

RESEARCH CONNECTION

The joy of sexting: Mapping the significance of the first time in the virtual world

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Why this research is important

This study seeks to address the paucity of scholarship about the social and semiotic dimensions of digital affordances. It also seeks to understand how relative gendered value is generated through social media images, narratives, and practices. *The Joy of Sexting*, therefore, provides a cultural and gendered analysis of normative and non-normative experiences of sexting in the digital realm. Moreover, this project aims to provide a nuanced understanding of sexting in the virtual landscape by drawing on sexual cultural history.

How the research was conducted

Over the course of two years through a Research Manitoba funded project, this project had four goals:

What you need to know

Do you sext? According to one survey, 85% of people have admitted to sexting. If this is true, how do we make sense of sexting? We seek to understand the complexity of sexting, which is to say, we wish to explore the ways in which sexting is understood, how it functions in the world, and how it is rewriting how we think and understand sexual experiences in the digital age. While sexting can be dangerous, just as sex can be dangerous, this is not necessary or essential to the phenomenon. To date, we have conducted a literary review of sexting that shows while the discourse has been extensive, it has primarily focused on the harm and crisis narratives. We seek to study sexting as a historical phenomenon, that is, we argue that sexting is just another part of sexual cultural history, just as streaking, skinny-dipping, and the Polaroid camera were parts of sexual cultural history of decades past.

1. Utilize the previously established literature review on sexting and expand it in order to find its correlations with virginity in the virtual world.

2. Develop new theoretical models to consider virginity and the digital realm, especially with respect to intimacy and sexuality.
3. Provide analysis based on this new model by considering cultural texts and experiences of sexting.
4. Consider the importance of the first-time in the digital realm to ongoing discussions of disclosure culture, toxic or hegemonic masculinity, and sexuality.

To respond to these goals, we have undertaken an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary literature review, which has allowed us to determine gaps and absences while also understanding the contours of the debates.

What the researchers found

The medium really is the message. Sexting isn't new, but how it is done might be. Flirtatious letters have been sent for centuries, millennia; photographs and drawings are part of an ongoing sexual history.

What is new is the ease with which we are able to distribute these materials, which has allowed for a panic discourse, for example, sexual material in the virtual world is archived to create potential problems for individuals in the future. With a large portion of sexuality occurring virtually today, we have found that a new vocabulary and discourse can be looked at in regard to virginity, sexuality, relationships, and gender identities.

How this research can be used

This project will be of value to policymakers, particularly various levels of government, as they debate and think through the problem of sexting and aligned concerns such as, for instance, revenge

pornography. Additionally, this project will be of value to educators in the formal settings of secondary education, who are often confronted by the realities of sexting. The importance of discussing and finding all aspects of our virtual sexual experiences is valued for a better understanding of our identities and how we define our sexualities and relationships in our world today.

About the researchers

Throughout this project, there has been a team of researchers led by two main authors, Dr. Eftihia Mihelakis and Dr. Jonathan A. Allan. Research Assistants Kayla Mahoney, Valeria Viteri, and Brett Chrest were also involved throughout the project to compile data, conduct literary reviews, track and document relevant recent popular culture, as well as assist in various publications.

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Keywords

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