Internet through computers is often determined by parental socioeconomic and education level, access to smartphones appears ubiquitous with teens from all walks of life (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). While the majority of parents report that the main reason their child has a cell phone is to facilitate communication with them no matter where they are, teens' use of cell phone technologies may serve a broader range of social and developmental needs (Judge & Saleh, 2013). Approximately 95% percent of teens now report they have a smartphone or access to one, which has contributed greatly to more persistent online activities (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). The age of acquiring a first smartphone is also decreasing, with the average age now being 10.3 years (Madigan, Ly, Rash, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2018). The proportion of third-graders who owned a cell phone doubled between 2013 and 2016 (Englander, 2018). Texting, or using a smartphone to send written messages or visual symbols, such as an emoji to another smartphone, has become a prominent means of communication for teens

(Carpenter & Hubbard, 2014; Reid-Chassiakos et al., 2016). According to a survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, conducted with 800 teens ages 12-17 and their parents in four U.S. cities between June 26 and September 24, 2009, the typical American teen sends and receives 50 or more messages a day, or 1,500 messages a month (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). Approximately 31% of teens send and receive more than 100 messages a day, or more than 3,000 messages a month. Approximately 15% of teens who are texters send more than 200 texts a day, or more than 6,000 texts a month. Fully three-quarters of teen cell phone users (75%) have unlimited texting plans. Common Sense Media, a leading non-profit organization dedicated to helping children thrive in a world of media and technology, polled over 1,200 parents and teens about their mobile device use and found that 50% of teens reported feeling addicted to their phones ("Dealing with Devices," 2016). In 2010, Grogan asked one teen about giving up her cell phone, the teen replied, "I'd rather give up, like, a kidney than my phone" (as cited in Henley, 2010, p. e2).

Online Sexual Behavior in Teens

Online sexual activity is generally defined as any use of the Internet that involves sexuality (Shaughnessy, Byers, & Thornton, 2011). Online sexual behaviors cover a wide range of activities and behaviors that involve sexual content, topics, and stimuli (Shaughnessy, Fudge, & Byers, 2017). These activities and behaviors may include viewing sexual material, producing online sexual messages, images, and videos, and making online sexual requests (Shaughnessy et al., 2017). Contact with pornography and with unknown, potentially dangerous persons online are major concerns expressed by

parents related to teen online sexual behavior (Sorbring et al., 2015). In a national sample of 1,500 10 to 17-year-olds, nearly half of the Internet users had been exposed to online pornography in the previous year (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). Accounts of exposure to pornography, unwanted sexual requests, aggressive sexual solicitation, online harassment in the form of victimization and cyberbullying, and participation in other high-risk sexual behaviors have all been linked to online sexual behavior (Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2012; Bond, 2010; Judge & Saleh, 2013; Kerstens & Stol, 2014; Lim, Agius, Carrotte, Vella, & Hellard, 2017). In a cross-sectional study, 54% of SNS profiles were found to contain one or more references to high-risk behaviors such as sexual activity, substance abuse, or violence; in addition, high-risk behaviors may lead to more "likes" by an online audience, perpetuating such behavior (Khan & Coble, 2017). Further, online disinhibition may lead adolescents to divulge private information more readily than they would in face-to-face interactions (Khan & Coble, 2017). Teens often overestimate the level of privacy afforded by technology, and share intimate sexual information with an unintended public audience (Holoyda et al., 2018). Self-exploitive behaviors such as creation and distribution of explicit or inappropriate materials, photos, comments, and suggestions have occurred in teens (Khan & Coble, 2017).

However, not all online sexual behavior is posited as negative. Internet use may fulfill different developmental needs for adolescents such as developing close and meaningful relationships; exploring identity, sexuality, and intimacy; and finding information about developmentally sensitive issues (Borca, Bina, Keller, Gilbert, & Begotti, 2015). Adolescents engage in various online sexual activities as a means to

search for information about sex and sexual health-related topics, engage in sexual conversations, meet and flirt with potential dating partners, and satisfy natural sexual curiosity (Giordano & Cashwell, 2017; Kerstens & Stol, 2014; Naezer, 2018). The Internet provides an outlet for adolescents to obtain advice about sexual health issues, and discuss moral, emotional, and social issues related to teenage sex (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Because the Internet allows the possibility of anonymous communication, adolescents may be able to address sensitive sexual issues more easily than in face-to-face communication (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Digital media have allowed the breakdown of geographic boundaries in health promotion and sexuality education, especially in underserved populations of adolescents (Khan & Coble, 2017). Teens report a generally positive attitude toward digital media-based sexual health interventions, and these interventions have provided health care providers and educators a valuable vehicle for providing teens with appropriate sexual information (Khan & Coble, 2017; Strasburger et al., 2010). Positive aspects of online sexual behavior reported by teens include overcoming boredom; entertainment; bonding with friends; receiving compliments; meeting and flirting with potential partners; experiencing intimacy, sexual arousal and gratification; and learning about sex (Naezer, 2018). Finally, online sexual behavior may provide a healthier outlet for communicating sexual desire and a safer alternative for teens who are not sexually active or ready for the emotional aspects of a sexual relationship (Anastassiou, 2017).

Teen Sexting: Definitions, Prevalence, Opportunities and Risks

Within a climate of online sexual behavior, a new phenomenon referred to as *sexting* has emerged. *Sexting* blends the words *sex* and *texting* and generally refers to the sending, receiving, and forwarding of sexually explicit messages, images, photos, or videos via communication technologies (Barrense-Dias, Berchtold, Surís, & Akre, 2017; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; Ngo, Jaishankar, & Agustina, 2017; Smith, Thompson, & Davidson, 2014; Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013; Walrave, Heirman, & Hallam, 2014). However, definitions of sexting vary widely in terms of context, meaning, and intention, and are not consistent across the literature (Englander, 2018; Gewirtz-Meydan, Mitchell, & Rothman, 2018; Madigan et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2013). Further, the term *sexting* is predominately used in media, academic, and legal discourse, but teens do not tend to use this language to define their behavior, instead preferring to use terms such as *pictures*, *pics*, *videos*, and *selfies* (Albury, Crawford, Byron, & Mathews, 2013; Lee, Crofts, Salter, Milivojevic, & McGovern, 2013; Walker et al., 2013).

One consistent aspect of sexting appears to be that teens are participating in this behavior. Overall, it is estimated that somewhere between 15% and 28% of teens participate in sexting behavior at some point (Temple et al., 2014). How the question is asked in studies about sexting may influence teens' responses; while some studies have focused on "nude or seminude images," others have focused on "sexually suggestive" images that "may be no more revealing than what someone might see at a beach" (Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 14). The true prevalence of sexting in teens may be

underestimated, as the research methods themselves, such as obtaining parental consent, may discourage honest answers from teens (Strohmaier, Murphy, & DeMatteo, 2014).

While some differences have been identified, sexting behavior is occurring across age, gender, race, and ethnicity (Temple et al., 2012). The research on sexting has focused mostly on its prevalence in older adolescents; however, there is some evidence to suggest that sexting behavior is occurring earlier, even in preadolescents as young as 10 years of age (Chaudhary et al., 2017; Dake et al., 2012; Houck et al., 2014; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2014; Ricketts, Maloney, Marcum, & Higgins, 2015; Strohmaier et al., 2014). Sexting behavior occurs across genders, although the accounts of male and female experiences with sexting may differ, with females bearing more social stigma and disapproval for their participation, and males gaining more approval and social status (Ringrose et al., 2013; Temple et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2013; Walrave et al., 2014). In addition, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) teens may participate in sexting as a means of interacting and maintaining intimate relationships without fear of negative social consequences (Gámez-Guadix, de Santisteban, & Resett, 2017; Rice et al., 2012).

While some studies that have shown differences in sexting behavior amongst races and ethnicities, the study settings, sample distributions, prevalence of cellphone or Internet use within groups, and other variables have likely influenced the results (Dake et al., 2012; Fleschler- Peskin et al., 2013; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013; Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014). Finally, the body of teen sexting literature is not United States-centric, suggesting teen sexting may be a global

phenomenon. Studies about teen sexting from Australia, Great Britain, Spain, the Netherlands, Finland, Germany, and Peru are noted in the literature (K. Albury et al., 2013; Clark, Lewis, Bradshaw, & Bradbury-Jones, 2018; Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017; Nielsen et al., 2015; Van Oosten & Vandenbosch, 2017; Villacampa, 2017; Walrave et al., 2014; West et al., 2014). However, a large majority of studies have used samples from the United States; therefore, differences in teen sexting behaviors and correlates across cultures remains unknown (Klettke et al., 2014). In addition, countries differ in their prosecution of teen sexting in different contexts making it difficult to make comparisons (Wood, Barter, Stanley, Aghtaie, & Larkins, 2015).

Some studies have situated sexting in the context of risky behavior, negative consequences, and even legal implications for adolescents, including cyberbullying, sexual harassment, pornography, links to other risky sexual behavior, substance use, and emotional and mental health problems (Dake et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2012; Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaíta, & Rullo, 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Further, it appears adolescents may participate in sexting despite knowing its negative consequences (Lenhart, 2015; Strassberg, Cann, & Velarde, 2017; Strassberg et al., 2013). Other studies have emphasized sexting's place in the normal development of adolescent self and social-identity, highlighting its role in intimate relationships and peer group dynamics (Burkett, 2015; Cooper et al., 2016; Vanden Abeele, Campbell, Eggermont, & Roe, 2014; Wilkinson, Whitfield, Hannigan, Ali, & Hayter, 2016). While research has found that sexting behavior occurs more often in older teens, sexting behavior seems to

coincide with the time when teens become more interested in romantic relationships and sexuality, when puberty and adolescent sexual development begins (Houck et al., 2014).

Adolescent Sexual Development

Developing a healthy sexuality is a developmental milestone for all children and adolescents (Breuner et al., 2016). Adolescent sexuality encompasses multiple biologic, cognitive, and psychosocial dimensions beginning before onset of puberty and ending with attainment of adulthood (Rodgers, 2017). The biologic changes of puberty are probably the most obvious changes and are associated with increased physical growth and the appearance and development of primary sex characteristics (e.g., ovaries, breast, uterus, and penis) and secondary sex characteristics (e.g., changes in voice, body hair, and fat deposits). Adolescent sexuality is best understood within the context of the specific developmental level of the adolescent (Rodgers, 2017). Early adolescents, ages 11 to 14 years, are starting to develop the beginning secondary sexual characteristics of puberty. They have limited ability for abstract thinking and often wonder if they are normal in comparison to their same sex peers. Sexuality entails self-exploration and evaluation, limited dating, which usually occurs in groups, and limited intimacy. Middle adolescents, ages 15 to 17 years, are experiencing decelerating growth patterns, reaching adult height, and development of secondary sex characteristics is well established. They are beginning to develop an increasing capacity for abstract thought, and are often concerned with thinking in idealistic terms regarding philosophic, political, and social problems in the world. According to Rogers (2017), they may develop “multiple plural relationships,” (p. 449) and begin to internalize heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual

attractions. Rodgers (2017) adds that this is the time when teens may begin to have feelings of "being in love" (p. 449) and establish tentative relationships. Late adolescence, from ages 18 to 20 years, is a time of almost complete reproductive growth and physical maturity. Abstract thinking is well established. Late adolescents can perceive and act on long-range plans, and view problems comprehensively. They begin to form stable relationships and attachments with others with a growing capacity for mutuality and reciprocity. Dating usually occurs within a romantic partnership, and intimacy involves commitment rather than exploration and romanticism. Late adolescence is also a time when teens may publicly identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial developmental asserts that sexual identity and sexual orientation are a part of identity formation. As adolescents begin to integrate changes involved with puberty, they begin to develop emotional and social identities separate from their families. In establishing a sexual identity, teens begin to develop intimate relationships with members outside of their family. Sexual orientation is an important aspect of sexual identity and involves a pattern of sexual arousal or romantic attraction towards persons of opposite, same, or both genders. Sexual identity and sexual orientation are profoundly influenced by cultural meaning and expectation, gender, peer groups, societal and family pressures, and other environmental factors.

Adolescence is also a developmental stage marked by the desire for immediate gratification, experimentation, risk-taking, and limited comprehension of dangers of risky behaviors (Ahern, Kemppainen, & Thacker, 2016). This may include sexual risk behaviors. According to the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), conducted with

a nationally representative sample of students in grades 9-12 in both public and private schools across 50 states and Washington D.C., the percentage of youth who have ever had sex decreased from 48% in 2007 to 40% in 2017, as did the percentage of youth who reported having four or more sexual partners from 15% in 2007 to 10% in 2017 (Kann et al., 2018). However, condom use reported among sexually active high school students also decreased from 62% in 2007 to 54% in 2017. The YRBS also reported that 30% of high school students admitted to having sexual intercourse during the previous 3 months, with 46% reporting not using a condom with last intercourse, 14% reporting not using a method to prevent pregnancy, and 19% using alcohol or drugs before last sexual intercourse (Kann et al., 2018). In addition, an estimated 7% of high school students reported being physically forced to have sexual intercourse against their will (Kann et al., 2018). Sexual risk behaviors place youth more at risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and unintended pregnancy (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018). It is estimated that there are 20 million new STIs diagnosed in the US each year, and half of these are among young people ages 15 to 24 years (CDC, 2017). Youth ages 13 to 24 years accounted for an estimated 21% of all new HIV diagnoses in the United States in 2016 (CDC, 2016). Although teen pregnancy rates have declined in recent years, nearly 210,000 babies were born to teen girls aged 15 to 19 years in the US in 2016 (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll, & Drake, 2018). The CDC data show that lesbian, gay, and bisexual high school students are at substantial risk for serious sexual health outcomes including being forced to have

sexual intercourse, and experiencing more sexual violence and dating violence as compared to their peers (CDC, 2018).

Assessment of Adolescent Sexual Development and Behavior

The successful navigation of achieving and maintaining healthy sexuality for adolescents involves receipt of medically accurate, developmentally appropriate, accessible, and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education and services (World Health Organization, 2006). The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Medical Association (AMA), the American Public Health Association, the National Education Association, and the National School Boards Association all endorse comprehensive sexuality education that includes both abstinence promotion and accurate information about contraception, human sexuality, and STIs (Breuner et al., 2016). The AAP recognizes that healthy sexuality is an important part of adolescent development and recommends that confidential time to discuss sexuality, sexual health promotion, and risk reduction be a component of all health maintenance visits with teens (Marcell et al., 2017). There are a number of different physical and psychosocial screening tools for adolescent sexual health and development that can be used in the clinical setting. Probably the most familiar physical screening tool for physical sexual development in adolescents is the Tanner stages (Rodgers, 2017). The Tanner stages describe the stages of pubertal growth from stage 1, immature, to stage 5, mature pubertal growth. In girls and young women, the Tanner stages describe pubertal development based on breast size and shape and distribution of pubic hair. In boys and

young men, the Tanner stages describe pubertal development based on the size and shape of the penis and scrotum, and the shape and distribution of pubic hair.

Healthy sexuality encompasses more than just screening for the physical aspects of biological sex and reproductive characteristics in children and adolescents (Breuner et al., 2016). Additional guidelines and psychosocial screening tools are used to screen adolescents for healthy sexual development, body image, interpersonal relationships, intimacy, gender identity, and sexual risk behaviors (Breuner et al., 2016). The Guidelines for Adolescent Preventive Services (GAPS) includes recommendations developed and promoted by the AMA's Department of Adolescent Health that encompass health care delivery, health guidance, screening, and immunizations for all 11-to 21-year-old patients (Montalto, 1998). Responsible sexual behavior including abstinence, use of condoms, prevention of STIs, appropriate methods of birth control, and annual sexual health screening are included in the GAPS guidelines (Montalto, 1998). The rationale behind the development of GAPS guidelines is the belief that high-risk behaviors and negative lifestyle patterns can be identified early and appropriate intervention strategies such as counseling, providing educational information, or scheduling follow-up visits and referrals can be developed and instituted.

The AAP developed the Bright Futures guidelines for health supervision of infants, children, and adolescents, which include social determinants of health, physical growth and development, emotional well-being, risk reduction, and safety (Hagan, Shaw, & Duncan, 2017). These guidelines include topics related to sexuality such as dating, dating violence, sexual feelings, puberty, and pregnancy and STI prevention. Bright

Futures also provides questionnaires and core tools for the 11 to 14-year-old visit that providers can use to address sexual topics with teens (Breuner et al., 2016). In addition, various psychosocial screening tools including the HEADSSS and SAFE TEENS are commonly used to screen for various concerns regarding adolescent sexual health. The HEADSSS psychosocial risk assessment tool acronym stands for home, education, employment, eating, and exercise, activities, drugs, sexuality, suicide and depression, and safety (Goldenring & Rosen, 2004). This tool provides a systematic approach to the adolescent interview progressing from less threatening topics to more personal and sensitive topics (Goldenring & Rosen, 2004). Specific questions about sexuality are incorporated such as "Have you ever been in a romantic relationship?" or "Are your sexual activities enjoyable?" (Goldenring & Rosen, 2004). The SAFE TEENS psychosocial screening tool includes sexuality, accident and abuse, firearms/homicide, emotions, toxins, environment, exercise, nutrition, and shots or school performance in its mnemonic (Montalto, 1998). These psychosocial screening tools provide a quick and efficient approach to assessing overall adolescent health behavior, in addition to sexual developmental screening.

While recognizing positive and prosocial effects of media, the AAP continues to be concerned by evidence about the potential harmful effects of media messages and images (Strasburger et al., 2013). Of particular interest is the potential harmful effect that sexting may have on the mental health of adolescents. There have been several high-profile cases linking cyberbullying, sexting, and suicide, but the findings about the relationship between sexting and mental health have been inconclusive (Frankel, Bauerle-

Bass, Patterson, Dai, & Brown, 2018). Although there are several anecdotal incidents, the scientific literature describing the association between sexting and mental health outcomes such as depression is mixed, with many studies suggesting a positive association, but other studies suggesting no association or even a protective effect (Chaudhary et al., 2017).

The AAP encourages taking a media history and screening for the use of media by asking children and adolescents two media-related questions at each well visit (Strasburger et al., 2013). However, it has been found that only about 16% of pediatricians inquire about media usage during health visits (Reid-Chassiakos et al., 2016). Further, one out of three adolescents receive no information about sexuality from their pediatrician, and when they do the conversation often lasts less than 40 seconds. Because they already have an established trusting relationship with teens, pediatric nurse practitioners serve as a valuable resource for assessing teens' media use (Guinta & John, 2018). Assessment of media use could include questions about sexting behaviors; these questions could be incorporated into the various psychosocial screening tools used for adolescent sexual development. The AAP offers suggestions for how to begin the conversation about sexting with children and adolescents ("Talking to Kids and Teens," 2013). Keeping in mind that teens do not always use the term sexting to describe their behavior or the behavior of their peers, questions such as "Have you or your friends ever sent, received, or forwarded a message, picture, or video on your phone that involves nudity or sexual content, also sometimes called sexting?" could serve as an opening question for sexting screening.

From the answers to these questions, explanations about sexting could be provided according to the teen's age, developmental level, and understanding. For example, older teens may benefit from more specific explanations about sexting; while younger teens, who may not have as much knowledge about sex, may benefit from more general descriptions of sexting such as pictures of people without their clothes on, or kissing or touching each other in ways they have never seen before. Assessment might also include asking teens if they have seen stories of sexting behavior on the news, "Have you seen this story?" and "What did you think of it?" ("Talking to Kids and Teens," 2013). By further inquiring, "What would you do if you were this teen?" teens would have a chance to rehearse their responses to various sexting behavior scenarios. By starting an assessment within a context of general media use, something with which most teens are comfortable and familiar, questions about sexting may open the door for teens to ask other questions about their sexual health or other high risk behaviors that may have the potential to impact their mental health and well-being.

Problem of Study/Statement of Purpose

The impact that sexting has upon the mental health and well-being of adolescents is continuing to develop in the literature but remains largely unclear. There is sufficient anecdotal evidence about adolescents' engagement in sexting behavior and the effects that it has had upon their mental health. However, the scientific literature is unclear and there is often conflicting and inconclusive evidence about the association between sexting and adolescent mental health. While some of the literature has demonstrated no clear relationship between sexting and mental health in adolescents, there is literature that

suggests there is a relationship (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2016). Sexting behavior occurs within a very complex context and a number of factors have likely contributed to the conflicting evidence presented in the literature about the relationship between sexting and adolescent mental health. Gender, culture, age, relationships, and various social contexts have likely influenced how sexting behavior has affected adolescents (Anastassiou, 2017).

There is still much misunderstanding about the relationship between sexting and mental health in adolescents. A better understanding of how sexting is related to adolescent mental health will lead to interventions that will assist health care providers and counselors to guide adolescents in decision making surrounding sexting behavior and mitigate any harmful effects of sexting. The research question for the study was, "How are sexting and adolescent mental health related?"

