Research on Sexting among Young People: Where do We Go from Here?

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Presentation format

Part 1: Overview of sexting literature & methodological constraints
*Moses Okumu*

Part 2: Gendered & Sexualized Bullying & Cyber Bullying: Spotlighting Girls & Making Boys Invisible
*Faye Mishna*

Part 3: Youth Sexting Dating
*Matthew Johnson*
Part 1: Sexting Literature & Methodological Constraints

Moses Okumu

- Current definitions
- Review of systematic reviews
- Proposed framework for defining sexting
- Benefit, risk & harm model of sexting
- Suggestions for methodological improvement
Definitions

The definition of sexting is ambiguous
Studies Reviewed

14 peer reviewed articles
2 qualitative, 4 literature reviews, 2 metaanalyses & 6 systematic reviews
Primary studies from USA, Europe, Peru & Canada
Current Methodological Constraints

- Measures of sexting
  - Use of single measure

- Cross sectional data

- Limited use of theory
Proposed Framework for Defining Sexting
Risk-Harm Model of Sexting
Risk-harm model of Sexting

- Fun & Adventurous
- Adolescent Development
- Empowering
- Alternative to Sex
- Intimacy
- Relationship Satisfaction
- Private

- Sexual Risk Behaviors
- Drug Use
- Alcohol Use
- Conduct Disorder
- Academic Failure
- Emotional & Psychological Well Being

- Legal Problems
- Sexual Violence
- Reputation Damaging
- Revenge Porn
- Cyber Bullying
- Suicide
- Public
Methodological Improvements

- Develop & test a fallibility scale of sexting
- Systems thinking approach to sexting research
- Longitudinal studies
- Use of diverse populations
- Qualitative studies to develop theory
Part 2: Gendered & Sexualized Bullying & Cyber Bullying: Spotlighting Girls & Making Boys Invisible

Faye Mishna
Gendered & Sexualized Bullying

- Increasing evidence of contradictory messages girls receive in socializing & self-presenting online

- Have to walk a fine line between performing gendered expectations of beauty & hypersexuality while not appearing to be a “slut” or “trying too hard”

- Limited research on children's experiences of gendered & sexualized bullying
  - Partly because of assumption that behaviors emerge primarily during adolescence

- Our findings suggest that sexualized bullying of girls begins quite young
The Double Bind

- Media-driven environment pressures girls to be popular, party, & be sexually attractive
- Pressure to self-objectify in self-presentation online
- Pressure to send explicit images of themselves to boys & men
- Culture where girls harshly judge other girls' online behaviour & self-presentation
- Rejected &/or punished for being “slutty”
- Criticized for “trying too hard” to appear cool/popular
- Blamed for their own sexual harassment online
- Criticized for taking & /or sharing explicit images of self; blamed for images being shared without their consent
- Criticized for wearing either too much or too little clothing
“…Once, at school, I saw someone calling each other sluts, like looking like sluts … it's kind of mean to call someone a slut because it’s actually disgusting. But I don't really know what it means, but it just means something to do with ugly” (G4 girl)
Current Study & Sample

- 3 year longitudinal study
  - Stratified random sample of schools
  - Low, medium & high need schools based on external challenges to student achievement

- 19 schools
  - Students (654)
  - Parents (250)
  - Teachers (98)
Current Study & Sample

- 4th Grade: 24.0%
- 7th Grade: 36.2%
- 10th Grade: 39.8%

Interviews
- Year 1: 35 Girls, 21 Boys
- Year 3: 22 Girls, 9 Boys
Definitions

- **Gendered bullying/cyber bullying**
  - Bullying behavior that operates to maintain & assert dominant cisgender norms of heterosexual masculinity & femininity

- **Sexualized bullying/cyber bullying**
  - Bullying of a sexual nature that results in unwanted sexual attention that makes the recipient feel humiliated, uncomfortable, or, demeaned

- Also labelled *harassment, aggression, discrimination*
Interview Analyses: Themes

- Invisibility
  - Gendered stereotyping
  - Spotlighting girls
  - Gender surveillance & policing
Gendered Stereotyping

- Aligns with stereotypes that girls & boys perpetrate & experience bullying & cyber bullying in distinct ways
- Described boys as engaging in bullying through physical means – e.g., punching & “beating up” others
- Described girls as bullying through relational means – e.g., gossiping & rumor spreading
Gendered Stereotyping

• Participants emphasized these stereotypes even when their own descriptions did not fit
  • e.g., a participant who described a boy using ‘guilt trips’ to coerce a girl into sharing intimate images, depicted boys as bullying physically