The purpose of the proposed qualitative study was to theorize about how sexting is related to adolescent mental health from adolescents' perspectives using a constructivist grounded theory approach. The specific aims of this study were to:

1. Theorize adolescents' experiences of sexting within a mental health and well-being context.
2. Identify antecedents, benefits, risks, consequences, and outcomes related to sexting behavior from adolescents' perspectives.
3. Explore adolescents' emotional responses/reactions surrounding sexting.

A constructivist grounded theory approach was used to explore teen sexting within a complex social context, keep teens' perspectives about sexting central to the

analysis, and facilitate the creation of a theory that helped to explain the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health. The rationale for the study, definitions of terms, philosophical underpinnings of constructivist grounded theory, and assumptions of the study are described next.

Rationale for the Study

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services lists adolescent development, health, safety, and well-being as a priority goal for the Healthy People 2020 initiative ("Adolescent Health," n.d.). Healthy People 2020 recognizes adolescence as a crucial transitional period from childhood to adulthood and notes the impact that negative experiences can have on adolescent development, as well as progression into healthy adulthood. The negative impact of sexting has the potential to affect adolescents' healthy sexual, mental, and physical development throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Despite the very real risks associated with sexting, substantial numbers of teens are still sexting (Lenhart, 2015; Strassberg et al., 2017). While sexting has at times been situated within a context of normal adolescent sexual development and exploration, the range of consequences of sexting make it an important adolescent health concern that cannot be ignored.

Approximately one in five adolescents has a diagnosable mental health disorder ("Mental Health in Adolescents," n.d.). Depression, in particular, has sharply risen during adolescence in recent years (Breslau et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2017; Mojtabai, Olfson, & Han, 2016). Adolescents who experience depression often continue to experience negative psychosocial effects, with earlier onset of depression associated with greater

harm (Ellis et al., 2017). One predominant influence on the mental health of adolescents has been the pervasiveness of social media behavior, which has significantly transformed the nature of everyday social interactions in adolescents (Lenhart, 2015). Sexting behavior has presented particular threats to the mental health of adolescents. Sexting has been found to be associated with anxiety and depression symptoms in early adolescents (Chaudhary et al., 2017). Consensual sexting in teens has been found to be highly correlated with alcohol and tobacco use, being cyberbullied, and reporting both depressive symptoms and previous suicide attempts (Frankel et al., 2018). Adolescents who have engaged in sexting were more likely, in the year prior to the study, to have felt sad or hopeless for more than two weeks, to have contemplated suicide, and to have attempted suicide (Dake et al., 2012). Sexting has been shown to be associated with loss of privacy and reputation, loss of academic and employment opportunities, victimization in the form of cyberbullying or harassment, coercive behaviors involving pressure to sext, legal problems, sexual risk taking behaviors, substance use, emotional and psychosocial difficulties, depression, and even suicide (Mitchell et al., 2012; Ricketts et al., 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013; Ševčiková, 2016; Smith et al., 2014; Walrave et al., 2014; Wolak et al., 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). These consequences of sexting behavior certainly have the potential to add substantially to the burden of mental health in adolescents.

The legal consequences of sexting can be devastating for teens and can have an impact on mental health. Walsh, Wolak, and Finkelhor (2013) found that 62% of the 378 interviewed U.S. state prosecutors, who had worked on technology-related crimes against children, had handled a sexting case involving juveniles. Thirty-six percent of

prosecutors in the study reported that they had filed charges in the cases, with 21% reporting they filed felony charges. Most had charged felony child pornography production, and 16% had handled sexting cases that resulted in sentencing to mandatory sex offender registration. When charges were filed in these juvenile sexting cases, they usually involved exacerbating circumstances such as malicious intent, bullying, coercion, harassment, or photographs taken by a boyfriend or girlfriend who then distributed them widely with an intent to harm the other's reputation. Further, there is no national consensus on exactly how the laws should be different or how sexting among minors should be prosecuted (Lorang et al., 2016).

Some states focus on the age of the person in the image or the age of the person possessing the image, others focus on details surrounding the dissemination of the sexting message, while others focus on educational programs or other ways to avoid legal judgement (Lorang et al., 2016). A persistent debate surrounding sexting behavior in minors is that current statutes do not adequately distinguish between consensual and nonconsensual adolescent sexting behavior, which may unfairly subject victims to the same punishment as perpetrators (Krieger, 2017; Spooner & Vaughn, 2016). To further complicate this problem, the still developing cognitive processes of the adolescent brain and the propensity for risk taking, increase the chance that a teen might act impulsively or not consider the seriousness of their sexting behavior (Spooner & Vaughn, 2016). Worse still, adolescents may be prosecuted for something in which they believe they have done nothing wrong (Lorang et al., 2016).

The real stories of teen sexting are palpable and make it difficult to ignore the impact that sexting has had for some teens. In 2015, Cañon City, Colorado made national news when at least 106 students in the Cañon City School District were reported to be involved in a sexting incident (Rose, 2015). Phones were confiscated and 351 images were flagged as questionable in nature. While the majority of the sexting photographs did not include the faces of students, three students were able to be positively identified. Many of the nude photographs were found in applications disguised as something else. Although no students were expelled, some were suspended, and the Cañon City High School football team was not allowed to compete in the last game of the season. After the incident had unfolded, many of the students commented that they did not understand that sexting could have legal ramifications.

Further, several students indicated that sexting was a common behavior in the schools. In 2015, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, 16-year-old Cormega Copening was charged with five felony counts of sexual exploitation when nude photos that he and his girlfriend, Brianna Denson, also 16 years of age, had consensually exchanged were found on his cell phone (Reeves, 2016). Cormega and Brianna agreed to plea bargains to reduce their charges to misdemeanor, served a period of probation, and eventually had all charges dismissed. Although he was eventually allowed back on the team, Cormega was suspended as quarterback of the Jack Britt High School football team after he was charged, while threats of losing a football scholarship loomed in the background. Cormega's parents urged that a law be enacted in North Carolina that called for reduced penalties for minors convicted of sexting, suggesting it be called "Cormega's Law" ("All

Charges Dismissed," 2016). During the summer of 2009, 13-year-old Hope Witsell text messaged a photograph of her breasts to her boyfriend (Kaye, 2010). Another young girl obtained the image and sent it on to students in six other schools. Hope became the target of relentless bullying at her middle school, with fellow classmates even creating a website called the *Hope Hater Page*. Later that summer, Hope hanged herself in her bedroom.

While evidence in the literature demonstrates the negative consequences and outcomes that sexting behavior has presented for some teens, there is also evidence in the literature that supports sexting behavior can have positive outcomes. There are studies emphasizing sexting's place in the normal development of adolescent identity, highlighting its role in peer and intimate relationships (Burkett, 2015; Cooper et al., 2016; Vanden Abeele et al., 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2016). Research supports that sexting behavior coincides with puberty when teens begin to explore their sexuality and become more interested in romantic relationships (Houck et al., 2014). Sexting may provide a healthier outlet for communicating sexual desire and a safer alternative for teens who are not sexually active or ready for the emotional aspects of a sexual relationship (Anastassiou, 2017). In addition, sexting may represent a means of interacting and maintaining intimate relationships without fear of negative social consequences for LGBTQIA teens (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2012).

Teen sexting behavior presents opportunities for communities to come together to impact change (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014). Pediatric nurse practitioners (PNPs) can provide anticipatory guidance, prevention strategies, standardized screening, early and

evidence-based interventions, and timely follow-up for teen sexting behavior (R. Albury et al., 2013). PNPs can be involved in educating teens, parents, schools, and communities about teen sexting, and become more familiar with the legal statutes for teen sexting in their states. PNPs can also play a key role in guiding teens to make positive choices about their sexuality, and creating an environment in which teens can feel safe and comfortable talking about sexting behavior (Crown, 2014). Many schools do not yet have a unified response to sexting (Frankel et al., 2018). School nurses can be at the forefront of sexting prevention and play a pivotal role in guiding schools by incorporating sexting as part of the sexual education curriculum (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, Ponnet, & Heirman, 2015).

School nurses could identify students at risk for sexting and engage them in risk prevention (Van Ouytsel et al., 2015). Schools could develop clear policies and procedures for addressing teen sexting, including information about the rights of students, inappropriate or unlawful electronic communications or activities, and procedures for safe, anonymous reporting (Spooner & Vaughn, 2016). State legislatures and courts, practitioners, parents, and educators all play a role in protecting youth against the legal consequences of sexting (Spooner & Vaughn, 2016). Finally, teen sexting behavior presents a significant opportunity for nursing science to conduct more qualitative studies to help explain sexting behavior in teens more fully. A theory regarding teen sexting behavior would contribute greatly to the story of sexting. Further understanding of how teen sexting behavior and adolescent mental health are related would certainly impact interventions to assist health care providers and counselors to guide adolescents in

decision making surrounding sexting behavior and mitigate any harmful effects of sexting.

Definition of Terms

Adolescence: Adolescence typically describes the transitional stage from childhood to adulthood with physical and psychological changes beginning during the preadolescent years, ages nine through 12 ("Adolescence," n.d.). Adolescence is generally divided into three stages: early adolescence, ages 11 to 14; middle adolescence, ages 15 to 17; and late adolescence, ages 18 to 21 (Allen & Waterman, 2019). Rodgers (2017) distinguishes the stages of adolescence by the sexual developmental changes that are happening during each time period. Early adolescents, ages 11 to 14 years, are starting to develop the beginning secondary sexual characteristics of puberty. Sexuality entails self-exploration and evaluation, limited dating, which usually occurs in groups, and limited intimacy. Middle adolescents, ages 15 to 17 years, have well established development of secondary sex characteristics. Rodgers (2017) notes teens may develop "multiple plural" (p. 449) relationships, and begin to internalize heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual attractions. This is the time when teens may begin to have feelings of "being in love" (Rodgers, 2017, p. 449) and establish tentative relationships. Late adolescents, ages 18 to 20 years, experience almost complete reproductive growth and physical maturity. They begin to form stable relationships and attachments with others with a growing capacity for mutuality and reciprocity. Dating usually occurs within a romantic partnership, and intimacy involves commitment rather than exploration and romanticism. Late adolescence is also a time when teens may publicly identify as

gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Adolescents older than 18 years are considered to have attained the age of legal majority or adulthood in most states ("Adult Law and Legal Definition," n.d.). For this study adolescence was defined as adolescents from 13 to 21 years of age. Adolescent participants aged 18 to 22 years were interviewed about their own or friends' and peers' sexting behavior in the past 5 to 7 years. Interviewing adult adolescents rather than minor adolescents minimized the potential challenges with recruitment of minors, the need for parental consent, and legal challenges that may arise from interviewing minors about potentially illegal behavior.

Cyberbullying: Any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates negative, false, harmful, hostile, or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others who find it difficult to defend themselves. It can also include sharing personal or private information about someone else causing embarrassment or humiliation (DePaolis & Williford, 2015; Tokunaga, 2010; "What is Cyberbullying," n.d.).

Cybersex: A subcategory of online sexual activity referring to an array of online sexual activity associated with Internet usage and may include viewing erotic or pornographic images online; uploading or forwarding images or text descriptions of oneself or one's sexual partner; interacting with sex workers employed by particular websites; interacting with anonymous partners through blogs, chat rooms; meeting potential sexual partners for offline contacts; and violating interpersonal boundaries by initiating unwanted sexual contacts through email, social networking sites, and other Internet forums (Judge & Saleh, 2013).

Mental Health: Mental health is a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society. Basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one's own emotions, as well as empathize with others; flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles; and harmonious relationship between body and mind represent important components of mental health which contribute, to varying degrees, to the state of internal equilibrium (Galderisi, Heinz, Kastrup, Beezhold, & Sartorius, 2015, pp. 231-232).

Online Sexual Activity: Broad range of Internet behaviors that involve sexual content, topics, and stimuli (Shaughnessy et al., 2017). Online sexual activity (OSA) can be divided into non-arousal and arousal-oriented activities (Shaughnessy et al., 2017). Non-arousal OSA refers to activities that involve sexual information and knowledge (e.g., looking for sexual health information online), as well as relationship or community-related activities that contain sex-related content or contexts (e.g., online dating sites). In contrast, arousal-oriented OSA involves sexually explicit stimuli, materials, and content, and can be further divided into two subtypes, solitary-arousal and partnered-arousal. Solitary-arousal OSA involves accessing or posting sexually explicit content, materials, or stimuli over the Internet (e.g., viewing pornography). Partnered-arousal OSA requires the participation of at least two people in an interactive sexual communication or activity using Internet-based forums (e.g., sending sexually explicit messages). For this study, online sexual activity referred to any use of the Internet that involves sexuality (Shaughnessy et al., 2011)

Sexting: In this study, sexting was defined as the behavior of sending, receiving, and forwarding between persons of messages, images, photos, or audio content that contain sexual-related content through various transmission modes (e.g., online, electronic, Internet, mobile phone, smartphone, computer, social networks; Barrense-Dias et al., 2017).

Sexuality: Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles, and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious, and spiritual factors (World Health Organization, 2006).

Sexuality Education: Sexuality education regarding human sexuality, includes information about intimate relationships, human sexual anatomy, sexual reproduction, sexually transmitted infections, sexual activity, sexual orientation, gender identity, abstinence, contraception, and reproductive rights and responsibilities (Breuner et al., 2016).

Social Media: Social media includes forms of electronic communication (such as Web sites) through which people create online communities to share information, ideas, and personal messages (“Social Media,” 2018). Social media also refers to “software that enables individuals and communities to gather, communicate, share, and in some cases

collaborate or play typically in the context of applications accessible through internet browsers or mobile devices" (Von Muhlen & Ohno-Machado, 2012, p. 777).

Social Network: A social network is an online service or site through which people create and maintain interpersonal relationships ("Social Network," 2018). YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, Google+ (Google Plus), Vine, Tumblr, Reddit, Pinterest, and MySpace are examples of social networking sites (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Philosophical Underpinnings

Grounded theory emerged from the collaboration of sociologists Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss while they were studying death and dying in seriously ill patients in U.S. hospitals (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Existing theories, in their estimation, were often ill-suited to understand the experiences of their study participants (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory methods provide a frame for qualitative inquiry and guidelines for conducting it (Charmaz, 2014). Fundamental to grounded theory is the belief that theory emerges from the data rather than from a priori theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory moves beyond description and *generates* or *discovers* a theory, an abstract analysis of a process, action, or interaction as experienced by participants; thus, the resulting novel theory is *grounded* in the data from the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A fundamental aim of grounded theory is to explore basic social processes and understand the multiplicity of interactions that produce variation in that process (Charmaz, 2008; Heath & Cowley, 2004). The questions that the researcher asks of participants focus on understanding how individuals experience the process and

identifying the steps in the process (e.g., What was the process? How did it unfold?) (Creswell, 2007).

Grounded theory has philosophical underpinnings in symbolic interactionism and pragmatism (Wuest, 2012). Symbolic interactionism assumes that meaning is made and constantly changed through interaction between persons and things; meaning in artifacts, gestures, and language is embedded in social context; and both meaning and social context influence interaction (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism was informed by pragmatism which "assumes that interaction is dynamic and interpretive and addresses how people create, enact, and change meanings and actions" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 9). Pragmatism views reality as "fluid, somewhat indeterminate, and open to multiple interpretations" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 262).

Grounded theory was appropriate for studying teen sexting behavior for several reasons. First, grounded theory provides a general framework for explaining how people experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory serves as a way to learn about the worlds of others and a method for developing theories to understand them (Charmaz, 2014). Further, grounded theory helps to explain human behaviors and processes in context (Wuest, 2012). The goal of this study was to capture the experiences of sexting from teens' perspectives and explore the processes that take place during teen sexting behavior in their worlds. By understanding the experiences of teens, we may be able incorporate their voices into educational, legal, and health strategies for teen sexting. Second, grounded theory is especially suited for areas where there is minimal knowledge of a phenomenon or a new perspective is required (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). Teen sexting behavior is a relatively new phenomenon and there is still much misunderstanding about its specific behaviors, motivations, experiences, consequences, and benefits, especially by teens' accounts. Third, grounded theory works well when the researcher is concerned with theory generation that is fluid and can cope with changing situations and demonstrate transferability (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009). Technology is changing rapidly, and teens' interactions with technology are likely to change rapidly along with it.

One final example of where grounded theory methods may serve a study well is when there is a lack of theory available to explain a process or existing theoretical perspectives do not satisfactorily explain what is going on (Creswell, 2007; Wuest, 2012). Steele and Brown (1995) introduced the adolescent media practice model to explain how adolescents choose one media source over another, and what factors play a role in this decision. The original intent of this model was to emphasize the constant interaction between adolescents and older sources of media, such as television. However, this model is completely outdated for explaining the different interactions teens are having with media and technology today, because most of the media that teens are commonly interacting with today did not exist in 1995. More importantly, this model may not adequately describe how adolescents are making the decision to engage in sexting behavior. More recently, Shafer, Bobkowski, and Brown (2013) made modifications to the model creating the sexual media practice model to help describe teens' interactions with sexual media. The sexual media practice model mirrors the original model, with adaptations for interactions with sexual media. However, the model does not appear to be

grounded in scientific evidence. Shafer et al. (2013) substituted the constructs of identity, media selection, and application from the original adolescent media practice model with the constructs of sexual self-concept, sexual media diet, and sexual attitudes, norms, scripts, and behaviors without an explanation of how they arrived at these constructs. The authors also make reference to a number of other sexual and communication theories while describing their model, but make no reference to prior research that has tested this model with adolescents in the context of sexting behavior. Therefore, the sexual media practice model may not adequately explain how adolescents are making the decision to engage in sexting behavior. These models were not used for this study. Constructivist grounded theory as described by Charmaz (2014) provided the qualitative research methodology for this study.

Study Assumptions

First and foremost, as a pediatric healthcare provider, I made an assumption that sexual exploration is a normal part of adolescent growth and development. A second assumption included that adolescents are engaging in sexting behavior and that this study would identify some of these adolescents. A third assumption was that 18 to 21-year-old adolescents would be able to accurately remember their own sexting behaviors and those of friends or peers from the past 5 to 7 years. A final assumption about the study was that adolescents would want to talk about their sexting behavior with the researcher who is a PNP in an environment that was safe and where confidentiality would be protected and assured to the extent of local, state, and federal laws.

Summary

This chapter described the significance of the phenomenon of adolescent sexting within the context of increasing technology and social media, highlighting it as a significant behavior in a range of broader online sexual behaviors in teens. This chapter provided a brief overview of existing research on teen sexting, teen sexting's position in the context of normal adolescent sexual development, screening for adolescent sexual development, a statement of the research problem and aims and goals of the study, as well as rationale for the study, definitions of important terms, and a brief background of the philosophical underpinnings for this qualitative study. Basic assumptions of the study were also provided. Chapter 2 is an integrative review of the literature on teen sexting and mental health that will be submitted to the *Journal of Adolescence*. Chapter 3 is a manuscript of the findings of the grounded theory study regarding teens' experiences with sexting that will be submitted to the *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*. Chapter 4 provides a summary and conclusion of the study.

CHAPTER II

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEXTING AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH

AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A Paper to be Submitted for Publication in the

Journal of Adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The purpose of this integrative literature review was to describe and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between sexting and adolescent mental health and emotional well-being.

Methods: The review included 28 studies published between 2005 and 2019 reporting on the relationship between sexting and adolescent mental health.

Results: A synthesis of the findings of the studies revealed four main themes or focus areas: (a) the relationship between sexting and decreased emotional well-being, (b) the relationship between sexting and mental illness diagnoses, (c) the relationship among sexting and other risky behaviors, and (d) consensual versus nonconsensual or coercive sexting.

Conclusions: The themes identified across the reviewed literature identified gaps in knowledge that warrant further investigation. The literature regarding the relationship between sexting and mental health often projected a negative view of risk and danger,

lacked a normal sexual growth and developmental approach, and neglected the greater context in which sexting occurs for adolescents. Future research employing qualitative methodologies would enable a deeper understanding of the experiences, circumstances, and contexts surrounding sexting behavior from adolescents' points of view. Understanding adolescents' experiences of sexting could help healthcare providers address the psychological and emotional challenges experienced by adolescents who participate in sexting within specific social and developmental contexts.

Keywords: adolescent, teen, sexting, mental health, emotional health, emotional well-being

Introduction

In May 2008, Jessica Logan went on a Cincinnati television station to tell her story of sending nude pictures of herself to a boyfriend using her smartphone, who after their break-up, sent them on to other high school girls (Celizic, 2009). Other girls harassed her, calling her a *slut* and a *whore.* Jesse was miserable, depressed, and afraid to go to school. Two months after the interview, Jesse hanged herself in her bedroom. She was 18 years old.

Easy access to social networking sites and smartphones has allowed the Internet to play an increasingly central role in the exploration and expression of adolescent sexuality (Kerstens & Stol, 2014). Online sexual behavior in turn has played a role in the social and sexual development of adolescents. Within a climate of online sexual behavior, a new phenomenon referred to as *sexting* has emerged. *Sexting* blends the words *sex* and *texting* and generally refers to the sending, receiving, and forwarding of sexually explicit

messages, images, photos, or videos via communication technologies (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). However, the term *sexting* is evolving and embodies a wide range of practices, motivations, attitudes, and behaviors among adolescents (Barrense-Dias, Berchtold, Surís, & Akre, 2017). While adolescents are recognized as sexual beings with rights to communicate in privacy to explore their sexuality, public discussion often centers on the potential risks, harms, and detrimental outcomes of online sexual behavior (Naezer, 2018). Of particular interest is the potential harmful effect that sexting may have upon the mental health of adolescents.

Adolescence marks a significant period of sexual growth and development. Developing a healthy sexuality is a key developmental milestone for all adolescents (Breuner et al., 2016). Adolescent sexuality encompasses multiple biologic, cognitive, and psychosocial dimensions, which begin before the onset of puberty and end with the attainment of adulthood (Rodgers, 2017). Further, sexual development is a critical component of identity formation (Erikson, 1963). Self-discovery and discovery of a sexual self is a normal part of identity formation. Sexting may play a role in the development of adolescent identity formation as adolescents interact with friends, peer groups, and intimate relationships through sexting behavior (Burkett, 2015; Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson & Svedin, 2016; Vanden Abeele, Campbell, Eggermont, & Roe, 2014). In addition, adolescence is a developmental stage marked by the desire for immediate gratification, experimentation, risk-taking, and limited comprehension of dangers of risky behaviors (Ahern, Kemppainen, & Thacker, 2016). This may include sexual risk behaviors in which sexting may play a part.

Anecdotal evidence shows that sexting has resulted in negative outcomes for adolescents including being reprimanded at school, bullying and ostracism by peers, legal ramifications, and even suicide (Alonso & Romero, 2019; Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Holoyda, Landess, Sorrentino, & Friedman, 2018). Some adolescents have faced misdemeanor and felony convictions, child pornography charges, and sex offender registration (Holoyda et al., 2018).

Recent trends in adolescent mental health indicate that approximately one in five adolescents has a diagnosable mental health disorder (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015). Approximately 50% of lifelong mental disorders begin by 14 years of age (Kessler et al., 2005). In addition, suicide is a leading cause of death in adolescents aged 15 to 17 years (Heron, 2019). Depression, in particular, has risen sharply in recent years, affecting one in eight adolescents and young adults, and is now the most common mental health disorder in adolescents (Mojtabai, Olfson, & Han, 2016). An increased risk for depression occurring during a critical period of adolescent development involves a complex interaction of biological, environmental, and social factors (Ellis et al., 2017). Further, adolescents who experience depression often continue to experience negative psychosocial effects, with earlier onset of depression associated with significant threats to the attainment of educational and occupational goals, and the development of social relationships.

Cognitive processes and the propensity for risk taking in adolescents increase the chance that a teen might act impulsively or not consider the seriousness of their sexting behavior, providing additional impetus for the negative mental health consequences of

sexting (Spooner & Vaughn, 2016). Despite risks and consequences of sexting, substantial numbers of teens are still engaging in this behavior suggesting that sexting may be a way for adolescents to explore their sexuality as an important aspect of their normal growth and development. Sexting behavior has been reported to occur as early as 10 years of age (Houck et al., 2014). Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaíta, and Rullo (2013) report that between 15% and 28% of teens are participating in sexting behavior. Some authors have reported even higher rates of teen sexting (Gregg, Somers, Pernice, Hillman, & Kernsmith, 2018; McLaughlin, 2012; Strohmaier, Murphy, & DeMatteo, 2014; Yoder, Hansen, & Precht, 2018). Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, and Wolak (2012) report that while some authors have defined sexting in terms of images, others have focused on messages, while still others have failed to distinguish between sending, receiving, or forwarding of sexual content in their definitions.

The lack of a clear definition of sexting across studies has likely resulted in difficulty in capturing the true incidence of sexting in adolescents and the relationship between sexting behavior and mental health and well-being. Anastassiou (2017) further asserts that sexting behavior occurs within a very complex social context, and a number of factors have likely influenced how sexting behavior has affected the mental health and well-being of adolescents. The purpose of this integrative review of the literature is to describe and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health and emotional well-being. This review will address the following research question, “What is the relationship between sexting and mental health and emotional well-being in adolescents?”

Methods

The integrative review methodology described by Whittemore and Knafl (2005) was used to guide this review. The five-stage process of Whittemore and Knafl's integrative review methodology includes: (a) problem identification; (b) literature search; (c) data evaluation; (d) data analysis; and (e) presentation of results. The integrative literature review is a distinctive form of research that generates new knowledge about a topic by reviewing, critiquing, and synthesizing representative literature on a topic in an integrated way allowing for generation of new frameworks and perspectives on the topic (Toracco, 2016). This method allows for inclusion of diverse data sources and research methodologies in order to resolve discrepancies between the literature and observations about the issue. An integrative review was conducted to formulate a comprehensive description of the state of the science regarding the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health.

Literature Search and Data Evaluation

The literature search regarding sexting and adolescent mental health includes scientific journal publications of original research that spanned a 14-year period from 2005 to 2019. Keywords included sexting, adolescent, teen, mental health, mental disorders, mental well-being, psychological well-being, psychosocial well-being, anxiety, stress, depression, suicide risk, suicidal ideation, and suicide. The literature search was conducted using eight databases: CINAHL Complete, PsycINFO, Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection, Scopus, PubMed, ERIC (EBSCO), Medline with Full Text (EBSCO), and Web of Science. The search initially yielded 382 articles authored

from a broad base of disciplines including nursing, medicine, psychology, and communication science. Studies were included if they represented original research, were available in full text, and were written in the English language. Studies with both quantitative and qualitative research study methods with diverse designs were considered. Studies were included if they noted adolescents between the ages of 10 and 21 years within their samples, and the main focus of the article was on sexting behavior of adolescents. After removal of all duplicates and application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 20 articles remained. The reference lists of all remaining articles were reviewed and eight additional articles were identified. A total of 28 articles remained for further evaluation.

The data evaluation stage focused on evaluating the quality of studies for methodological rigor and topic relevance. Studies that discussed the relationship between sexting and mental health or mental health related issues as either predictors or consequences of sexting behavior were included in the data evaluation stage. Whittemore and Knafl (2005) recommend a simple rating scale when evaluating both quantitative and qualitative studies with diverse methodologies. All 28 articles were read in entirety and rated as low, moderate, or high for methodological rigor and topic relevance. All articles scored moderate or higher on both evaluation criteria and were included in the final review. A PRISMA diagram of the screening and selection process of the literature search and data evaluation is depicted in Figure 2.1.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

In an integrative review, critical analysis and synthesis work together as the means through which the data found in the literature are used to generate new knowledge about a topic (Torraco, 2016). Critical analysis in an integrative review involves carefully examining the main ideas and arguments presented in the literature through a critical lens. Critique of the research articles was done to identify the strengths of the articles as well as any deficiencies, omissions, inaccuracies, and other problematic aspects of the studies in order to identify aspects of the topic that were missing, incomplete, or poorly represented in the literature, as well as inconsistencies or contradictions among the research articles on the topic. The result of a comprehensive synthesis of literature is that new knowledge or perspective is created from a review of previous research. A conceptual or thematic structure was used to synthesize the literature in order to integrate existing ideas with new ideas about the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health and emotional well-being (Toracco, 2016).

Results

The integrative review analysis revealed four main themes regarding the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health and emotional well-being: (a) the relationship between sexting and decreased emotional well-being, (b) the relationship between sexting and mental illness diagnoses, (c) the relationship among sexting and other risky behaviors, and (d) consensual versus nonconsensual or coercive sexting. The study characteristics showed that all articles in the review employed quantitative research designs. With regards to samples and settings, a majority of studies

sampled a mix of adolescents and young adults from high school and university settings. Table 2.1 provides an overview of the selected studies.

The Relationship Between Sexting and Decreased Emotional Well-Being

Mental health is a broad concept and encompasses aspects of psychological, social, and emotional well-being (CDC, 2018a). Well-being includes the presence of positive emotions and moods, the absence of negative emotions, satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive functioning (CDC, 2018b). Emotional well-being differs from mental health in that it involves being in control of one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and being able to cope with challenges in life (Lamothe, 2019). A number of studies explored the relationship between sexting and different aspects of emotional well-being in adolescents.

Specific feelings and emotions experienced by adolescents were mentioned in several studies. The literature revealed that feelings and emotions that adolescents experienced with sexting were often negative in nature. Feelings of sadness (Dake et al., 2012; Ševčiková, 2016), fear (Alonso & Romero, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2012), anger or irritability (Alonso & Romero, 2019; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; Yoder et al., 2018), embarrassment (Mitchell et al., 2012), discomfort (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014), loneliness (Festl, Reer, & Quandt, 2019; Yoder et al., 2018), stress (Klettke, Mellor, Silva-Myles, Clancy, & Sharma, 2018; Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2014), and hopelessness (Dake et al., 2012) were associated with sexting across studies.

In addition to specific feelings and emotions, other emotional health and emotional well-being related aspects were explored across the studies. There was some evidence suggesting that sexting was associated with other aspects of emotional health and well-being in adolescents. Three studies reported an association between sexting and low self-esteem (Gámez-Guadix & deSantisteban, 2018; Klettke, Hallford, Clancy, Mellor, & Toumbourou, 2019; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Two additional studies reported an association between sexting and self-esteem, but found mixed results. One study found no differences in self-esteem across groups of adolescents who sexted (Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013). Another study found sexting to be associated with low self-esteem; however, low self-esteem did not appear to predict sexting over time (Jonsson, Priebe, Bladh, & Svedin, 2014). Self-efficacy was explored in two studies, and findings were mixed as well. While one study showed that lower self-efficacy resulted in adolescents being more vulnerable to participating in sexting behavior (Houck et al, 2014), another study showed that lower self-efficacy actually resulted in a decrease in sexting behavior (Ševčiková, 2016). Other studies found associations between sexting and lower perceived life satisfaction (Festl et al., 2019), negative body image (Milton et al., 2019), lower sense of coherence (Jonsson et al., 2014), lack of parental bonding (Jonsson et al., 2014), and lower levels of social support (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014).

The Relationship Between Sexting and Mental Illness Diagnoses

Although mental health and mental illness are often used interchangeably, they are different (CDC, 2018a). Mental illnesses are conditions that affect thinking, feeling,

mood, or behavior such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia. Evidence in the literature strongly suggests that there is an association between sexting and mental illness diagnoses in adolescents. Across studies, sexting was found to be positively associated with depression (Chaudhary et al., 2017; Englander, 2012; Festl et al., 2019; Frankel, Bauerle-Bass, Patterson, Dai, & Brown, 2018; Gámez-Guadix & deSantisteban, 2018; Jonsson et al., 2014; Klettke et al., 2019; Medrano, Rosales, & Gámez-Guadix, 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014), anxiety (Chaudhary et al., 2017; Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Englander, 2012; Festl et al., 2019; Jonsson et al., 2014; Klettke et al., 2019; Weisskirch, Drouin, & Delevi, 2017), psychological distress (Milton et al., 2019), past trauma and abuse (Dake et al., 2012; Englander, 2012; Milton et al., 2019; Morelli, Bianchi, Baiocco, Pezzuti, & Chirumbolo, 2016; Yoder et al., 2018), and personality disorders (Brinkley, Ackerman, Ehrenreich, & Underwood, 2017; Ferguson, 2011). One study found an association between sexting and recent poor mental health, but did not specify a specific mental illness diagnosis (Carrotte, Vella, Hellard, & Lim, 2016). Evidence in the literature also suggested that sexting may be linked with behaviors of mental illness that have a devastating outcome to adolescent mental health. Of significant concern were studies that demonstrated a relationship between sexting and suicidal behaviors. Four studies reported a positive association between sexting and both suicidal thoughts and attempted suicide in adolescents (Dake et al., 2012; Frankel et al., 2018; Medrano et al., 2018; Milton et al., 2019).

While a majority of studies reviewed reported that there was an association between sexting behavior and mental illness in adolescents, there were five studies that did not support this finding (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Klettke et al., 2018; Morelli et al., 2016; Temple et al., 2014; Woodward, Evans, & Brooks, 2017). Two of these studies found no association between sexting and depression (Temple et al., 2014; Woodward et al., 2017). Two studies found no association between sexting and depression or anxiety (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Morelli et al., 2016). In another study, lower levels of depression were associated with more sexting behavior in adolescents (Klettke et al., 2018).

The Relationship Among Sexting and Other Risky Behaviors

Adolescence is often characterized by a period of increased risk-taking, with adolescents engaging in one type of risk behavior more likely to engage in others (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014). The existing research presents strong evidence that adolescents who engaged in sexting were also more likely to be participating in other risk-related behaviors. In this review, 22 of the 28 studies examined mentioned risky behaviors with sexting. Often multiple risk behaviors were mentioned within the same study. Risk behaviors noted in the literature included substance use behaviors, sexual risk behaviors, bullying and cyberbullying, problematic Internet use and other online risk behaviors, sensation seeking, and delinquency behaviors.

Alcohol use was found to be associated with sexting behavior in eight studies (Dake et al., 2012; Englander, 2012; Frankel et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2012; Ševčiková, 2016; Temple et al., 2014; Woodward et al., 2017; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014).

Sexting was found to be associated with the behavior of binge drinking in two of these studies (Dake et al., 2012; Frankel et al., 2018). Sexting was found to be associated with marijuana use in five studies (Dake et al., 2012; Frankel et al., 2018; Temple et al., 2014; Woodward et al., 2017; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014), and tobacco use in two studies (Dake et al., 2012; Frankel et al., 2018). Three additional studies noted an association between sexting and drug use, but did not identify specific drugs (Brinkley et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2012; Morelli et al., 2016). Temple et al. (2014) discovered that sexting was significantly associated with the use of several illicit drugs including cocaine, amphetamines, inhalants, ecstasy, and non-prescribed prescription drugs.

Across studies, sexting was also found to be associated with several sexual risk behaviors including a past history of having had vaginal sex (Brinkley et al., 2017; Dake et al., 2012; Frankel et al., 2018; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Houck et al., 2014; Ševčiková, 2016; Temple et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014), having oral or anal sex (Dake et al., 2012; Houck et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014), early sexual debut (Brinkley et al., 2017), multiple sexual partners (Brinkley et al., 2017; Dake et al., 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014), not using contraception (Brinkley et al., 2017; Dake et al., 2012; Ferguson, 2011; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014), and sexual risk-related cognitions including greater intentions to engage in sexual activity, as well as more perceived approval for participating in sexual activity from peers, family, and the media (Houck et al., 2014). Two studies demonstrated the effect that the co-occurrence of risk behaviors may have on sexting behavior in adolescents. Frankel et al. (2018) found that sexually active adolescents who used alcohol were seven times more likely to engage

in sexting. Brinkley et al. (2017) discovered that sexting at 16 years of age was associated with both drug use and sexual activity two years later.

A number of other high-risk behaviors were examined across studies. Bullying and/or cyberbullying behavior was found to be associated with sexting in six studies (Alonso & Romero, 2019; Englander, 2012; Frankel et al., 2018; Medrano et al., 2018; Milton et al., 2019; Woodward et al., 2017). Problematic Internet Use (PIU), defined as a loss of control over the use of the Internet and continued use despite negative outcomes, and other online risk behaviors (e.g., Internet use to meet strangers) were found to be associated with sexting in five studies (Festl et al., 2019; Gámez-Guadix & deSantisteban, 2018; Jonsson et al., 2014; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Milton et al., 2019). The personality trait of sensation seeking (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014) and delinquency (Woodward et al., 2017) were found to be associated with sexting in two additional studies.

Consensual Versus Nonconsensual or Coercive Sexting

Evidence in the literature strongly suggests that certain contexts of sexting, particularly contexts of nonconsensual or coercive sexting are associated with negative mental health outcomes in adolescents. Across studies, nonconsensual contexts of sexting were referred to as unwanted, unwanted or coerced but consensual, nonconsensual, coerced, and sexual cybervictimization (Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Englander, 2012; Festl et al., 2019; Frankel et al., 2018; Klettke et al., 2019; Medrano et al., 2018). Unwanted sexting referred to receiving sexually explicit images of another person that were unwanted or unwelcome (Klettke et al., 2019). Unwanted or coerced, but consensual

sexting was defined as consenting to sexting behavior even when one did not want to consent (Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Klettke et al., 2019). Nonconsensual sexting was defined as having a revealing or sexual photo of oneself texted, emailed, or posted electronically without permission (Frankel et al., 2018), while coerced sexting referred to sexting that was pressured, forced, blackmailed, or threatened (Englander, 2012). Sexual cybervictimization referred to acts of sexual-related insistence, threats and coercion, and dissemination of personal information without consent (Festl et al., 2019; Medrano et al., 2018).

Seven studies in this review distinguished nonconsensual or coercive sexting contexts from consensual sexting; all reported an association between sexting and negative mental health outcomes (Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Englander, 2012; Festl et al., 2019; Frankel et al., 2018; Jonsson et al., 2014; Klettke et al., 2019; Medrano et al., 2018). Four studies specifically referenced nonconsensual or coercive contexts of sexting. Klettke et al. (2019) found that adolescents who had received unwanted sexts or had sent sexts under coercion experienced higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and psychological distress compared to adolescents who were consensually sexting. Englander (2012) discovered that pressured or coerced sexting was the most reported motivation for sexting, with girls reporting sexting under coercion more often than boys. In addition, adolescents pressured or coerced into sexting were significantly more likely to report excessive anxiety, prior dating violence, and cyberbullying. While Frankel et al. (2018) found that more adolescents participated in consensual sexting, females were 49% less likely to report consensual sexting than males. Further, nonconsensual sexting was

associated with higher percentages of depressive symptoms, attempted suicide, and engagement in self-harm than consensual sexting. In a final study, Drouin and Tobin (2014) found that anxious attachment in relationships was significantly associated with consenting to unwanted sexting among women. For these women, the most reported motivation for consenting to unwanted sexting was avoiding an argument with their partners.

Three additional studies examined the role that sexual cybervictimization may play in moderating the relationship between sexting and mental health. Jonsson et al. (2014) discovered that adolescents who participated in sexting were more likely to be both perpetrators and victims of sexual cybervictimization. The study also found that adolescents who sexted reported more problematic parental relationships and poorer psychosocial health overall. In another study, participating in sexting was associated with more online sexual victimization experiences; adolescents who sexted also reported more loneliness, lower life satisfaction, and poorer mental health (Festl et al., 2019). In a final study, Medrano et al. (2108) found sexting was associated with cybervictimization involving intentional forwarding of sexual content; further, both cybervictimization and depressive symptoms were significantly associated with suicidal ideation.

Discussion

The purpose of this integrative review was to describe and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health and emotional well-being. The themes identified across the reviewed literature revealed gaps in knowledge that warrant further investigation.

Sexting and Mental Health Viewed Through a Negative Lens

Mental health is a broad concept and encompasses psychological, social, and emotional aspects of adolescent health (CDC, 2018a). This was reflected in the many ways that the relationship between sexting and adolescent mental health was explored across the literature. While there were some studies that explored emotional well-being aspects of mental health, other studies explored specific mental illness diagnoses. When the relationship between sexting and mental health was explored, feelings and emotions experienced by adolescents were often negative and negative outcomes to adolescent mental health were heavily emphasized. Several methodological limitations may have influenced the relationship between sexting behavior and mental health found across the studies. The majority of studies in this review employed a cross-sectional research design. Therefore, no causality between sexting and mental health could be inferred from the studies. Additionally, few studies used longitudinal methods which could have helped identify whether adolescents had a mental health issue prior to sexting behavior or if sexting behavior resulted in a decrease in emotional well-being or experiencing a mental health issue. Finally, all studies included in this integrative review were quantitative and descriptive in nature and did not explore adolescent experiences, motivations, or intentions for engaging in sexting behavior.

The review also revealed that the literature of sexting and mental health was heavily focused on risky behaviors suggesting a view of sexting by authors that was biased towards a negative context of risk and danger. Previous literature has suggested that sexting behavior often co-occurs with a number of other risk factors (Benotsch,

Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Gasso, Klettke, Agustina, & Montiel, 2019; Rice et al., 2014; Temple & Choi, 2014). Sexting may also function as a high-risk or impulsive behavior that clusters with other risky behaviors, and like these other risky behaviors may be associated with poorer psychological health (Temple et al., 2014). However, risk-taking behavior can also be viewed as a normal part of exploring self and sexual identity in adolescents (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014).

Lack of a Developmental Approach

While an association between sexting behavior and negative mental health in adolescents is concerning, few authors accounted for adolescent development within their studies. Authors often focused on age and not developmental level of the adolescents within their studies. Further, the samples in most studies were a mix of adolescents and young adults, which did not allow for acknowledging the influence that different developmental levels may have had on influencing participation in sexting or the effects sexting may have had on mental health. Adolescent development was addressed in only six studies (Festl et al., 2019; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Livingstone and Görzig, 2014; Ševčiková, 2016; Temple et al., 2014: Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). In addition, adolescence is a time when sexual relationships and sexually curious behavior are viewed as normative experiences with significant implications for health, adjustment, and psychosocial functioning (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). There is evidence in the literature that suggests that sexting may play a key role in adolescent sexual developmental (Burkett, 2015; Cooper et al., 2016). Adolescent sexual development was mentioned in only five studies (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Ševčiková,

2016; Temple et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Only one study recommended that sexting should be approached from an adolescent sexual developmental perspective in future studies (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014).