• Participants rarely mentioned or acknowledged the behaviors or existence of the perpetrators, most of whom were boys (according to the students)

• Images described as ‘getting out’ or ‘ending up on the internet’
Gendered Stereotyping

“Mostly for girls it’s usually psychological because girls really overthink things & we’re really up in our minds & we’re all like, ‘what exactly did you mean?’ & we have to figure out what the exact word meant. And you always think about what it is. Guys just like have no brains. They just beat people up” (G7 girl)
Spotlighting Girls

- Participants often framed gendered & sexualized bullying & cyber bullying as the victim’s fault – who were mostly girls
  - Victimized girls were often described as making a ‘dumb,’ ‘stupid,’ or ‘sad’ mistake
  - “Girls’ creation of intimate images was considered risky
  - Non-consensual distribution of these images often viewed as natural consequence
Spotlighting Girls

“It happens to girls the most where a girl decides to make a dumb mistake & sends a picture, like a nude picture, to someone” (G10 girl)

“A lot of girls like, especially when it comes to boys, they want to please boys by sending them pictures & saying certain things that end up getting on the internet & so many people see it” (G10 girl)
Gender Surveillance & Policing

- Gendered & sexualized bullying & cyber bullying often involved surveillance of girls’ & boys’ gender performance, which we labeled **gender surveillance & policing**

- Reinforcing traditional & stereotypical gender norms in others by rewarding behaviours & actions that conform to norms & stereotypes & chastising behaviors & actions that defy such norms & stereotypes
Gender Surveillance & Policing

• “I don’t think many guys are [cyberbullied] unless it’s like they’re gay or they’ve done this or that, but for girls, it’s mostly about appearance & it’s mostly trying to get inside their brain & trying to get them to think like that. So you say you’re fat, you’re ugly, you’re stupid. I get that a lot because I’m blonde, so it’s always like, you’re really stupid because you’re blonde” (G4 girl)
Invisibility

• The theme of invisibility spanned all sub-themes:
  • Invisibility of boys as perpetrators
  • Invisibility of gender norms & stereotypes

• Boys’ roles & even presence typically invisible. Participants used gender norms & stereotypes to discount, normalize, or justify boys’ behaviors

• Girls’ involvement, as victim, perpetrator or witness, often spotlighted, with participants holding girls responsible for boys’ behavior
Invisibility

- Girls’ victimization attributed to their poor judgment

- Narratives tended to focus on how girls’ behaviors should change, which often functioned to erase boys’ culpability & roles

- Even when boys & girls engaged in similar behaviors (e.g., sexual rumor spreading), the power of gender norms & stereotypes led participants to discount boys’ behaviors while problematizing these same behaviors by girls

- Influence of gender norms & stereotypes used to make sense of gendered & sexualized bullying & cyber bullying, was typically invisible to the participants
Invisibility of Boys

“One thing on Twitter is that it’s mainly pictures & mostly happens to girls. They have a picture that yeah, they shouldn’t have sent out because it could be a nude picture or it could just be a picture that they don’t like. And I’ve seen it get on Twitter & in like less than 20 minutes, everyone is laughing at them, everyone is talking about it, everyone is re-tweeting it…I think that girls do get targeted more & victimized more just because it’s way more easy, because a lot of girls are naïve” (G10 girl)
Invisibility of Gender Norms

“They don’t want to show that they’re weak because guys tend to be, they think they’re very strong, kind of thing, so I don’t think they would show it as much. Girls kind of like the vulnerable look, so I think girls tell, more than guys do” (G7 girl)
Discussion

- Consistent with other research, our findings suggest gendered & sexualized bullying & cyber bullying are
  - Commonplace in the lives of children & youth
  - Normalized & trivialized by peers & adults
- As young as 4th grade, boys’ actions & even presence often invisible in participant accounts
- Girls disproportionately experience gendered & sexualized bullying & cyber bullying, for which they are blamed
Discussion

- Participants reported instances in which adults did not respond even when sought out.

- School personnel must be trained to recognize and respond to gendered and sexualized bullying and cyber bullying, including behaviors considered ‘benign’ – in ways that validate girls’ experiences.

- Without tools to unpack these social forces, girls may be more likely to blame themselves and each other for failing to achieve impossible standards of appearance and behavior.