Context Surrounding Sexting

A final gap in knowledge regarding sexting and mental health is the greater context in which sexting occurs in adolescents' social lives. Noted in the review was that the context of nonconsensual or coercive sexting appeared to present particular risks and harms to adolescent mental health. Studies exploring sexting have often grouped consensual with nonconsensual contexts of sexting together; however, consensual and nonconsensual contexts of sexting are likely to result in different psychosocial outcomes (Krieger, 2017). This was clearly demonstrated in this review. While only seven studies in this review distinguished between consensual and nonconsensual contexts of sexting; adolescents in all seven studies reported more negative mental health-related behaviors and poorer mental health overall. Further, evidence from this literature noted that female adolescents may be at more risk for harm related to nonconsensual or coercive contexts of sexting. Whether or not sexting is consensual is just one context related to the impact of sexting on mental health and emotional well-being. Additional contexts surrounding sexting behavior were not clearly explored in the reviewed literature.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Findings from this integrative review have implications for future research and practice. Future research regarding sexting and mental health should include qualitative methodologies to enable a deeper understanding of the experiences, circumstances, and

contexts surrounding the behavior of sexting, as well as examine more closely whether there are differences regarding contexts, motivations, expectations, and attributed meanings of sexting behaviors from adolescents' points of view. Further, exploration of sexting and mental health from within a normal sexual developmental framework may help to identify adolescent perspectives. Finally, distinguishing between contexts of consensual and nonconsensual sexting behavior may help to discern sexting behaviors that present the greatest risks of harm to adolescent mental health, from those that represent a normal aspect of adolescent sexual growth and development. Future implications for practice include incorporating sexting as part of the assessment of normal sexual developmental in adolescents. Talking with adolescents about sexting may open the door to discussions about their involvement in other high-risk behaviors or mental health problems they may be experiencing (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, Ponnet, & Heirman, 2015).

Conclusion

There is a need to better understand the relationship between sexting and mental health from the perspective of adolescents. Missing from this group of reviewed studies were the voices of adolescents' and their accounts of the antecedents, expectations, and motivations of sexting. Also missing were adolescents' perceptions of both the negative effects and potential benefits that sexting may present to their own mental health. Understanding the experiences of sexting and mental health from adolescents' perspectives supports the Healthy People 2020 goal of improving the healthy development, health, safety, and well-being of adolescents and young adults (U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). A qualitative research approach may offer a theoretical foundation for exploring the relationship between sexting and mental health from the perspective of adolescents allowing a deeper understanding of the experiences, circumstances, and contexts surrounding the behavior of sexting, as well as examining more closely differences regarding motivations, expectations, and attributed meanings of sexting behaviors among adolescents. Understanding adolescents' experiences of sexting could help healthcare providers address the psychological and emotional challenges experienced by adolescents who participate in sexting within specific social and developmental contexts.

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Table 2.1

Studies Examining the Relationships between Sexting and Mental Health

Authors(s), Year	Sample Size and Age Range	Research Design	Sexting Defined	Mental Health Defined	Other Variables Measured	Sexting & Mental Health Findings
Alonso & Romero (2019)	(T1) N=910; (T2) N=624; 12-19 years	Descriptive; Longitudinal	Nude photo or video using cellphone	Emotional Well-Being (e.g., positive and negative affect)	Personality traits; bullying or cyberbullying	Sexting was associated with a decrease in the level of emotional well-being in adolescents (e.g., decreased levels of positive emotions).
Brinkley et al. (2017)	N=181; 15-16 years	Descriptive; Longitudinal	Utterances of actual or hypothetical sexual behaviors via text message	Borderline personality disorder features	Early sexual activity and risky sexual behaviors	Sexting behavior at age 16 years was associated with sexual activity, sexual risk behavior, and borderline personality features at 18 years of age.
Carrotte et al. (2016)	N=1345; 15-29 years	Descriptive; Cross-Sectional	Sexually explicit photos via online or cellphone	Recent poor mental health	Use of illegal drugs; alcohol consumption; bullying	Recent poor mental health in adolescents and young adults was associated with sexting, sexual risk behaviors, use of illegal drugs, and being bullied.
Chaudhary et al. (2017)	N=500; (M 12.22 years) 6th and 7th graders	Descriptive; Longitudinal	Sexually suggestive (e.g., nude or nearly nude) text messages, videos, and images via cellphone or Internet	Anxiety, Depression	None	Adolescents who participated in sexting had greater odds of both depression and anxiety symptoms in 6th and 7th grade compared to adolescents who did not participate in sexting.
Dake et al. (2012)	N=1289; 12-18 years	Descriptive-Correlational;	Sexually explicit messages, or nude,	Emotional Health Behaviors (e.g., being	Substance use behaviors; sexual	Sexting was associated with emotional health

		Cross-sectional	partially nude, or sexually suggestive images via cellphone, email, or Internet	abused by boyfriend/girlfriend, forced sexual intercourse, depression, suicide contemplation, suicide attempts, and who one talks to when depressed)	behaviors; social behaviors (e.g., time spent texting, participation in organized activities)	issues, engaging in high-risk sexual behaviors, and substance use.
Drouin & Tobin (2014)	N=155; (M 21.64 years) undergraduate students	Descriptive; Cross-Sectional; Retrospective Cohort Study	Unwanted but consensual sexting (e.g., engaging in sexting when not wanting to via text, pictures, or video)	Anxious attachment, Avoidant attachment	None	Anxious attachment was significantly related to consenting to unwanted sexting among women.
Englander (2012)	N=617; 18 year olds	Descriptive; Cross-sectional; Retrospective Cohort Study	Nude pictures	Depression, Anxiety	Alcohol/drug use; special needs status in school; self-cyberbullying; dating or domestic violence	Adolescents who experienced pressured or coerced sexting were more likely to report having had problems during high school with excessive anxiety, prior dating violence, and cyber self-bullying. Girls reported sexting under coercion more often than boys. Sexting was also associated with sexual activity, and drug and alcohol use.
Ferguson (2011)	N=207; 16-25 years	Descriptive; Cross-sectional	Erotic or nude photographs	Histrionic personality traits	Sexual behaviors; high-risk sexual behaviors	Histrionic personality trait was a significant predictor for sexting behavior.

Festl et al. (2019)	N=1033; 14-20 years	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Naked or almost naked picture via Internet or text message; pictures with a sexy gaze or appearance, scantily dressed, or in a sexy pose via SNS	Psychosocial well-being (e.g., Loneliness, Perceived Life Satisfaction, Depression and Anxiety)	Online sexual victimization	Sexting was associated with a higher number of online sexual victimization experiences, which, in turn, was associated with decreased psychosocial well-being.
Frankel et al. (2018)	N=6021; 9-12th graders (most participants $\geq$16 years)	Descriptive-Correlational; Retrospective Cohort Study	Consensual sexting (e.g., revealing or sexual photo via text, e-mail, or electronically with permission) Nonconsensual sexting (e.g., revealing or sexual photo via text, e-mail, or electronically without permission)	Mental health variables (e.g., depressive symptoms, attempted suicide, self-harm)	Sexual behavior; current alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use; neighborhood safety; electronic bullying	Nonconsensual sexting was associated with higher percentages of depressive symptoms, suicide attempts, and engagement in self-harm than consensual sexting.
Gámez-Guadix & deSantisteban (2018)	N=1208; 12-16 years	Descriptive-Correlational; Longitudinal	Written information, text message, pictures, images, or videos with sexual content via online	Psychological adjustment (e.g., depression, self-esteem, problematic Internet use)	Personality characteristics (e.g., neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness)	Sexting was associated with depression.

Gordon-Messer et al. (2013)	N=760; 18-24 years	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo or video via cellphone	Mental health indicators (e.g., depression, anxiety, self-esteem)	Sexual Behavior; Internet use; phone/texting communication	There were no differences in depression, anxiety, or self-esteem between adolescents and young adults who sexted and those who did not. Sexting was also associated with sexual activity.
Houck et al. (2014)	N=410; 12-14 years (7th grade)	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Sexual picture via text, email, or message	Emotional Competency (e.g., emotional regulation capabilities, emotional self-efficacy)	Sexual risk behaviors; sexual risk-related cognitions	Adolescents who participated in sexting reported significantly more difficulty with emotional awareness, lower emotional self-efficacy, and lower emotional competence. Sexting was also associated with sexual risk behaviors.
Jonsson et al. (2014)	N=3288; 16-22 years	Descriptive-Exploratory; Cross-sectional	Voluntary online sexual exposure (e.g., partially undressed pictures or films via online; expose or flash via webcam or cellphone; masturbate via webcam or cellphone; engage in sex via webcam or cellphone)	Psychosocial health (e.g., depression and anxiety; self-esteem; sense of coherence; parental bonding)	None	Adolescents who participated in sexting reported poorer psychosocial health and more problematic parental relationships. Adolescents and young adults who participated in sexting were more likely to be both perpetrators and victims of sexual cybervictimization.

Klettke, Hallford, Clancy, Mellor, & Toumbourou (2019)	N=444; 18-21 years	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Sexually explicit images via text message; Unwanted sexting (e.g., unwanted or unwelcome sexting) Coerced, but consensual sexting (e.g., consenting to sexting when one did not want to)	Mental Health Variables (e.g., Depression, anxiety, stress)	Self-esteem	There were no differences in depression, anxiety, or stress among adolescents who had sent or received consensual sexts. Receiving unwanted sexts or sending sexts under coercion was associated with increased depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as lower self-esteem.
Klettke, Mellor, Silva-Myles, Clancy, & Sharma (2018)	India N=300, 17-20 years; Australia N= 298, 18-21 years	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Sexually explicit images via text message	Mental Health (e.g., depression, anxiety, stress)	None	Higher levels of stress were significantly associated with sending sexts. For males in the Australian sample, having higher levels of stress and lower levels of depression was associated with an increased likelihood of sending a sext.
Livingstone & Görzig (2014)	N-18709; 9-16 years (11-16 year-olds were asked sexting questions)	Descriptive-exploratory; Cross-sectional	Sexual messages via Internet	Psychological Measures (e.g., sensation seeking, psychological difficulties)	Online activities; risky online activities; risky offline activities	Adolescents with psychological difficulties experienced more harm from receiving sexual messages; those with higher sensation seeking experienced less harm from receiving sexual messages.

Medrano et al. (2018)	N= 303; 18-24 years (M 19.73 years)	Descriptive-correlational; Cross-sectional	Erotic or sexual photos, images, or videos via Internet	Depression, suicidal ideation	Cyberbullying	Sexting behavior was significantly associated with more cybervictimization. Cybervictimization was associated with greater likelihood of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation.
Milton et al. (2019)	N=1400; 16-25 years	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Images or messages of a sexual nature	Mental health and well-being indicators	Internet use; cyberbullying	Sexting was associated with reporting suicidal thoughts and behaviors, body image concerns, and cyberbullying
Mitchell et al. (2012)	N=1560; 10-17 years	Descriptive; Cross-sectional	Nude or nearly nude images	Emotional Impact (e.g., feeling upset, embarrassed, or afraid)	None	Twenty one percent of adolescents appearing in or creating sexting images reported feeling very or extremely upset, embarrassed, or afraid, as did 25% of youth receiving such images.

Morelli et al. (2016)	N=1334; 13-30 years (M 20.8 years); sample was divided 13-19 years (adolescents) and 20-30 years (young adults)	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Sexually suggestive or provocative messages, photos, or videos via cellphone, Facebook, or Internet SNS	Psychological Distress (e.g., anxiety, depression)	Sexual orientation; dating violence	There were no differences in psychological distress between low and high users of sexting. Sexting was associated with more victimization and perpetration of dating violence in moderate and high users of sexting compared to low users. High users of sexting compared to moderate and low users of sexting reported more substance use, being forced to sext by a partner or friends, and sharing sexts with strangers.
Ševčíková (2016)	N= 17016; 9-16 years (11-16 year-olds asked sexual experience questions)	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Sexual messages (e.g., words, pictures, or videos) via the Internet	Emotional Problems (e.g., feelings)	Alcohol use; sexual intercourse; self-efficacy	For both older and younger adolescents, having more emotional problems was associated with a greater likelihood of being involved in sexting.

Temple et al. (2014)	N=937; 14-18 years (M 16.05 years)	Descriptive-Exploratory; Cross-sectional	Naked pictures via text or email	Depression and Anxiety symptoms	Impulsivity; substance use; sexual behavior	After adjusting for prior sexual behavior, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and parent education, sexting was not found to be associated with depression or anxiety. Sexting was found to be associated with impulsivity and substance use.
Van Ouytsel et al. (2014)	N=1028; 15-18 years (M 16.68 years)	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Sexually suggestive naked or half naked pictures via Internet or cellphone	Depression	Sensation seeking; rational and experiential thinking styles	Sexting was significantly associated with sensation seeking, experiential thinking styles, and depression in adolescents after controlling for gender, age, family status, and adolescent's response to economic stress.
Weisskirch et al. (2017)	N=459; 18-25 years	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Photos or videos that are sexually suggestive, in underwear or lingerie, or nude; sexually suggestive text, or text propositioning sex via cellphone	Dating anxiety, Anxious attachment, Avoidant attachment, Fear of being single	Relationship commitment	Low attachment avoidance and high fear of negative evaluation from a dating partner predicted sexting behavior.
Woodward et al. (2017).	N=548; (most participants were 16 years)	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Nude photos via cellphone	Psychological Effects (e.g., depression)	Self-esteem; social skills; alcohol and marijuana use; bullying and bullying victimization; delinquency	There were no significant associations between psychosocial factors and sexting behavior, regardless of controlling for other psychosocial factors.

						There were significant associations between sexting and several high-risk behaviors including alcohol consumption, marijuana use, and property crime.
Ybarra & Mitchell (2014)	N=3715; 13-18 years (≥ 5th grade)	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Sexual (e.g., nude or nearly nude) photo sharing through any mode	Depressive Symptomology (e.g., social support, substance use)	Sexual activities; sexual risk behaviors	After adjusting for all demographic variables, sexting was associated with depressive symptomology, all types of sexual behaviors, some risky sexual behaviors, substance use (e.g., alcohol, marijuana), and lower self-esteem.
Yoder et al. (2018)	N-=200; 13-20 years (M 17.17 years)	Descriptive-Correlational; Cross-sectional	Sexual words, content, or images via cellphone	Emotion Motivation	Domestic adversity; physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; attachment styles; dating violence	Early domestic adversity was associated with emotional motivations for sexting.

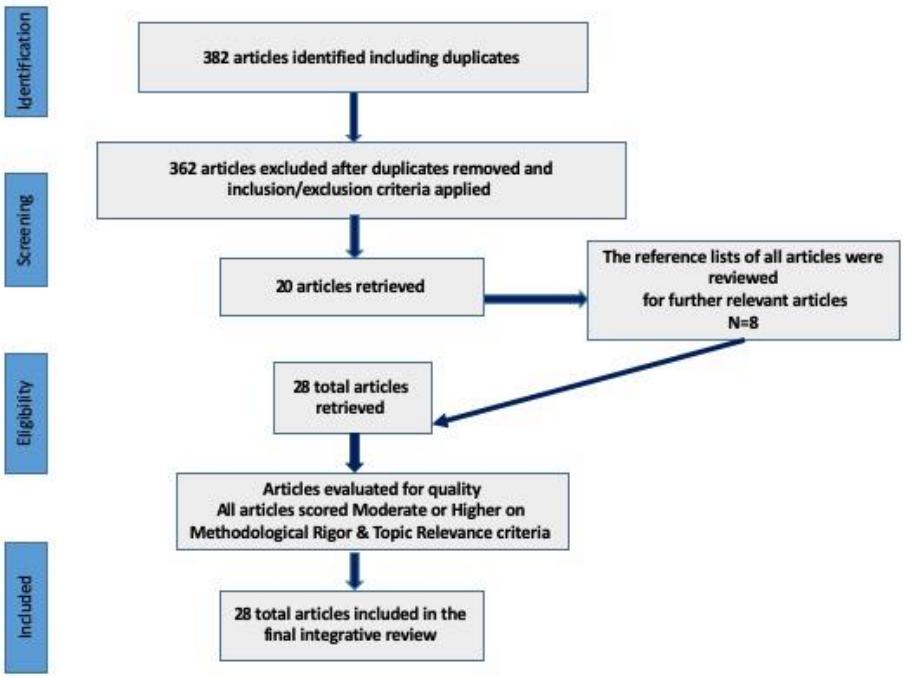

Figure 2.1. PRISMA diagram for integrative literature search strategy.

CHAPTER III

TEENS' EXPERIENCES WITH SEXTING: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

A Paper to be Submitted for Publication in the

Journal of Pediatric Health Care

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To explore and understand the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health and well-being from adolescents' perspectives.

Methods: A constructivist grounded theory study was conducted to explore adolescents' experiences of sexting.

Results: *Engaging in the Culture of Teen Sexting* materialized as the central process and the title for the grounded theory that emerged. The six primary processes included *Engaging in the Culture of Teen Sexting, Motivating Factors, Forming Perceptions and Feelings, Acknowledging and Managing Risks, Connecting Mental Health and Sexting,* and *Finding a Sexual Self.*

Conclusion: The findings revealed that sexting is part of teen culture and a normal part of adolescent sexual growth and development. Acknowledging sexting as a culture and a normal part of sexual growth and development will assist pediatric nurse practitioners to engage teens in conversations about sexting, helping them to navigate the risks of sexting and find healthy ways to manage sexting behavior.

Keywords: adolescent, teen, sexting, mental health, emotional well-being, constructivist grounded theory

Introduction

This manuscript contains language that some may find offensive. Staying true to constructivist grounded theory methodology, quotes were transcribed verbatim in order to capture the voices of the adolescents' and accurately reflect their experiences of sexting.

Easy access to social networking sites and smartphones has allowed the Internet to play an increasingly central role in the exploration and expression of adolescent sexuality (Kerstens & Stol, 2014). Online sexual behavior in turn has played a role in the social and sexual development of adolescents. Within a climate of online sexual behavior, a phenomenon referred to as *sexting* has emerged. *Sexting* blends the words *sex* and *texting* and generally refers to the sending, receiving, and forwarding of sexually explicit messages, images, photos, or videos via communication technologies (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). However, the term *sexting* is evolving and embodies a wide range of practices, motivations, attitudes, and behaviors (Barrense-Dias, Berchtold, Surís, & Akre, 2017). While adolescents are recognized as sexual beings with rights to communicate in privacy to explore their sexuality, public discussion often centers on the potential risks, harms, and detrimental outcomes of online sexual behavior (Naezer, 2018). Of particular interest is the potential harm sexting may have upon the mental health of adolescents.

Adolescence marks a significant period of sexual growth and development. Adolescent sexuality encompasses multiple biologic, cognitive, and psychosocial dimensions which begin before the onset of puberty and end with the attainment of

adulthood (Rodgers, 2017). Further, sexual development is a critical component of identity formation which includes both self and sexual discovery (Erikson, 1963). Sexting behavior may play a role in the development of adolescent identity formation as adolescents interact with friends, peer groups, and intimate relationships (Burkett, 2015; Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson & Svedin, 2016; Vanden Abeele, Campbell, Eggermont, & Roe, 2014). Furthermore, adolescence is a developmental stage marked by the desire for immediate gratification, experimentation, risk-taking, and limited comprehension of dangers of risky behaviors (Ahern, Kemppainen, & Thacker, 2016). This may include sexual risk behaviors in which sexting may play a part.

Sexting has been associated with substance use, sexual risk behaviors, coercion, anxiety, depression, and suicide (Chaudhary et al., 2017; Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Further, when adults and authorities discover this behavior, consequences can be severe for teens including tarnished reputation, loss of future career prospects, effects on relationships, and legal ramifications (Holoyda, Landess, Sorrentino, & Friedman, 2018). Some adolescents have faced misdemeanor and felony convictions such as child pornography charges and sex offender registration (Holoyda et al., 2018). Recent trends in adolescent mental health indicate that approximately one in five adolescents has a diagnosable mental health disorder (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015). Depression has risen sharply in recent years, affecting one in eight adolescents and young adults, and is now the most common mental health disorder in adolescents (Mojtabai, Olfson, & Han, 2016). Adolescents with depression often continue to experience negative psychosocial effects, with earlier onset

of depression associated with significant threats to attaining educational and occupational goals, and developing social relationships (Ellis et al., 2017). In addition, suicide is a leading cause of death in adolescents aged 15 to 17 years (Heron, 2019).

Cognitive processes and the propensity for risk taking in adolescents increase the chance a teen might act impulsively or not consider the seriousness of their sexting behavior providing additional impetus for the negative mental health consequences of sexting (Spooner & Vaughn, 2016). Despite risks and consequences of sexting, substantial numbers of teens are still engaging in this behavior. Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaíta, and Rullo (2013) reported that between 15% and 28% of teens are participating in sexting behavior. Some authors have reported higher rates of teen sexting in their studies (Gregg, Somers, Pernice, Hillman, & Kernsmith, 2018; McLaughlin, 2012; Strohmaier, Murphy, & DeMatteo, 2014; Yoder, Hansen, & Precht, 2018). Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, and Wolak (2012) reported that some authors have defined sexting in terms of images, while others have focused on messages or have failed to distinguish between sending, receiving, or forwarding of sexual content in their definitions. The lack of a clear definition of sexting across studies has resulted in difficulty in capturing the true incidence of sexting in adolescents and the relationship between sexting behavior and mental health and well-being. Further, while this behavior is commonly referred to in media and public discourse as *sexting*, teens do not use this language to describe their behavior, instead using terms such as *pictures*, *pics*, *videos*, and *selfies*, suggesting they may have a different understanding of sexting (Albury, Crawford, Byron, & Mathews, 2013).

Missing from the literature of sexting and adolescent mental health are the experiences surrounding sexting behavior including motivations, expectations, and attributed meanings from adolescents' perspectives (Anastassiou, 2017). Further, the literature often lacks a developmental approach to teen sexting, particularly that of normal adolescent sexual development (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Finally, sexting behavior occurs within a complex social context, and a number of factors have likely influenced how sexting behavior has affected the mental health and well-being of adolescents (Anastassiou, 2017). The author of this study sought to further explore and understand the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health by (a) theorizing how sexting is related to adolescent mental health from adolescents' perspectives using a constructivist grounded theory approach, (b) identifying antecedents, benefits, risks, consequences, and outcomes related to sexting, and (c) exploring adolescents' emotional responses and reactions surrounding sexting. Understanding adolescents' experiences of sexting could help pediatric nurse practitioners and healthcare providers address the psychological and emotional challenges experienced by adolescents who participate in sexting within specific social and developmental contexts.

Methods

Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory methodology was used to explore adolescents' experiences of sexting within a context of mental health and well-being. Charmaz's grounded theory approach is rooted in the perspectives of symbolic interactionism that explains how persons interact with each other through symbols of language, gestures, actions, and statuses within their social worlds, as well as

pragmatism, which recognizes unique meanings that experiences and interactions have for individuals. This qualitative approach helped to emphasize "entering the adolescents' worlds of meaning and actions" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 241), and allowed for engagement in the mutual creation of a theory to help explain the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health.

Approval to conduct the study was granted from two institutional review boards: the first author's educational institution and the educational site where the research was conducted. English speaking adolescents between the ages of 18-22 who had experience with sexting or had knowledge of friends' experiences with sexting were recruited from a community college campus in the Northwestern United States. Seventeen participants met all eligibility requirements and provided signed informed consent. The sample was diverse with regards to race/ethnicity, and gender and sexual identity. Most participants were receiving financial aid (76%), and most adolescents' first experiences with sexting were between the ages of 12-14 years (63.7%). Adolescent participant demographics are included in Table 3.1. All adolescents voluntarily participated in the face-to-face interviews with the primary investigator (PI) which were conducted in a private room located at the community college.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview guide was used to elicit in-depth information regarding adolescents' experiences with sexting behavior, and the effects upon their mental health. Sample interview questions are provided in Table 3.2. The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim

by GMR Transcription Services. Field notes of observations were recorded, and at the end of the interview, the investigator conducted a member check by summarizing the participants' responses and asking if any clarification was needed. The PI also wrote detailed memos throughout the study, and documented ongoing processes and thoughts in a methodological and reflective journal. All participants received a $25.00 Amazon gift card after the interview.

Data Analysis

Using NVivo Plus (Version 12.1) software, the PI coded the written transcripts line-by-line using gerunds to show actions and describe the data in concise terms and to gain detailed observations of the adolescents, actions, and settings (Charmaz, 2014). Next, incident with incident coding was performed, which entailed comparing the accounts of adolescents' sexting experiences to identify properties of emerging concepts. Focused codes were then formulated from the initial codes. Comparison of the codes was performed to determine which initial codes made the most analytical sense to categorize the data. Table 3.3 provides an example of how a theoretical category emerged from the processes described above. Focused codes formed the basis for the generation of theoretical categories of the events, happenings, and instances of teen sexting behavior and impact on mental health and helped to form the emerging grounded theory about this behavior. Memo-writing was done and helped raise focused codes to conceptual categories in order to explicate ideas, events, or processes about teen sexting behavior within the data. Saturation of theoretical categories was noted around the fifteenth participant interview. An additional two interviews were conducted to ensure the

theoretical categories were robust. No new properties of the categories were found, and the already established categories accounted for patterns in the data.

A visual diagram of the theoretical categories and their relationships was drawn to visualize the power, scope, and direction of categories in the analysis, as well as connections among them. Finally, the integration of memos involved ordering memos and deciding how the memos fit together for the writing of the final emerging theory diagram. All 17 participants were invited to review the visual diagram of the emerging theory. Feedback was obtained from six participants and a $10.00 Amazon gift card was given for their participation.

Results

During personal interviews, adolescent participants described their experiences of sexting. Based on the interviews it became evident early in the data analysis that adolescents progressed through multiple social processes during their sexting experiences. According to Charmaz (2014), a process consists of unfolding temporal sequences in which single events become linked as part of a larger whole. These sequences are linked in a process and lead to change. A process may have identifiable markers with clear beginnings, benchmarks, and endings or may be more diffuse and less visible, but processes are evident when comparisons are made over time. A brief description of the theoretical model is followed by a description of each process along with its categories in the sections that follow. Excerpts from participant interviews are provided to support the emergence of each process.

Engaging in the Culture of Teen Sexting: A Description of the Theoretical Model

Engaging in the culture of teen sexting materialized as the central process and title of the theoretical model (Figure 3.1). The six primary processes included engaging in the culture of teen sexting, motivating factors, forming perceptions and feelings, acknowledging and managing risks, connecting mental health and sexting, and finding a sexual self. The process of engaging in the culture of teen sexting represents all teens who are participating in sexting. The processes of motivating factors, forming perceptions and feelings, and acknowledging and managing risks form a triangle connected by double arrows demonstrating that these processes occur simultaneously and continuously as teens engage in sexting. As teens move through these processes they work through a number of tensions regarding motivations, perceptions and feelings, and risks of sexting. The process of connecting mental health and sexting represents the connection between mental health and sexting that occurs throughout all processes of sexting. This includes both the impact of existing mental health status upon sexting behavior and the impact that engaging in sexting has upon the emotional well-being of adolescents. Finding a sexual self represents the process of discovering a sexual identity through sexting which plays a role in sexual development. Interviews were reflections of past and present experiences with sexting. The adolescents were all still in the process of finding their sexual selves. A model case for engaging in the culture of teen sexting based upon the experiences of all participants is provided in Table 3.4.

Engaging in the Culture of Teen Sexting

The participants of this study discussed personal experiences of engaging in sexting as well as experiences of friends and peers. Three categories emerged as being important to the central process of engaging in the culture of teen sexting: learning about sexting, socializing through sexting, and speaking the language.

Adolescents shared stories about how they first learned about sexting. Adolescents discussed learning about sexting from friends who were already participating in the behavior. Arnie noted, "I had a friend… he was telling me about his experiences, and he showed me a few pictures." Sometimes an older sibling introduced them to sexting. Cactus noted, "I had an older sister who had just gotten her first boyfriends…That's when I first learned about it." Some adolescents learned about sexting from their own parents, Alan stated, "But it was just like really gross to find that, you know…my parents were taking pictures…"

Socializing through sexting describes the ways that teens used sexting to be part of a group and meet new friends. Mr. J. described sharing sexting pictures with friends, "I would definitely say that my social group, like my best friends and like guy friends…'Hey, did you know I got this picture? Look at this." Marie described meeting friends through sexting, "My best friend that I have now, we first started off with, like, being a bit of friends and then sexting. And then we realized, 'Oh, you know, we actually just like each other as friends, so we're just gonna be friends.'""

Adolescents also discussed sexting within intimate relationships. Socializing behaviors included behaviors that led to, maintained, and sometimes ended a relationship.

Alan described how sexting might lead to a relationship, "And then, I guess, even if – before you're dating, if it's kind of a one-on-one thing, it can help lead to a relationship. So, it kind of enhances the possibility of a relationship developing." Pablo described how sexting was used to maintain a relationship, "I feel like it's kind of like a, a way to, like, keep the other one, kinda still interested." Tash shared that sexting sometimes ended a relationship, "So you do anything you want for them to make them stay…And what happened was that, uh, I started to really notice how poorly I was being actually treated."

Adolescents also discussed socializing behaviors of sexting that they believed were more harmful in nature. Stories of pressured or coerced sexting, bullying, and pictures of genitalia were shared by adolescents. Cactus described the pressure she felt from her boyfriend, "And he engaged in coercing me to participate for X, Y, Z reason." Gilbert described feeling pressured by other male friends, "I was just like, I gotta do something, because I'm not doing anything in this group chat." Aviana explained how she was bullied, "And, um I remember somehow, um, my pictures were sent to a lot of other students and kind of held against me." Kylie described being threatened by an ex-boyfriend, "And then he was just like, 'Come on, you know, or I'll like tell people that you're doing stuff.'" Alan shared a story about an individual randomly sexting others, "…So, and he would just, like, be anonymous, but he'd send, like, dick pics to random girls in the middle school or whatever."

Speaking the language refers to a unique language that developed in the culture of teen sexting. Teens used words such as *selfies, pics, vids, nudes, ludes, notes, posts, photos, images, messages,* and *tweets*, instead of *sexting*. Pablo explained, "The word,

'sexting,' has a real negative connotation…You know, it's kind of like how someone says 'doing drugs,' you know?" Different emojis were used to describe body parts and suggestive actions. For example, an eggplant emoji represented a penis, and a peach or cake emoji referred to a female bottom. An emoji of a finger pointing into an A-Okay sign, represented sexual intercourse. A 'winkie' emoji was used to request a sext. Adolescent participants also described vocabulary used in sexting such as *catfishing*, *burner account, dicpic, screenshot,* and *cancel culture*. Adolescents mentioned *scroll down* and *swipe right/left* when viewing sexting pictures. Terms such as *unsend, block,* and *put on blast* referred to actions of removing messages, restricting access to pictures, and exposing others during sexting. Definitions for these terms are in Table 3.5.

Finally, adolescent participants revealed that they used multiple mobile and social media applications for sexting (Table 3.6). Pablo disclosed there were applications that could be used to hide nude photos including Private Photo Vault (Version 2.3.1; Legendary Software Labs LLC, 2019), as well as applications that were disguised as calculators. A few participants admitted to having two Snapchat or Twitter accounts, one they used for everyday social interactions, and the other for posting sexting pictures. Miss X spoke of her use of Spotafriend:

> I didn't want to download, because I was underage, I didn't want to download Tinder or, you know, other popular dating apps. I wanted it to be kinda more low-key, uh for teenagers, I specifically remember um, looking up teenager dating app…

Kacie referred to the limitless mediums available for sexting, “Facebook is just where it all started.”

Motivating Factors

The process of motivating factors describes the reasons teens gave for first participating and then continuing sexting behavior. Motivations for sexting did not seem to be driven by malicious intent, but instead seemed to cluster around two general categories: curiosity and gaining attention or acceptance. Many participants described curiosity as their primary motivator to first engage in sexting. Mr. J. admitted curiosity played a part in his sexting behavior, “Oh, I get to see boobies or I get to see, you know, uh female genitalia.” Participants also described gaining attention as a primary motivator with girls noting that sexting was also a way to feel more loved. Tash gave an example of gaining attention and love, “We want so much to be loved and we want to feel attention and affection…” Adolescents also described acceptance as a motivator. Savannah noted, “Kids just do it…, and they think that they’re gonna get in with the in-crowd.” Mr. J. mentioned popularity, “…like you were popular if you got, um, sexting or like images such as that.”

Forming Perceptions and Feelings

The process forming perceptions and feelings entailed two categories, perceptions of their sexting experiences and feelings that resulted from their sexting experiences. Adolescent participants had perceptions of themselves, others, and the overall behavior of sexting. Participants expressed an awareness that sexting experiences resulted in a changed perception of self. Cactus stated, “It changes your view of yourself too. Whether

for better or for worse." Some experiences resulted in a perceived positive image. Aviana noted, "Oh my gosh! Someone thinks I'm pretty!" Pablo expressed body confidence, "And, um, be proud of what you got." Some experiences resulted in a perceived negative image. Alan expressed concerns about perceptions of penis size:

> …like you're just, like, sexting this one girl, and got a huge dick – or whatever and it gets shared around and then it's like – ah…Yeah, it's like people are not gonna laugh at you, I guess, or anything or bring you down too much, maybe some will.

Adolescents who participated in sexting often had a harsher perception of others than of themselves. Alan referred to those who sent random penis pictures, "Er, try not to be such, like, a man whore, or whatever." Kylie criticized an ex-boyfriend who asked for sexting pictures, "Oh such a trash person. You know?" Sometimes a perceived bias towards girls was expressed. Alan stated, "Ah, I feel like with girls, ah, no matter how good you look, uh, you probably still gonna end up being like – like – uh – a 'ho' or whatever."

Participants' overall perception of sexting was that it was a normal part of their lives. Tash stated, "So, I came to the conclusion that eventually sexting was just like a natural thing that young people like us were going to do." Participants also expressed a sense of omnipresence related to sexting. Jack stated, "Some of my buddies have been involved in it. I've been involved in it. So, we're all doing it." Herald expressed:

> It doesn't matter whether you're the jock of the football team, doesn't matter if you're a cheerleader, or if you're the nerdy girl, or the geeky guy. It happens to all of us. You know, it surrounds us.

Although participants perceived that sexting was a normal behavior, feelings varied widely amongst them. Adolescents expressed both positive and negative feelings. Kylie noted, "Wow, I feel really good…it feels soooo good." Miss M experienced feelings of guilt, "I did not really like doing it and it was ultimately something I did do, and it was my own fault that I did it." Herald had feelings of disappointment, "Why is this girl I've spoken to and have, you know had lunch with, you know, at the table with all our friends, you know, and I'm seeing her naked?" Some revealed a change in feelings to less positive after engaging in sexting. Cactus admitted, "When I first started, I thought it was the shit. It was great- It starts out exciting, but it fades."

Acknowledging and Managing Risks

The process of acknowledging and managing risks describes how teens acknowledged and navigated the risks of sexting. Two important categories emerged: risk awareness and strategies for navigating the risks.

Participants' statements indicated an awareness of the risks of sexting. Adolescents discussed various risks ranging from future consequences, legal implications, and possible suicide. Mr. J. mentioned the lasting impact of sexting images, "So, be careful about what it is that you send because it can be here longer than you know or than you'll ever be on this earth." Mr. J. warned about legal problems, "…the consequences of like if you could really get into some law trouble if you're sending nude

pictures to a girl that you think is 26 but she turns out to be 16." Finally, Miss M mentioned the sad story of a girl who committed suicide after her sexting pictures were shared without her consent, "…she drank bleach and everything. Then you found out what she did before that."

Adolescent participants described multiple strategies used to navigate the risks of sexting behavior. Strategies included concealing recognizable attributes, a sense that there is a "right way" of participating, conveniently disengaging, and secrecy. Kylie noted, "…if your face isn't in it, you can always just claim like, 'That's not even me.'" Kylie also mentioned covering birthmarks, tattoos, and using filters for disguising bodily features. Marie asserted that there was a correct way of doing sexting, "…just make sure that you do it right so that it doesn't ruin your life." For adolescents sexting done the right way meant monitoring their participation or avoiding persons when things felt uncomfortable. Miss M described moments when she disengaged because she felt guilt or shame, "I would try to find any excuses to not deal with it, like pretend to sleep, or try to change the subject, or not answer my cell phone and just ignore the texts altogether." Alan emphasized privacy, "…play your cards to your chest, I would say…so I guess another thing about sexting is you should do your best to hide it."

Participants were well aware of the risks. They discussed being told about the risks of sexting in school, by parents, or through the negative experiences of others. However, they participated in sexting and developed a method for navigating the risks. Kacie best summarized what it meant to participate in sexting anyway:

> It's like when you see your risks of smoking cigarettes. You know what's in it, but like – you're going to do it anyway, because – or sometimes because like you don't think that these risks are going to happen to you.

Connecting Mental Health and Sexting

The process of connecting mental health and sexting describes the impact of existing mental health status upon sexting behavior, as well as how working through tensions caused from participating in sexting influences emotional well-being. Two categories emerged during this process: connecting mental health and working through tension.

Connecting mental health describes teens that arrive at sexting with many different levels of mental health status. Some adolescent participants shared stories of diagnosed mental health illness as children and young teens. Some mentioned that post-traumatic stress, bipolar, and borderline personality disorders were influencing factors in their sexting behavior. Tash noted mental illness, "Me not fully understanding the situation and also being clouded by mental illness and wanting to be loved." Miss X described the anxiety she experienced after sexting when she did not know what the person had done with her pictures:

> …just the anxiety, um…Yeah, it was, it was really bad, those first couple weeks, um, after that happened, um, so much so that my mom, she had to take me to the doctor, and I had to be put on medication for, um – I went on Zoloft…

Mr. J. realized the impact of past trauma, "Um, like past traumatic experiences and, um, just experiences in general that people go through I feel like affect how and when and

where they share their body, what they share." Aviana shared the tragedy of her own suicide attempt that followed a sexting incident with a boy who spread rumors about her at school:

> And I got so confused and it was just – it was a really, really hard experience and, um, not long after that, I actually attempted suicide. And I was hospitalized. And um, eventually, it got to a point where I tried to commit suicide again.

Gilbert stated his thoughts on mental health and sexting, "I think the more unstable your mental health is, the more vulnerable you are to sexting."

While some discussed the impact of preexisting mental health upon sexting, other participants discussed how sexting affected their emotional well-being. Savannah discussed how sexting led to negative body image and disrespect of her body:

> So, from my standpoint the connection between mental health and sexting is you just don't have a lot of respect for your body. So that means that you're not really gonna respect anything that you do, which can mean that you you're depressed, or you just don't give a fuck about the world anymore.

Others discussed the positive connotations that sexting had upon their emotional well-being. Pablo described the good feeling he had when he received nudes, "Then it's kinda like, ah, um, almost like a prize."

Participants described coping skills developed to deal with the impact that sexting had upon their mental health and emotional well-being. They discussed talking with friends or family about sexting experiences. Miss M described talking with friends, "To cope [with negative sexting experiences] sometimes I had a good friend I could talk to

about it." Savannah described talking with her mother after a sexting incident, "…when my mom found out, I think [her understanding] made our connection stronger, our relationship stronger." Others described seeking counseling. Tash advised about seeking counseling, "Get it out and you have to really go to therapy because it's just – you can try to figure it out in your mind, but how good are you going to be at doing that than a professional." Miss M shared a different perspective, "I am sure the answer from my counselor will be it will be my fault for doing it anyway, so I have not brought it up with my counselor mainly for that reason." Aviana shared her experience, "And I mean that [admission for mental health treatment] really turned things around for me." Some perceived that sexting did not have a negative impact and coping was not necessary. Marie stated, "I didn't need – I didn't need to cope. Nothing about it was stressful for me."

Finally, participants' stories indicated that a number of tensions arose from sexting as they worked through the processes of motivating factors, forming perceptions and feelings, and acknowledging and managing the risks of sexting. How adolescents worked through these processes helped determine how a sexual self emerged from their experiences. Of significance was that each participant described positive and negative experiences. Jack described what he felt when deciding to sext:

> – there's always that thing in the back of my head, like, ah, should I do it? Should I do it? And then there's the, you know, logical means of thinking, which are like, No! You should not do it! So like my emotions and my thoughts conflict and usually it just, like, ends up being sort of a fuzzy, hazy memory.

Aviana described wrestling with trusting others, “And, you know it’s scary because there’s so much out there and people are like, ‘No, you can trust me,’ but can you?” Kacie described the misunderstanding of sexting behavior from others, “It’s just some people don’t understand that it’s two consenting kids.” Miss X described the tension experienced by her own participation, “Yeah, it just, it makes me question, well, how can you, how can you do this so casually, and you know, stuff like that.”

Adolescent participants’ stated their self-reflections about the tensions of sexting. Marie described sexting as fun and exciting but also realized the naivety of her own behavior, “- because I think I was so young, that I didn’t get to, like, learn about it [sexting] before I actually did it.” Miss M liked the compliments she received from her boyfriend, but struggled with deciding if sexting was appropriate, “We sort of viewed sexting as normal, but that did not make it right.” Finally, Cactus noted sexting could be empowering, but also discouraging, “I’m gonna be honest, I definitely like myself less the more – the more that I sext.”