- Because boys’ behaviour is often invisible or normalized, interventions must address boys’ understanding of their responsibility in these contexts.
Implications

“[m]y friend got called a slut & a stripper in front of 2 teachers & they did nothing, they just looked at the person & looked away & they heard everything. She went to the washroom crying & got in trouble because she went to the washroom” (G7 girl)
Implications

“It’s from when we were little because those Barbie dolls are super skinny. We wanted to have blonde hair, blue eyes, & be like Barbie or something like that. I think it’s just how maybe we were raised, & how we look at things. We tend to be very submissive & dependent” (G4 girl)
Conclusion

- Adults must recognize & challenge the social norms, stereotypes, & discourses that inform their responses to bullying & cyber bullying.

- Adult acceptance of such behaviors may contribute to a culture that perpetuates gender inequality & promotes gendered violence & sexualized aggression.

- Interventions must challenge these norms & discourses that privilege boys & foster a culture in which girls are sexualized & objectified.
Conclusion

- Findings seem related to what some scholars have termed "responsibilization" of girls.

- Discrepancy about who is viewed as responsible, consistent with social norms & narratives that position girls & women as responsible for anticipating & managing boys’ & men’s sexual desires.

- Thus as blameworthy when these desires manifest in sexual violence, harassment, or abuse.
Conclusion

- While not a focus in our analysis, important to recognize that gender inequality, sexualized violence, & pervasive gender norms can have detrimental effects on boys, men, & sexual & gender non-conforming young people
- Sexual & gender non-conforming young people commonly targets of bullying
- Both in ours & other research, boys more likely to experience homophobic bullying & bullying related to norms re: masculinity
Part 3: Youth Sexting Data

Matthew Johnson
## How Common is Sexting?
(Students with Cellphones, Grades 7-11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Percentage Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever sent a sext of yourself to someone?</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you answered Yes, did they forward it to anyone else?</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has someone ever sent you a sexy, nude or partially nude photo (a sext)</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of themselves?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you answered Yes, did you forward it to anyone else?</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever received a sext that was forwarded to you by someone else?</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rate of most sexting behaviours rises with age
Who Sends & Shares Sexts?

![Bar chart showing the percentage of boys and girls who send or share sexts.

- 9% of boys and 8% of girls have sent a sext of themselves to someone.
- 26% of boys and 20% of girls have sent a sext of themselves that was forwarded by the recipient.
- 32% of boys have received a sext created by someone else, while 17% of girls have.
- 16% of boys have forwarded a sender-created sext, compared to 12% of girls.
- 28% of boys have received a sext forwarded by someone else, compared to 14% of girls.]
Students with household rules about specific activities that adults consider risky are less likely to engage in those activities than students without rules...
... including around cyberbullying...
... but there’s evidence of a “moral blind spot” around sexting:
Youth Sexting Interventions
Main themes found in 10 interventions:

- Anti-sharing: 5
- Focus on boys and girls: 4
- Focus only on girls: 6
- Safer sexting: 1
- Legal risks: 9
- Abstinence: 10
Review of Existing Sexting Interventions

Victim-blaming: “Megan’s Story”
Review of Existing Sexting Interventions

Minimizing responsibility of sharer: “Exposed” and “Coatless”
Priorities for Intervention:

Social norming: Communicate *low rates of sexting and sharing*
Priorities for Intervention:

Supporting victims: Provide tools for mitigating harm from shared photos
Priorities for Intervention:

Correcting the blind spot: Challenge attitudes that blame victims and excuse sharers
Priorities for Interventions:

Correcting the blind spot: Challenge attitudes that blame victims and excuse sharers
The Way Forward...
Intervention Priorities Based on Upcoming Data:

Publicize low rates of non-consensual sharing

**How many people your age do you think share sexts?**

- None
- A small number
- Some
- Half
- Most
- All or nearly all

**How many times have you electronically shared a sext you had asked for?**

- Never
- 1-3 times
- 4-6 times
- 7-9 times
- 10 times or more

* (asked only of those who had received solicited sexts)
Intervention Priorities Based on Upcoming Data:

Build on existing social norms around privacy

![Bar chart showing survey responses to different scenarios involving consent for sharing personal pictures and sexts.](chart.png)

- **Okay for a friend to post a good picture of you without consent**
- **Okay for a friend to post a bad or embarrassing picture of you without consent**
- **Okay for a friend to share a sext of you without consent**
Intervention Priorities Based on Upcoming Data:

Challenge victim-blaming attitudes

It’s the original sender’s fault if a sext gets shared around. They shouldn’t send sexts if they don’t understand the risks.
Intervention Priorities Based on Upcoming Data:

Confront gender roles
References