Finding a Sexual Self

The process of finding a sexual self refers to how teens reflect on their sexting experiences and the impact of sexting on finding a sexual self or identity. The lessons they shared in finding a sexual self or identity often revealed a process of personal growth and continuing development. Marie discussed how she discovered a self-identity:

> Or I would just say, just don’t do it at all. But I probably wouldn’t say that because I like who I am now as a person. And I probably wouldn’t go into the past and tell myself not to do anything different.

Miss X summarized what it was like finding a sexual self:

> Yeah. Um, so I mean, it's given me an insight. I'm glad I learned earlier rather than later. Um, I just kind of like to look at that [lessons learned] as my silver lining, is I've learned and I've grown, and it's helped me kinda discover who I am as a person, and my sexuality.

Participants clearly described that how they worked through the good and bad of their sexting experiences was an important factor in personal growth and discovering their sexual identity.

Trustworthiness

Charmaz's (2014) criteria for evaluating grounded theory studies includes applying credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness to the study. Credibility was established by attaining intimate familiarity with the setting and topic of teen sexting. Observations were recorded throughout the study in a methodological and reflexive journal. The author worked with her dissertation chair and committee members throughout the study for guidance in developing theoretical categories. Originality was demonstrated when theoretical categories provided new insights about sexting behavior. In addition, the grounded theory that emerged challenges, extends, and refines current ideas, concepts, and practices related to teen sexting behavior. Resonance was promoted by staying close to the data during analysis and presenting a rich description of adolescents' sexting experiences ensuring fullness of the theoretical categories. Usefulness was established by a final analysis of teen sexting behavior that offered interpretations that inspired further research, contributed to knowledge, and could be used

in everyday life. Pediatric nurse practitioners and other healthcare providers can use the theory that emerged to enhance communication with teens and help them navigate the risks of sexting in ways that promote healthy sexual growth and development.

Discussion

Development of sexuality and a sexual identity is an important aspect of adolescent identity formation (Erikson, 1963; Rodgers, 2017). The sexting stories shared by participants in this study reflected physical, emotional, and relational sexual development which is an important part of identity information. Participants perceived their bodies in different ways through sexting. Some participants conveyed confidence in their bodies as they shared stories of favorite bodily features such as tattoos or piercings. Others noted that sexting triggered insecurities about their bodies such as being overweight or penis size. In addition, as part of establishing their sexual identity, adolescents often measure their attractiveness by the acceptance or rejection of their peers (Rodgers, 2017). Adolescents are by nature egocentric and often self-absorbed in their appearance; through the belief of an imaginary audience, teens perceive that others are also preoccupied with their appearance (Elkind, 1967). Participants mentioned editing their photos and sometimes *catfishing* so others could perceive them as they wanted to be perceived. Receiving feedback and comparing themselves to others helped participants form perceptions about their own bodies and helped them shape their sexual identities.

While this study suggested that sexting was part of normal adolescent sexual growth and development, the existing literature almost exclusively situates sexting behavior within a context of risk, negative consequences, and legal implications. Within

the literature, sexting has been associated with cyberbullying, pornography, sexual risk behavior, substance use, and emotional and mental health problems (Dake et al., 2012; Frankel, Bauerle-Bass, Patterson, Dai, & Brown, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2012; Strassberg et al., 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Further, anecdotal evidence demonstrates that sexting has resulted in negative outcomes for adolescents including being reprimanded at school, legal ramifications, and suicide (Alonso & Romero, 2019; Dake et al., 2012; Holoyda et al., 2018). The theory that emerged in this study suggested that each participant perceived sexting as a range of both good and bad experiences. Rather than focusing on good and bad sexting experiences, it was how the participants described working through good and bad sexting experiences that helped facilitate their growth and development and finding their sexual selves.

Assessment of adolescent sexual development during well care is often focused on avoidance of risk behaviors (Ahern, Kemppainen, & Thacker, 2016). When talking with adolescents about sexting is approached from an exclusively risk aversive model, adolescents are denied the opportunity to work through the tensions or processes of sexting that are necessary to facilitate their sexual growth and development. Stories shared by some participants suggested that they were able to work through a number of tensions related to sexting thereby facilitating their growth and development and finding their sexual selves. Some participants shared stories of liking the self that emerged after sexting, and being more comfortable with their sexuality after working through the tensions of sexting.

Researchers have reported that the relationship between sexting and mental health in adolescents is often depicted as negative and negative outcomes on adolescent mental health are heavily emphasized (Chaudhary et al., 2017; Dake et al., 2012; Englander, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2012). The findings of this study suggest that each participant perceived both positive and negative impacts of sexting on emotional well-being rather than the predominant negative feelings reported in previous literature (Dake et al., 2012; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012). Participants expressed many positive feelings related to sexting including comfort, enjoyment, happiness, and sexual satisfaction. Some participants believed that sexting played an important role in building relationships with friends, peers, and intimate partners. These findings support previous literature that has emphasized sexting's role in intimate relationships and peer group dynamics as part of normal growth and development (Burkett, 2015; Cooper et al., 2016; Vanden Abeele et al., 2014). In addition, experiences and reflections of sexting shared by participants suggest that impacts to mental health were not always harmful. Through sexting, some participants discovered an increased self-esteem, self-worth, or increased self-respect for their bodies which differs from the association between low self-esteem and negative body image found in previous studies (Milton et al., 2019; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). For some teens, sexting resulted in getting help for mental health issues by reaching out to friends and family, seeking counseling and therapy, and entering mental health treatment. The findings of this study suggest that moving away from a risk aversive stance of sexting toward a normal growth and development perspective shifts the focus from shaming and punishing to helping adolescents process both good and bad

experiences related to sexting. Helping adolescents process their sexting experiences while they work through tensions helps support their emotional well-being and mental health.

Clinical and Research Implications

By using the language that teens use to describe sexting, nurse practitioners and healthcare providers can assess for engagement in sexting as part of well adolescent care and communicate with parents and other adults about how to talk to adolescents about sexting. While sexting behavior plays a role in normal sexual growth and development of adolescents, not all sexting behavior is healthy. Providing guidance to help teens manage the risks of sexting and work through the tensions experienced during sexting will support emotional well-being and aid teens in finding a sexual identity. Further, assessing current mental health status will help identify adolescents who may struggle with working through tensions experienced during sexting and who may be at increased risk for negative outcomes from sexting. Priorities for future research include the development of valid and reliable tools to assist nurse practitioners and healthcare providers in assessing and discussing sexting with teens within a context of normal sexual growth and development. Future research should also ensure that a diverse group of gender and sexual identities are represented.

Conclusion

Through personal interviews, adolescent participants shared their experiences of sexting. The findings of this study suggest that sexting is part of teen culture and is occurring during a time of normal sexual growth and development. Sexting behavior was

influenced by current mental health status and impacted emotional well-being as teens worked through tensions experienced during sexting. Teens' voices added realness and validation of sexting's place in the normal development of adolescent self and sexual identity and its role in intimate and peer group relationships. Recognizing teen sexting culture as an alternate method of developing sexuality avoids condemning or shaming adolescents that participate in this culture. There is a need to further explore sexting behavior to better understand how teens engage in sexting and to develop tools to measure its' influence on mental health. It is imperative that future research include teens' perspectives so their experiences can be part of the educational, legal, and public health dialog about this behavior.

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Table 3.1

Adolescent Participant Demographics

Adolescent Demographics (N=17)	**n (%)**
Age	
18 years old	6 (35.3%)
19 years old	8 (47.1%)
20 years old	0 (0%)
21 years old	2 (11.8%)
22 years old	1 (5.9%)
Gender	
Women	9 (52.9%)
Men	8 (47.1%)
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	10 (58.3%)
Bisexual	4 (23.5%)
Pansexual	2 (11.8%)
Demi sexual	1 (5.9%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White	5 (29.4%)
African American	3 (17.6%)
Hispanic/Latino	3 (17.6%)
Asian/Pacific Island	1 (5.9%)
Other	5 (29.4%)
Year in College	
First year	7 (41.2%)
Second year	7 (41.2%)
Third year	3 (17.6%)
Financial Aid or Funding for College	
Yes	13 (76.5%)
No	4 (23.5%)
Age at First Exposure to Sexting	
11	2 (11.8%)
12	4 (23.5%)
13	4 (23.5%)
14	3 (17.6%)
15	2 (11.8%)
16	1 (5.9%)
17	1 (5.9%)

Table 3.2

Semi-Structured Interview Guide Sample Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Guide
Opening Question
1. When did you first experience sexting or come to know about others' experiences with sexting?
Intermediate Questions
2. As you look back on your participation in sexting or the participation of friends/peers, are there any events that stand out in your mind?
3. What thoughts and feelings did you have while engaging in sexting? What thoughts and feelings of friends/peers did you witness while they were engaging in sexting?
4. How has sexting affected your relationships (friends/peers, boyfriend/girlfriend, family, others)?
5. What do you think the connection is between mental health and emotional well-being and sexting? How do you think sexting and mental health and emotional well-being are related?
6. Could I ask you to describe the most important lessons you learned through experiencing sexting?
7. How did your experiences of sexting change throughout your adolescent years?
Ending Question
8. What would you tell the person you were at (age of sexting experience) about what you know about sexting today?
Summary Question
9. (After summarizing the interview for the participant). Does this provide an accurate description/account of what you have told me today?

Table 3.3

Example of How a Theoretical Category Was Formed from Line-by-Line Coding, Memo Writing, and Incident with Incident Coding

Line-by-Line Coding	Memo Writing	Incident with Incident Coding	Theoretical Category
"Yeah, so, I'm like kind of like a passive guy…"	There seemed to be a caution in him revealing something about his own body image with sexting that may threaten his own manhood. He seemed focused on not wanting to get laughed at. His girlfriend told him that girls sometimes share guy's dick pics and laugh at them and I think this caused him great concern and anxiety about his body, and his perception of self.	*"But if it was like you're just, like, sexting this one girl, and got a huge dick – or whatever and it gets shared around and then it's like – ah…Yeah it's like people are not gonna laugh at you…"*	
"Oh my gosh! Someone thinks I'm pretty."	Her interview had themes of shame and guilt about her body, and promiscuity. Eventually through learning to value her own body again, she gained a renewed sense of self-worth.	*"Yeah. And it kind of made me realize like the value that like these sexual experiences should have, like I should want to feel… want to feel wanted, but it shouldn't be by everybody. And, you know, wanting myself, you know, and like loving myself more than needing other people to love me."*	**Forming Perceptions and Feelings**
"I wanted, you know, a boy to like me, so I thought sending pictures of my body would, you know, help..."	She appeared slightly overweight, almost cherub in appearance, and I wondered if this contributed in some way to her insecurities about her body. I wondered if sexting presented a way for her to get beyond her body image and achieve these goals. Did sexting present a way to display her body in a different way?	*"…Maybe this picture won't completely destroy my life, as, you know, with society and being more open… It wasn't that provocative of a picture. It may not come now. Yeah, it could not come now, it could come later, um, which would be really disheartening, especially once I move up in my professional career. Um, these photos could be online..."*	

Table 3.4

Excerpt of a Model Case

Jodi's Story of Engaging in the Culture of Teen Sexting	
Impact of Mental Health Status	Jodi's parents were divorced when Jodi was very young. Jodi did not remember them ever being together. Jodi's father was not around much and he divorced and remarried many times during Jodi's childhood. Jodi struggled with feelings of depression and anxiety throughout childhood and began seeing a counselor at 12 years of age.
Motivating Factors	Jodi knew all the popular kids were participating in sexting and it seemed like the "cool thing" everybody was doing. Jodi had always been curious about sexting and wanted to fit in. Jodi wondered if sexting might lead to popularity.
Forming Perceptions and Feelings	Jodi struggled with being overweight throughout childhood and often felt embarrassed and self-conscious. Kids at school often teased Jodi and it was difficult to make friends. Jodi had learned about sexting at school and always thought that sexting was a little gross. Jodi experienced feelings of self-confidence and a more positive body image after sexting.
Acknowledging and Managing Risks	Jodi knew that sexting could be risky. Jodi also knew about some kids at school who had been expelled for sexting. The school had always told kids not to do it and warned that it was bad. However, Jodi could not understand why the school would tell students that sexting was bad without any explanation. Jodi began sexting with a classmate at 13 years of age. Jodi felt safe sexting behind a screen, as it somehow felt more anonymous. Jodi often edited sexting photos, leaving facial features out of the photos in case the pictures ever got out.
Impact on Emotional Well-Being	At first, sexting behavior increased Jodi's self-confidence and created feelings of excitement and belonging. Then, one day, Jodi's sexting pictures were sent around the whole school. Kids began teasing Jodi even more than before. Jodi began experiencing feelings of guilt and shame. Jodi felt dirty and disgusting.
Working Through Tension	Jodi could not believe this had happened. Jodi exclaimed, *"How could I be so stupid? How could I risk everything I have worked so hard in school for?*" Jodi began talking to the school counselor about what had happened. Jodi started working through feelings related to their[1] sexting experiences.

Finding A Sexual Self	Jodi realized that sexting caused feelings of shame and disrespect. Jodi realized sexting did not fix their problems and insecurities about their body image. Years later at age 18, Jodi is now in a serious monogamous relationship. *"I mean, I'm only 18, but like now, sexting is like this loving thing that, you know, is no longer dirty and shameful, it enhances our relationship."*

[1] *"their" is used as a singular pronoun.*

Table 3.5

Definitions of Terms Used in Sexting

Definitions of Terms Used in Sexting	
Block	On the Internet, a block is a technical measure intended to restrict access to information or resources. In certain websites, including social networks such as Facebook, or editable databases like wikis users can apply blocks on other users deemed undesirable to prevent them from performing certain actions (“Block,” n.d.).
Burner account	When persons use fake online accounts and talk in third person about themselves to speak poorly of other people they would not speak poorly about on their real account (“Burner Account,” 2019).
Cancel culture	A modern Internet phenomenon where a person is ejected from influence or fame by questionable actions. It is caused by a critical mass of people who are quick to judge and slow to question. It is commonly caused by an accusation, whether that accusation has merit or not. It is a direct result of the ignorance of people caused by communication technologies outpacing the growth in available knowledge of a person (“Cancel Culture,” 2020).
Catfishing	The phenomenon of internet predators that fabricate online identities and entire social circles to trick people into emotional/romantic relationships (over a long period of time) with possible motivations of revenge, loneliness, curiosity, or boredom (“Catfishing,” 2013).
Dicpic	A picture sent online, usually requested by the recipient, of the sender’s penis. Usually sent for the viewer or sender's arousal, pleasure, curiosity, or boredom. Derived from the combination of the commonly used terms "dick" and "picture,” shortened to the abbreviation "dicpic"(“Dicpic,” 2009).
Put on blast	To put someone’s secrets and personal business in the spotlight without them being willing (“Put On Blast,” 2003).
Screenshot	An image that shows the contents of a computer display (“Screenshot,” 2020).
Scroll down	To move down the screen, for example when using a smartphone (“Scroll Down,” 2017).
Swipe right/left	An action on an online dating application that shows whether the viewer finds someone attractive or unattractive by moving his or her finger to the right or left across the photo on the screen of a smartphone or tablet. A sweep to the left indicates no, a swipe to the right indicates yes (“Swipe Right/Left,” 2015).
Unsend	Act of removing a message within an application (e.g., Instagram) or from a device to prevent the message from being received (Peterson, 2018).

Table 3.6

Mobile and Social Media Applications Used by Teens

Mobile and Social Media Applications Used by Teens	
Afterschool	Social network mobile application that allows users in a defined network, currently high schools, to share anonymous text-based posts and images with others. The application was created as a network that teens could use to express themselves to reach out to others and to ask for and offer help to fellow teens in distress (Searchfuse Marketing Management, 2017).
Clash of Clans	Strategy video online gaming application that joins millions of players worldwide in building villages, raising clans, and competing in epic clan wars (Supercell, 2020).
Discord	Proprietary freeware VoIP application and digital distribution platform designed for video gaming communities that specializes in text, image, video and audio communication between users in a chat channel (Discord Inc., 2015).
Facebook	Social media application where users can create a profile revealing information about themselves. They can post text, photos, and multimedia which is shared with any other users that have agreed to be their friend, and with a different privacy setting, with any reader. Users can also use various embedded applications, join common-interest groups, buy and sell items or services on Marketplace, and receive notifications of their Facebook friends' activities and activities of Facebook pages they follow (Facebook, Inc., 2004).
FaceTime	Mobile application for Apple iOS systems designed to connect users with family and friends around the world via audio and video calls (Apple Inc., 2010).
Instagram	Social media application that allows users to connect with friends, share events, and see what is new from others all over the world. It allows users to explore the community while feeling free to be themselves, sharing everything from daily moments to life's highlights. The application allows users to add photos and videos to their story that disappear after 24 hours bringing them to life with fun creative tools. Users can also message friends about what they see within feeds and stories (Facebook, Inc., 2010).
Kik	Messaging application that allows users to connect with friends, stay in the loop, and explore, all through chat. No phone numbers are used, the user chooses a username. The user can choose who to chat with one-on-one or in groups; share pics, videos, gifs, games, and more; and meet new friends with similar interests (Kik Interactive Inc., 2010).
LINE	Mobile application that allows users to have intimate or large round table conversations with up to 200 friends from anywhere internationally via free voice and video calls. The application also has a polling feature where users can see what other users are thinking. The application's features include a sticker shop, auto-sync with other devices, personal storage space, official LINE accounts, easy connection with other applications, international calling with LINE Out, and Face Play where users compete with other users by making unusual faces (LINE Corporation, 2020).
Private Photo Vault	Mobile application that keeps photos and videos safe by requiring a password to view them. This application allows users to password protect the entire application as well as individual photo albums (double layer password security). Users create their own personal photo locker. All secret images and videos that are protected with the application are then hidden from view of potential intruders (Legendary Software Labs LLC., 2019).

Skype	Mobile application that allows users to instant message, voice, or video call worldwide with up to 24 other users for free using their phone or computer. Features include video calls, chats, SMS messaging, sending and sharing of photos and videos, voice calls, and conversations that include emoticons, Gifs, web images, and annotated images (Skype Technologies, 2003).
Snapchat	Social media application that opens directly to the user's camera, allowing them to send a "Snap" or picture in seconds. Allows users to take a photo or video, add a caption, and send it to friends and family. The application allows users to express themselves with filters, lenses, Bitmojis, and other effects. Other features include following friends' stories, sharing locations, storing memories in Cloud or Camera Roll format, and creating friendship profiles using Charms and Bitmojis (Snap Inc., 2011).
Spotafriend	Social media application designed for teens aged 13-19 years. Teens swipe pictures of other teenagers around them, and swipe right to accept and become friends. If both teens accept, they get a match and can start chatting privately. With a single swipe teens invite friends to go out, meet in the real world, and hookup to live the best life experiences. Teens connect with interesting people in proximity beyond their school or community securely. This application is not advertised as a teen dating app. (Smart Lamas Inc., 2011).
TikTok	Chinese social networking application that allows the user to watch, create, and share videos, often to a soundtrack of the top hits in music right from their phone. Users can watch and record videos of themselves lip-synching to popular music and sound bites, create short, shareable videos ranging from funny to serious, and connect with friends and admirers through likes, comments, and even duets (ByteDance, 2016).
Tinder	Geosocial networking and online dating application that allows users to anonymously swipe to like or dislike other profiles based on their photos, a small bio, and common interests. Once two users have "matched" they can exchange messages (Tinder Inc., 2012).
Tumblr	American microblogging and social networking application that allows users to post multimedia and other content to a short-form blog. Users can also follow other users' blogs. Bloggers can make their blogs private (Tumblr Inc., 2007).
Twitch	Video live streaming service that primarily focuses on video gaming live streaming, including broadcasts of eSports competitions, in addition to music broadcasts, creative content, and "in real life" streams. Content on the site can be viewed either live or via video on demand (Twitch Interactive, Inc., 2020).
Twitter	American microblogging and social networking service on which users post and interact with messages known as "tweets". Tweets were originally restricted to 140 characters, but in 2017 this limit was doubled to 280 characters for all languages except Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Registered users can post, like, and retweet tweets, but unregistered users can only read tweets. Users access Twitter through its website interface, Short Message Service, or mobile-device application software (Twitter Inc., 2006).
World of Warcraft	Multiplayer online role-playing gaming application where players control a character avatar within a game in third or first person view, explore the landscape, fight various monsters, complete quests, and interact with non-player characters or other players (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004).

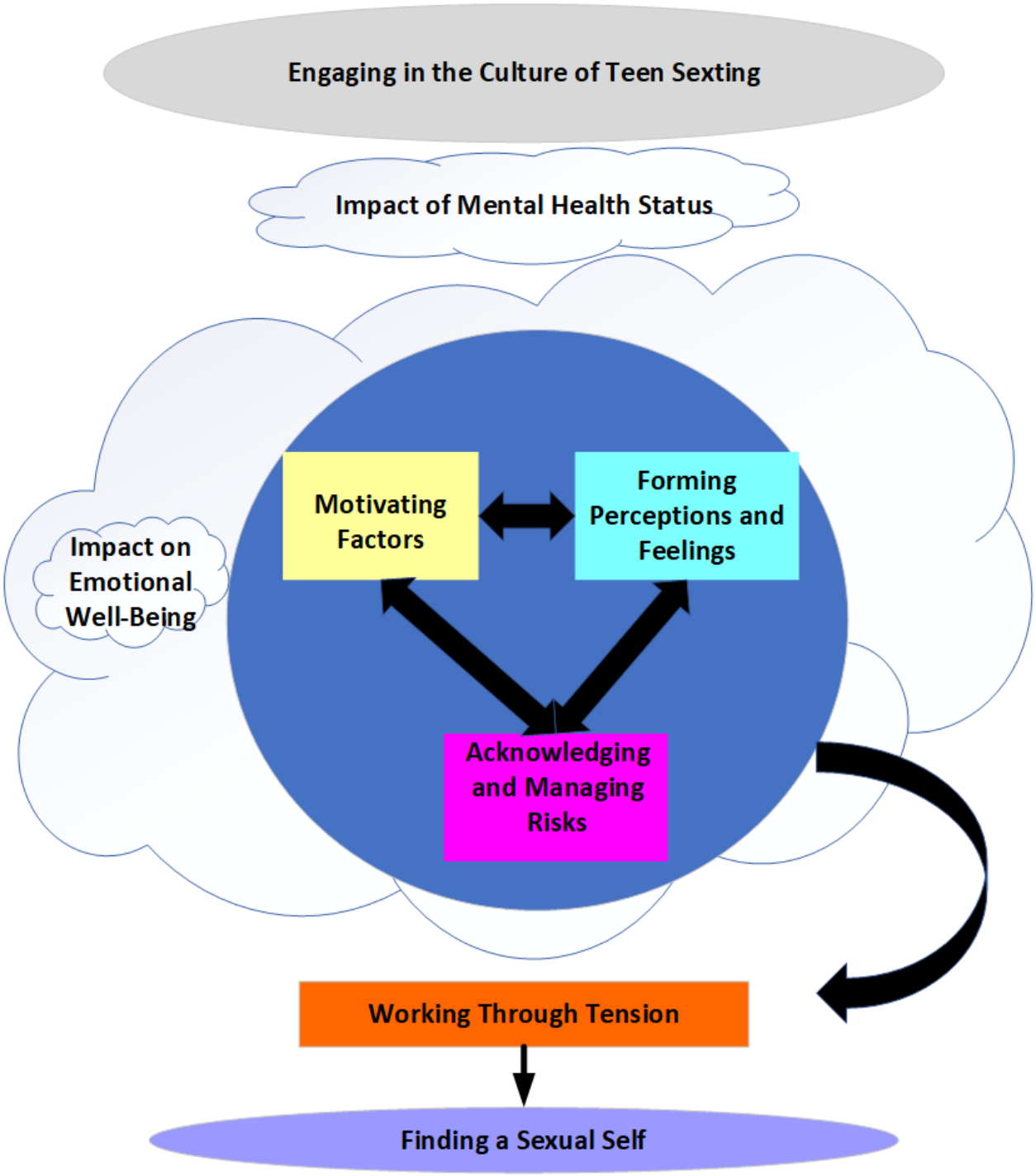

Figure 3.1. Model of Theory: Engaging in the Culture of Teen Sexting

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Summary

The present study explored the experiences of adolescents who were engaging in the behavior of sexting in order to better understand the relationship between sexting and adolescent mental health and well-being. Smartphones and social networking sites have allowed the Internet to play an increasingly central role in the exploration and expression of adolescent sexuality (Kerstens & Stol, 2014). Online sexual behavior, in turn, has played a role in the social and sexual development of adolescents. While there are studies that have emphasized sexting's place in the normal development of adolescent self and social-identity, highlighting its role in intimate relationships and peer group dynamics (Burkett, 2015; Cooper et al., 2016; Vanden Abeele et al., 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2016), much of the literature regarding teen sexting behavior is heavily focused on negative emotional and mental health outcomes, and sexting's relationship with high risk behaviors (Alonso & Romero, 2019; Brinkley et al., 2017; Dake et al., 2012; Englander, 2012; Ferguson, 2011; Festl et al., 2019; Frankel et al., 2018; Gámez-Guadix & deSantisteban, 2018; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Houck et al., 2014; Jonsson et al., 2014; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Medrano et al., 2018; Milton et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2012; Ševčiková, 2016; Temple et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014; Woodward et al., 2017; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Consensual and nonconsensual contexts surrounding teen sexting are seldom distinguished within studies (Drouin & Tobin, 2014; Englander,

2012; Festl et al., 2019; Frankel et al., 2018; Jonsson et al., 2014; Klettke et al., 2019; Medrano et al., 2018). Further, few authors have accounted for adolescent sexual development within their studies (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Ševčiková, 2016; Temple et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014).

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). Undergirded by the philosophical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism, constructivist grounded theory allowed for multiple social realities to explain the behavior of teen sexting, mutual creation of knowledge about teen sexting behavior by the researcher and participants, and entry into the adolescents' world of meanings and actions regarding sexting within larger social structures and contexts (Charmaz, 2014). The voices of adolescents' and their accounts of sexting experiences provided a view of sexting as part of normal adolescent sexual growth and development and as a range of experiences they worked through in finding their sexual selves and identities.

This chapter includes a discussion of how the theory that emerged from the analysis represented a culture, trustworthiness of the study, personal reflection, and implications for clinical practice and research. Copies of the institutional review board approval letters, recruitment postcard, informational brochure, written informed consent, semi-structured interview guide, and counseling resources list can be found in the appendices.

Discussion

Through personal interviews, adolescents shared their experiences of sexting. Engaging in the culture of teen sexting materialized as the central process and also serves as the title of the theory that emerged. Six primary processes were involved in engaging in the culture of teen sexting as illustrated by the participants' stories: engaging in the culture of teen sexting, motivating factors, forming perceptions and feelings, acknowledging and managing risks, connecting mental health and sexting, and finding a sexual self. While this study explored the processes of teen sexting, what emerged during the analysis was evidence that supports that teen sexting was indeed a culture. This discussion focuses on defining culture, describing how teen sexting is a culture, and explaining why it is important to recognize teen sexting as a culture.

Defining Culture

Culture is broadly defined as the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time ("Culture," n.d.). It includes a collective of ideas, values, meanings, and symbols shared by a group of people (Brake, 1985). Parsons (1964) first coined the term *youth culture* and described youth culture as a bridge between the dependency of childhood and independence of adulthood. Youth culture refers to the cultural practices of members of this age group by which they express their identities and demonstrate their sense of belonging to a particular group of young people (Buchmann, 2001). More broadly, youth culture refers to the way adolescents live their lives, and the norms, values, and practices they share (Rice, 1996). Youth subcultures form when existing cultural values, behaviors, and actions are viewed

as different or not congruent with those of the group (Brake, 1985). Subcultures suggest that there are alternate forms of cultural and self-expression. Subculture allows an expression of identity through a deliberate projection of self-image that is free from cultural norms. Separate subcultures exist with their own languages, special symbols, and most importantly with value systems that lead away from goals established by the larger society (Coleman, 1961). Often subcultures are perceived and responded to as a generational problem by those on the outside (Brake, 1985).

Teen Sexting as a Culture

As adolescent participants shared their experiences of sexting, evidence emerged that sexting represented a culture. First, sexting had its own set of learned and socializing behaviors, values, norms and rules, and even its own language and symbols. Participants revealed that the way into this culture was often by learning about sexting from peers who were already participating in the behavior. Sexting was viewed as a way to socialize with friends, peers, and intimate partners. Participants spoke of values important to the behavior of sexting including trust and mutual respect for others. According to the adolescent participants, sexting behavior contained its own set of rules and norms. Participants stressed that being careful, avoiding sexting behavior with the wrong person, keeping it private, and specific strategies such as keeping your face out the picture were important to participation. The participants affirmed that sexting had a language all its own with specific sexting terms, applications and social networking sites, and emoji symbols that were used for communicating. Second, sexting represented its own subculture as adolescent participants used sexting to express their identities in ways that

were different from broader cultural norms. Participants shared stories of presenting their best bodily features during sexting by using different camera angles, filters, and editing techniques. For the adolescents in this study, sexting served as an expression of self-empowerment, a way to escape from past traumas, and sometimes even with negative sexting incidents, a way to experience a new found respect for one's body. Finally, sexting was often viewed as being outside of the established cultural norms. Adolescent participants shared many stories of the negative view of sexting held by parents, schools, and other adult authorities. Getting into trouble, being shamed, and feeling isolated after negative sexting incidents were all discussed by adolescents in this study.

The Importance of Recognizing Teen Sexting as a Culture

Constructivist grounded theory is rooted in symbolic interactionism, which views interaction as occurring within social, cultural, and historical contexts that help to shape, but not determine these interactions (Charmaz, 2014). During adolescence, belonging to a peer group helps adolescents establish a self that is separate from their parents (Rodgers, 2017). Determining an individual identity and a place in the world is a critical feature of adolescence (Erikson, 1963). An important aspect of adolescent identity formation involves the development of a sexual identity. Hormonal influences and physical changes of puberty impact the way teenagers perceive their bodies and play a part in establishing a sexual identity (Rodgers, 2017). In addition, adolescents are stereotypically egocentric or self-centered. As a result, adolescents are not only self-absorbed, but believe others are also preoccupied with their behaviors and appearance (Elkind, 1967). Finally, adolescents are still developing a capacity for abstract thinking, which may impact their ability to

perceive future implications of current behavior and decisions (Rodgers, 2017). Understanding teen sexting as a culture means recognizing the context in which teens are exploring their self and sexual identities. Recognizing teen sexting culture as an alternate method of developing sexuality avoids condemning or shaming adolescents that participate in this culture. Acknowledging that sexting is a social and relational culture communicates the message to teens that they are valued and supports healthy sexual growth and development and mental health and well-being in adolescents.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is an artistic endeavor and makes a valuable contribution to nursing knowledge (Sandelowski, 1993). As such, it is worthy of the same rigorous criteria to determine its quality as that of quantitative research. Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory methodology provided the qualitative approach for inquiry and theory development in this study. Charmaz (2014) offers four criteria for evaluating grounded theory studies including credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. The following is a description of how Charmaz's (2014) criteria were used to operationalize trustworthiness in this study.

Credibility

Charmaz (2014) asserts that credibility is achieved when researchers have attained intimate familiarity with the setting or topic of study, data are sufficient, systematic comparisons between observations and categories are made, categories cover a wide range of empirical observations, and there are strong links between the data and emerging analysis. Prolonged engagement in the setting allowed me to develop rapport and trust

with the adolescents. I attended several community college events to advertise my study and meet potential participants including free HIV testing events and National Coming Out Day. I spent several additional days in the student commons areas at the campuses with my recruitment poster, handing out brochures and postcards, and providing donuts. I engaged with potential participants about my study allowing them to get to know me face-to-face, ask questions, and share ideas.

Multiple data collection sources including audio recordings of interviews, written transcription, field notes of observations, memos, methodological and reflexive journal entries, and extant documents helped to develop rich and detailed theoretical categories regarding adolescents' experiences with sexting behavior. During individual interviews, I took detailed notes about my observations including facial expressions, and body language of my participants. The interview guide included open-ended questions allowing for participants to fully discuss their sexting experiences. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. After each interview, I listened to the audio recording to confirm my notes and observations. I wrote memos after each interview, and throughout the study. Memo writing helped me to formulate theoretical categories about my data by explicating ideas, events, or processes in the data, and identify variations within and between theoretical categories. I used NVivo software to organize and code my data and formulate theoretical codes from focused codes. Incident with incident coding was performed during the analysis to compare adolescents' viewpoints and accounts of sexting and to examine the consistency and accuracy of their experiences.

Systematic comparisons between observations and categories ensured my theoretical categories covered a wide range of observations. A methodological journal was kept throughout the study detailing recruitment activities, a calendar of interviews, steps of the study procedures and decisions made, phone calls made, and attendance at meetings with my dissertation chair and other meetings and conferences pertaining to my research. I recorded my own feelings, values, and preconceptions about the data in a reflexive journal to help situate my own thoughts and biases and how these might be influencing my data collection and analysis. Media coverage of teen sexting incidents that occurred during my study were included as extant documents in the study. Meetings with my dissertation chair were conducted after interview sessions to debrief about data collection and analysis of data to ensure there were strong links between my data and the emerging analysis.

Originality

Charmaz (2014) notes that originality is demonstrated when theoretical categories are fresh and offer new insights. Originality occurs when the analysis provides a new conceptual rendering of the data and the social and theoretical significance of the work is demonstrated. The grounded theory that emerges should challenge, extend, or refine current ideas, concepts, and practices related to the study phenomenon. I conducted a thorough preliminary review of the literature on teen sexting behavior before I conducted my study. I continued to collect data for my study until I reached theoretical saturation, or the point where my theoretical categories were no longer providing new information or further insight about the behavior of teen sexting. I returned to the literature during the

analysis to compare the findings of my study with that of other studies on teen sexting behavior, to situate my work within the work of other studies on teen sexting behavior, and note new things learned from the analysis. I debriefed with my dissertation chair about ideas, concepts, and practices that emerged during the analysis.

Resonance

Resonance is demonstrated when the theoretical categories portray the fullness of the studied experience and "both liminal and unstable taken-for-granted meanings are revealed" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 337). Links can be drawn between larger institutions and individual lives. The grounded theory makes sense to participants who share the experience and offers them deeper insights about their lives and worlds. Perhaps the most critical ethical obligation that a qualitative nurse researcher has in a study is to describe the experiences of participants as faithfully as possible even if these experiences differ from one's own values and aims (Munhall, 2012). I stayed close to the data presenting a rich description of the adolescents' experiences, being continually mindful not to stop short or present a superficial portrayal of their experiences.

During informed consent I detailed mandatory reporting procedures providing specific examples and allowed adolescent participants to ask specific questions regarding these procedures. This approach not only increased participants' understanding of reporting laws pertaining to sexting, but allowed participants freedom in sharing what they were comfortable in sharing. Asking open-ended questions allowed adolescent participants to express themselves freely and reflect thoughtfully on their experiences of sexting. Probing questions further illuminated how participants understood their

experiences of sexting from within the contexts of their own lives and the world around them. Participant quotes, including some that were graphic in nature, were transcribed verbatim and included in the findings in order to reveal the full essence of adolescents' experiences and meanings of sexting. At the end of each interview, I summarized what the participant had shared. A member check was performed by asking, "Does this provide an accurate description or account of what you have told me today?" Participants were allowed to make corrections or additions to their responses. Additionally, participants were asked if there was anything else I should know to help me understand sexting behavior better. All participants were invited to review a diagram and written description of the emerging theory and provide their feedback via email ensuring that the grounded theory that emerged made sense to those who shared the experience.

Usefulness

Charmaz (2014) maintains that usefulness is established by "a final analysis that offers interpretations that can be used by persons in their everyday worlds" (p. 338). Usefulness examines generic processes for tacit implications. Further, an evaluation of usefulness assures that the analysis inspires further research, contributes to knowledge, and creates a better world. To establish usefulness, data analysis stayed close to the participants' specific accounts of sexting experiences. During data analysis I used my detailed fieldnotes of observations and memos to provide detailed accounts of adolescents' experiences of sexting. The rich description allows readers of my study to determine the extent to which any conclusions drawn might be transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people. Including accurate descriptions of adolescent

perceptions and feelings, social settings, and circumstances related to sexting as part of the findings allows readers of the research to view adolescents' sexting experiences within an understandable context. A methodological journal recorded every step of the research process such that anyone wanting to reproduce the study might be able to do so. I did not make broad claims of generalization of my study findings to the larger population of adolescents, but tried to present an account of teen sexting that adolescents who were not involved in the study might be able to relate to their own experiences.

Personal Reflection

Charmaz (2014) states as researchers "we are part of the world we study, the data we collect, and the analyses we produce" (p. 17). Charmaz (2014) asserts that conducting research is not a neutral act and the grounded theories we construct are reflections of our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices. Our participants' meanings and our finished grounded theories offer an "interpretive portrayal" (p. 17) of the reality of the worlds of those we study. As I reflect upon my research study and the time spent with adolescent participants, I feel privileged to have been invited into their worlds, their reality of teen sexting. As adolescents shared their personal stories and experiences of sexting and its impact on their mental health and well-being with me, I felt very much a part of this research and the world I was studying. There were times when I saw myself as a confidant, as participants entrusted me with their deepest and sometimes darkest secrets of sexting. At times it felt as if adolescents were almost confessing to me. Sometimes I saw myself as an educator when adolescents asked questions about normal sexual growth and development. After one interview when

the digital recorder was been turned off, I found myself in the role of PNP, when an adolescent sought advice about sexual side effects she was having from an antidepressant she was taking. Sometimes I saw myself as a counselor, as I expressed empathy for adolescents who shared sad and sometimes tragic stories. Mostly, I saw myself in the role of advocate, someone who was hearing their voices and validating their feelings and experiences, someone who would communicate their message of sexting to those on the outside.

As I reflected upon some of the challenges I experienced during my study, I began to see the reality of the world of teen sexting as adolescents sometimes experienced it. This world seemed to be one of taboo, stigma, and gatekeeping. Early in my research journey, I was discouraged to pursue sexting as my research topic because adolescents would likely not tell me the truth about their sexting behavior or would not want to talk to me at all. Worse still, I was warned that most of what adolescents would tell me would have to be reported to the appropriate reporting agency. Further, when I shared the excitement of my teen sexting study with friends or colleagues who were parents of teens, the response would often be that I better roll up my sleeves and be prepared for what I was going to hear from "those teens." For added effect, they would often share a dreadful story about another teen at their child's school who had been caught sexting.

Initially, I intended to recruit younger adolescents who were in middle school and high school. Early in the recruitment process, it became clear that middle schools and high schools were too uncomfortable with the topic of sexting. Sometimes my phone

calls were transferred to the principal's office; at other times I was left on hold for several minutes while someone tried to figure out who was going to talk to me. At one school, I never made it past the front desk. The woman on the other end of the call simply stated that their school would not be interested in participating in such a study. Sometimes messages and emails were never returned. By the end of my first attempt at recruitment, my list of potentially interested middle and high schools dwindled to zero. Even after I had obtained permission to conduct my study in the college setting, I found myself at times having to justify the purpose and importance of my study to some. When asking permission to use a table in the student commons area for recruiting purposes, I was told I needed to get permission from administration. Someone from administration promptly arrived to talk with me and find out what I was doing there. After giving a full poster presentation, presenting my argument for the purpose of my study, and producing the institutional review board papers from the college, I was allowed to continue to recruit students for my study in the student life area. The student life area, however, was hidden away from the traffic of the main student commons area.

Another challenge I initially faced during my study was recruiting adolescent men. My first four participants were all women. I began to wonder if the current "Me Too" movement was having some kind of effect upon my study. In recent news, there had been several high profile cases of prominent men being accused of sexual harassment and sexual assault of women. I wondered if the young men who were viewing my brochure were thinking about what was going on in this media. Were they seeing me as a white woman, maybe even a white woman of privilege, and feeling uncomfortable with

the idea of sharing their experiences of sexting with me? This caused me to think deeply about how I could break through this barrier. I decided the best way to meet this challenge might be to approach a group of young men that were seated together in the student life area. While approaching a group of college men about the best way to approach a sexting study terrified me, it helped me to see the error in my own assumptions. One young man noted that the word *volunteer* on my recruiting postcard gave the impression he would be moving a sofa and not participating in a research study. Another young man noted that the receipt of a $25 Amazon gift card after participation was the selling point of the study and that should be displayed in bigger and bolder font on the postcard. While I conversed with the young men, I noticed there was one young man who was studying the postcard and listening to me intently. Later, he approached me privately in the student life area and expressed he was interested in participating in my study. He was my first male participant; there would be six more male participants to follow. I was never sure if this young man had encouraged other male friends to participate, or if his participation sent a message to other young men that it was okay to participate in my study, but I felt encouraged.

Finally, my study caused me to reflect upon my own adolescence. A pediatric colleague once told me that when I was working with adolescents there were always two adolescents in the room: the adolescent with whom I was working and the adolescent I once was. Never had this felt more true to me than during my study. Listening intently to the voices of adolescents and writing entries in my reflexive journal evoked a roller coaster of emotions within me. As adolescent participants discussed feelings about their

own physical appearances and discomforts, it brought back memories of my own teenage "inadequacies" and behaviors I engaged in as a teenager. One such memory that resonated with me, was standing along the wall at a middle school dance looking out over a sea of boys and girls dancing together and the feeling of aloneness that came over me. Adolescents also shared stories of suicide and trauma which triggered deep sadness towards them, but also brought back memories of stories from my own adolescent peers. Finally, I remember experiencing many feelings of worry and doubt about my own future when I was an adolescent. While there were times during the interviews I experienced feelings of worry and doubt for the future of the adolescents, more often I experienced feelings of joy for the resiliency that adolescents demonstrated as they worked through difficult sexting experiences with a sense of humor and maturity. A sense of maturity was recognized in adolescents as they shared stories of their ability to work through the tensions of sexting, and as they shared insights gained from these experiences with others.

Limitations

This study should be interpreted within its limitations. First, all adolescent participants were recruited from one geographic area in the Northwestern United States. Therefore, the findings may not be transferable to adolescents in other geographic locations. Second, all adolescent participants were community college students and their understanding and responses to sexting may differ from adolescents with other educational levels. Finally, the study may have been affected by self-report and recall bias. Data were collected from participants using self-report measures in face-to-face

interviews with the primary investigator. Participants may not have felt comfortable sharing some sexting experiences with the investigator. Further, the investigator asked participants to reflect on past sexting experiences which may have affected the accuracy of experiences shared by the participants.

Implications for Nursing Practice and Research

The AAP continues to be concerned about the effect that online behavior is having upon the mental health and well-being of adolescents and encourages healthcare providers to talk with adolescents about their online behavior at every well visit (Strasburger et al., 2013). The findings of this study emphasize the need for healthcare providers to better understand the experiences of teen sexting behavior from adolescents' points of view. This knowledge will assist healthcare providers to engage teens in open and frank conversations about sexting, helping teens to navigate the risks of sexting and find healthy ways to manage sexting behavior. Clinical implications of this research include viewing sexting from a broader perspective by acknowledging sexting as part of teen culture and as part of normal sexual growth and development in teens. Viewing sexting as a part of normal adolescent sexual growth and development will assist healthcare providers to approach the topic of sexting without shaming adolescents. Healthcare providers' recognition that sexting provides an alternate way for adolescents to experience their sexuality communicates to teens that they are valued and that it is okay for them to talk about sexting.

Further, the findings of this study revealed that some teens who were engaging in sexting were also struggling with existing mental health issues or experiencing emotional

health issues as a result of negative sexting experiences. Engaging teens in conversations about sexting may open the door for discussing emotional and mental health issues, and assist adolescents to work through some of the tensions of sexting in ways that impact mental health and well-being in a positive way. Finally, the adolescents in this study represented a diverse group of gender and sexual identities. Sexting may present an opportunity for teens to openly discuss issues related to gender and sexual identity with their healthcare providers. By starting a conversation with teens about sexting within a context of teen sexting culture, healthcare providers foster further communication about topics related to adolescent sexual growth and development, emotional and mental health, and issues related to gender identity.

Healthy sexuality encompasses more than just screening for the physical aspects of biological sex and reproductive characteristics in adolescents (Breuner et al., 2016). A number of additional guidelines and psychosocial screening tools are used to screen adolescents for healthy sexual development, body image, interpersonal relationships, intimacy, gender identity, and sexual risk behaviors (Breuner et al., 2016). Some of these tools include the GAPS (Montalto, 1998), the AAP Bright Futures guidelines (Hagan et al., 2017), and the HEADSSS (Goldenring & Rosen, 2004) and SAFE TEENS (Montalto, 1998) screening tools. Future research should include refinement of current tools or development of new tools to specifically assess and measure how teens are engaging in sexting. Valid and reliable tools will assist healthcare providers in assessing sexting within a context of normal sexual growth and development and will aid healthcare providers in discussing sexting with teens and helping parents and other adults to talk to

adolescents about sexting. Future research regarding adolescent sexting behaviors should prioritize mental health, emotional well-being, gender identity, and sexual identity as key factors in sexual growth and development. Future research should also include qualitative studies that further explore adolescents' experiences with sexting in relation to gender and sexual identity formation and expression.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore adolescents' experiences of sexting in order to better understand the relationship between sexting and adolescent mental health and well-being. During the study many sources of bias regarding adolescent sexting behaviors were exposed that emphasized risk of negative outcomes. Most adults that the adolescent participants came into contact with had openly warned them about dangerous outcomes related to sexting ranging from embarrassment and shame to expulsion from school and criminal charges. Viewing sexting as part of normal adolescent sexual growth and development and within a culture of teen sexting positions sexting behavior as an alternative way for adolescents to develop their sexual identities. Adolescent participants shared both positive and negative personal consequences of sexting. The objective of the study was not to make a value statement about teen sexting as being bad or good. The objective of the study was to better understand the processes of sexting that adolescents experience. How adolescents navigate the good and bad experiences related to sexting has an impact on their mental health and well-being and ultimately their growth and development process of finding the sexual self. Adolescent participants clearly shared that sexting is happening and they are fully aware of the risks. Sexting has become part of

the normal sexual development of adolescents and part of teen culture, and part of developing and finding a sexual self. Helping to engage adolescents in the conversation and navigate risks of sexting will help them find healthy ways to engage in sexting.

Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory methodology allowed for adolescents' views and voices about sexting behavior to be central to the analysis. The value of adolescents' voices for this study was in illuminating outside views of teen sexting behavior that were "limited, imprecise, or erroneous" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 24). By listening to adolescent participants reflect on their stories of sexting, I was able to see sexting through their eyes and understand the culture of teen sexting as they have experienced it making their voices, views, and journeys a valuable part of the educational, legal, and public health dialog about this behavior.

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APPENDIX A

TWU IRB Approval Letter

IRB-FY2019-251 - Initial: Full Review Approval Letter

irb@twu.edu <irb@twu.edu> Thu, Jul 18, 2019 at 1:54 PM
To: bspencer@twu.edu, dmurphy5@twu.edu

Texas Woman's University
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
irb@twu.edu
https://www.twu.edu/institutional-review-board-irb/

July 18, 2019

Dawn Murphy
Nursing - Denton

Re: Initial - IRB-FY2019-251 Teens' Experiences with Sexting: A Grounded Theory Study

Dear Dawn Murphy,

The above referenced study has been reviewed at a fully convened meeting by the TWU IRB - Denton operating under FWA00000178 and approved on July 18, 2019. If you are using a signed informed consent form, the approved form has been stamped by the IRB and uploaded to the Attachments tab under the Study Details section. This stamped version of the consent must be used when enrolling subjects in your study.

Note that any modifications to this study must be submitted for IRB review prior to their implementation, including the submission of any agency approval letters, changes in research personnel, and any changes in study procedures or instruments. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any adverse events or unanticipated problems. All modification requests, incident reports, and requests to close the file must be submitted through Cayuse.

Approval for this study will expire on July 17, 2020. A reminder of the study expiration will be sent 45 days prior to the expiration. If the study is ongoing, you will be required to submit a renewal request. When the study is complete, a close request may be submitted to close the study file.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact the IRB analyst indicated on your application in Cayuse or refer to the IRB website at http://www.twu.edu/institutional-review-board-irb/.

Sincerely,

TWU IRB - Denton

APPENDIX B

PPCC IRB Approval Letter

PIKES PEAK COMMUNITY COLLEGE

TO: Dawn Murphy
Pikes Peak Community College, Nursing Instructor

FROM: Dr. Patricia Diawara
Chair of the Pikes Peak Community College Institutional Review Board

DATE: August 27, 2019

RE: **Teens' Experiences with Sexting: A Grounded Theory Study**
IRB# 190802 FB

Dear Ms. Murphy

After review of your research proposal entitled **"Teens' Experiences with Sexting: A Grounded Theory Study,"** it appears that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of your study participants. Work on this project may begin. This approval is for a period of one year from the date of this letter and will require continuation approval if the research project extends beyond August 27, 2020.

If you make any changes to the protocol during the period of this approval, you must submit a revised protocol to the PPCC IRB for approval before implementing the changes. As Principal Investigator, you must promptly inform the PPCC IRB of all adverse events to subjects. Furthermore, if the results of the research are used to prepare papers for publication or oral presentations at professional conferences, manuscripts or abstracts must be submitted to the PPCC IRB for pre-publication approval. Failure to comply with these federally mandated responsibilities may result in suspension or termination of the project.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact me at (719) 502-2037 or Patricia.Diawara@ppcc.edu. Thank you for submitting this research proposal to the PPCC IRB.

Best wishes for a successful research project.

Institutional Review Board

719-502-2037 *phone* | 719-502-2201 *fax*
Centennial Campus, Room A324, Box C-22 | 5675 South Academy Boulevard, Colorado Springs, CO 80906

APPENDIX C

TWU Consent to Participate

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY (TWU)
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: Teens' Experiences with Sexting: A Grounded Theory Study **IRB#190802 FB**

Principal Investigator: Dawn Marie Murphy MS RN CPNP....DMurphy5@twu.edu
972/742-9438
Faculty Advisor: Becky Spencer PhD RN IBCLC IBCLC…BSpencer@twu.edu
940/898-2406

PPCC Institutional Review Board/ Office of Institutional Research…719-502-2037

Summary and Key Information about the Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Ms. Dawn Marie Murphy, a nursing student at Texas Woman's University, as a part of her dissertation. The purpose of this research is to explore the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are an adult adolescent and you have had personal experience with sexting behavior or have known friends or peers that have personal experience with sexting behavior. As a participant you will be asked to take part in a face-to-face interview regarding your own experiences with sexting behavior or the experiences of your friends or peers. This interview will be audio recorded, and we will use a code name/alias to protect your confidentiality. In addition, all participants will be invited to provide their feedback about a diagram of the final emerging theory that is created during the study. The total time commitment for this study will be approximately 1.5 hours. Following the completion of the face-to-face interview you will receive a $25 Amazon gift card for your participation. You will receive an additional $10 Amazon gift card for providing feedback about the diagram of the emerging theory. Risks of this study include potential emotional discomfort or harm, loss of confidentiality, loss of anonymity, psychological distress, and coercion. We will discuss these risks and the rest of the study procedures in greater detail below.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are interested in learning more about this study, please review this consent form carefully and take your time deciding whether or not you want to participate. Please feel free to ask the researcher any questions you have about the study at any time.

Description of Procedures

As a participant in this study you will be asked to spend 30 minutes to one hour of your time in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. The researcher will ask you questions about your own experiences with sexting or the experiences of your friends and peers. You and the researcher will decide together on a private location where and when the interview will happen. The interview will be audio recorded and then written down so

that the researcher can be accurate when studying what you have said. The researcher may need to contact you after the face-to-face interview for clarification purposes. This will be done by phone and may take approximately 15 minutes. You will be invited to review a diagram of the emerging theory. This can be done in person or by email and may take approximately 15 minutes of your time.

Eligibility

In order to be a participant in this study, you must be 18 to 21 years of age; have yourself experienced sexting or have knowledge of friends' or peers' past experiences with sexting behavior; and you must be able to read, write, and speak English. You will be asked to show your driver's license to verify that you are between 18 and 21 years of age.

Potential Risks

The researcher will ask you questions about how your sexting experiences or the experiences of your friends' or peers' have made you feel or affected your relationships with family and friends. A possible risk in this study is emotional discomfort with the questions you are asked. If you become tired or upset you may take breaks as needed. You may also stop answering questions at any time and end the interview. If you feel you need to talk to a professional about your emotional discomfort, the researcher will provide you with a list of counseling resources.

Another risk in this study is loss of confidentiality. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, electronic meetings, and internet transactions. The interview will be held at a private location that you and the researcher have agreed upon. You and the researcher will decide on a code name/alias for you to use during the interview. A code name/alias, not your real name, will be used during the interview. No one but the researcher will know your real name. The audio recording and the written interview will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. Only the researcher, her advisor, and the person who writes down the interview will hear the audio recording or read the written interview. The audio recording and the written interview will be destroyed within three years after the study is finished. The signed consent form will be stored separately from all collected information and will be destroyed three years after the study is closed. The results of the study may be reported in scientific magazines or journals, but your name or any other identifying information will not be included.

Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. Some examples of laws that might require the researcher to break confidentiality include telling the researcher about child abuse, elder abuse, and sexual misconduct that occurred on campus. The researcher may have to break confidentiality and make a report to the appropriate agency if you reveal during the interview that there is current abuse occurring to a child or an elder, including the actions of self or others. In addition, if you reveal past abuse that occurred to a child, this may also have to be reported to the appropriate agency in the event there is still risk to a child. If you report instances of sexual

misconduct including sexual harassment, sexual assault, stalking, or relationship violence that occurred during your studies at the college, the researcher is required to report to the Title IX Coordinator at the University. When possible the researcher will tell you first that a report will be made. Also if the researcher believes that you are getting ready to reveal something in the interview that may need to be reported, the researcher will give pause and remind you of the obligation to report, by stating, "It sounds like you are getting ready to tell me something I may need to report, how would you like to proceed?"

The researchers will remove all of your personal or identifiable information (e.g. your name, date of birth, contact information) from the audio recordings and/or any study information. After all identifiable information is removed, your audio recordings and/or any personal information collected for this study may be used for future research or be given to another researcher for future research without additional informed consent.

If you would like to participate in the current study but not allow your de-identified data to be used for future research, please initial here _____.

Loss of anonymity is a risk in this study. Because interviews are face-to-face, and you may know other students who are participating in the study, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Psychological distress may be experienced because of the nature of the questions that could trigger emotions from past traumatic events. The researcher will provide you with a list of counseling resources. If you experience psychological distress, the researcher will provide you with a list of mental health resources including campus and community services such as counseling, crisis intervention, or other psychological services.

There is a risk of perceived coercion in this study. For example, coercion may be perceived by a participant if he or she feels pressure to answer an interview question in a certain way or to continue participation in order to comply with the research study. Your involvement in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without question or repercussion of any kind. Your choice not to participate in this study will not affect your education or relationship with the college, your status as a student, or participation in activities at the college.

The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen because of this research. You should let the researchers know at once if there is a problem and they will try to help you. However, TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research.

<u>Participation and Benefits</u>

Following the completion of the face-to-face interview you will receive a $25 Amazon gift card for your participation. You will receive an additional $10 Amazon gift card for

your participation in reviewing a diagram of the final emerging theory. If you would like to know the results of this study, we will email or mail them to you.*

Questions Regarding the Study

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep. If you have any questions about the research study you should ask the researchers; their contact information is at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the TWU Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 940-898-3378 or via e-mail at IRB@twu.edu or the Pikes Peak Community College Institutional Review Board Office of Institutional Research at 719-502-2037.

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

*If you would like to know the results of this study tell us where you want them to be sent:

Email: _____ or Address: _____

APPENDIX D

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Teens' Experiences with Sexting – Semi-Structured Interview Guide
Opening Question
When did you first experience sexting or come to know about others' experiences with sexting?
• If you recall, what were you thinking then? • Who, if anyone, influenced your actions? • Tell me about how he/she influenced you. • Could you describe the events that led up to participating in sexting or your friends/peers participating in sexting? • How would you describe how you viewed sexting before your own sexting behavior or that of your friends/peers?
Intermediate Questions
As you look back on your participation in sexting or the participation of friends/peers, are there any events that stand out in your mind?
• Could you describe (each one) of these events? • How did the event(s) affect what happened? • How did you respond to the event(s) or the situation?
What thoughts and feelings did you have while engaging in sexting? / What thoughts and feelings of friends/peers did you witness while they were engaging in sexting?
• Are there any sexting incidents that stand out in your mind? Could you describe the incident? How did this incident affect what happened? How did you respond to the incident/the resulting situation? • What helped you to manage and/or cope with your thoughts and feelings about sexting? In what ways did you help others to cope with their thoughts and feelings about sexting? • Have you ever seen a counselor? If so did you ever discuss sexting with the counselor? Is there anything to share? • How, if at all, have your thoughts and feelings about sexting changed? • What do you think the connection is between mental health and emotional well-being and sexting? How do you think sexting and mental health and emotional well-being are related?
How has sexting affected your relationships (friends/peers; boyfriend/girlfriend; family; others)?
• Who, if anyone, was involved in sexting? When was that? How were they involved? • Who was the most helpful to you during this time? How was he/she helpful? • What positive/negative influences did sexting have on relationships for you/friends and peers?
Could I ask you to describe the most important lessons you learned through experiencing sexting?
• Can you tell me about your thoughts and feelings when you learned about sexting? • What sexting experience(s) influenced you most?
How did your experiences of sexting change throughout your adolescent years?
• How were these experiences different from your younger adolescent years versus older adolescent years to now? • How were the situations that surrounded sexting different? • How, if at all, has your view of sexting changed?
Ending Question
What would you tell the person you were at (age of sexting experience) about what you know about sexting today?
• What do you think is most important to know about sexting? • Is there something that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview?
Summary Question
(After summarizing the interview for the participant). Does this provide an accurate description/account of what you have told me today?

• Is there anything you would like to add/correct? Is there something else you think I should know to understand sexting behavior better? • Is there anything you would like to ask me?
Adapted from Charmaz, 2014, p. 66-67

APPENDIX E

PPCC Counseling Resources List

Pikes Peak Community College (PPCC) Counseling Resources List
PPCC (The Counseling Center) 719-502-4782 Centennial Campus (CC) Room C-201a & b Rampart Range Campus (RRC) Room N107c Downtown Studio Campus (DTSC) Room S126a
University of Colorado, Colorado Springs Health & Mental Health Services Gallogly Recreation and Wellness Center Health & Mental Health Services 1420 Austin Bluffs Pkwy Colorado Springs, CO 80918 (719) 255-4444
PPCC Campus Police: (Emergency) 719-502-2900
211 Pikes Peak United Way 719-502-4525 for info and appointment times. Trained navigators connect you with community and campus resources. Free and Confidential. Walk-ins and appointments. Centennial Campus Learning Commons A303
Safe2Tell A toll-free, anonymous way to report things that threaten you, someone you know, or your community 1-877-542-7233 (SAFE) **After Hours* Emergencies Call Campus Police 502-2900
Sexual Identity Inside/Out Youth Services 235 S. Nevada Ave., Colorado Springs, CO 80903 Phone: (719)-328-1056 Springs Equality Center 410 S Tejon St, Colorado Springs, CO 80903 Phone: (719)-471-4429 http://springsequality.org/
Suicide Prevention Suicide Prevention Partnership Pikes Peak Region 704 N Tejon St., Colorado Springs, CO 80903 Phone: (719)-573-7477 Hotline: (719)-596-5433 Another Life Foundation of Colorado Springs 801 N. Weber St., Suite 204 Colorado Springs, CO 80903 Phone: 719-216-7238 or 1-800-273-TALK
APA Psychologist Locator Website https://locator.apa.org/

APPENDIX F

Recruitment Postcard

Volunteers needed!!!

- **Are you 18 to 21 years of age?**
- **Are you interested in participating in a research study about teen sexting behavior?**
- **Your participation in the study is completely voluntary**
- **All participants will receive a $25 Amazon Gift Card**
- **To find out more about how you can participate in this study contact: Dawn Murphy (I am a Texas Woman's University Student in the Nursing Science PhD program) Cell 972-742-9438 or Email DMurphy5@twu.edu**
- **Students who are currently enrolled in the nursing program are not eligible to participate in the study.**

**Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, electronic meetings, and Internet transactions*

APPENDIX G

Study Informational Brochure

Why your voice matters…

Your experiences will provide an "insider's view" to help alleviate some of the misunderstanding surrounding sexting behavior and its relationship to adolescent mental health.

Your voice and perspective may help to impact interventions that will assist healthcare providers and counselors to guide adolescents in decision making surrounding sexting behavior and mitigate any harmful effects of sexting.

The experiences you share will help to facilitate the creation of a theory that will help explain the relationship between sexting behavior and adolescent mental health.

How to Contact Me:
Dawn Marie Murphy MS RN CPNP
Email: DMurphy5@twu.edu
Cell Phone: 972-742-9438

Teen Sexting: So What? Teens' Experiences with Sexting: A Grounded Theory Study

About Me...

I have been a Pediatric Nurse for 26 years and a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner for almost 20 years

I also teach nursing at Pikes Peak Community College and enjoy working with young adults who share my passion for nursing

My passion is working with adolescents in healthcare and community settings

As a pediatric nurse and as an aunt to 3 adolescents, I have seen how social media and sexting behavior has affected adolescents

Teen Sexting Facts

Sexting blends the words *sex* and *texting* and generally refers to the sending, receiving, and forwarding of sexually explicit messages, images, photos, or videos via communication technologies; Sexting embodies a wide range of practices, motivations, attitudes, and behaviors.

Teens use a different language to describe their sexting behavior such as 'pictures,' 'pics,' 'videos,' and 'selfies,' suggesting that they may have a different understanding of sexting altogether.

Some sexting behavior has presented particular threats to adolescent mental health.

While there have been several anecdotal incidents demonstrating a relationship between sexting and adolescent mental health, the scientific literature is less clear. Sexting behavior occurs within a very complex social context of gender, age, and relationships.

About the Study: How Can You Participate?

You must be 18-21 years of age; have knowledge of the concept of sexting and have participated in sexting yourself or know friends or peers who have participated in sexting; and be able to read, write, and speak English.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

You may ask questions anytime!

Before the study, you will sign and be given a copy of a written informed consent explaining all study procedures and your participation.

You will be asked to participate in a 30-60 minute interview where you will be asked to reflect on your own or your friends' and peers' sexting experiences within the past 5-7 years.

You may be invited to participate in a second interview, which will take approximately 30-60 minutes, to clarify something that you mentioned in your first interview.

All interviews will take place in a private location at a convenient time for you.

All participants will be invited to review a model about the theory.