

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

SEXTING:  
A GENDERED RESPONSE  
TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF TECHNOLOGY  
IN EVERYDAY LIFE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Master of Arts  
in Sociology

By

Athanasia Medenas

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The thesis of Athanasia Medenas is approved:

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James Ballard, Ph.D.

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Date

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James Elias, Ph.D.

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Date

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Vickie Jensen, Ph.D., Chair

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Date

California State University, Northridge

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents, Christos and Mary Smyrniotis, and my grandmother, Athanasia Medenas, for continually motivating me to study and follow my dreams.

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## ABSTRACT

### SEXTING: A GENDERED RESPONSE TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF TECHNOLOGY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

By

Athanasia Medenas

Master of Arts in Sociology

This paper will address the electronic exchange of sexually explicit material, otherwise known as sexting. Specifically, addressing the dynamics of sexting as a social interaction and the affect it has on intimate relationships. A sample of twenty-three participants between the ages of eighteen to twenty-one was interviewed for this study. Building on a Dramaturgical perspective and the concept of “doing gender,” this study builds on individuals managing their self-presentations in ways that both reproduce and sustain societal norms of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Using a grounded theory approach, this study examines how women and men discuss their public presentations and gender performances in the context of a frontstage performance. The findings from this study can better illuminate how men and women actively negotiate doing gender when they are sexting.

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Recently, the social phenomenon known as sexting, considered to be the exchange of sexually explicit material via cell phones, has grasped the attention of researchers (Judge 2011; Leary 2008 and 2010; Lounsbury, Mitchell, and Finklehor 2011; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, and Harvey 2012; Wysocki and Childers 2011). The turn of the century saw an exponential advancement in telecommunications, which created a new stage for social interactions. The way people communicate using cell phones moderated how they interact with each other, particularly in communicating desires to pursue and maintain intimate relationships (Wysocki and Childers 2011). The modernity of sexting has given individuals the opportunities to develop social interaction through using cell phones, which have changed the way interpersonal relationships develop the past 20 years (Wysocki and Childers 2011). Since the recent emergence of sexting, little empirical research has been conducted on this social interaction (Drouin and Landgraff 2012; Ferguson 2010; Lenhart 2009; Ringrose et al. 2012; Weisskirch and Delevi 2011; and Wysocki and Childers 2011). With the lack of empirical research on sexting, this research understood sexting as the interplay of technology, communication and sexuality. Using text messaging to communicate a message to another whether it is a simple greeting or a form of sexual expression, cell phones enable social interaction between sender and receiver. People learned how to talk, send text, picture, or video messages with their cell phone and have become an instrument for sexual expression.

Using a Dramaturgy perspective as a frame for sexting as a social interaction for performers, the presentation of self guides the communication of sexual desires between sexters. The sexters performed a presentation of their social self in their relationships by

using their cell phones. Text messaging on their phones enabled a front and back stage for performance as the message was the presentation of self and the ability to compose the message was the back stage. The front stage built the foundation for sexting to occur between a sender and receiver. By understanding the presentation of self and the stages used for the performance of social interaction, sexting incorporated the use of technology, communication and sexuality in everyday life.

As there is little sociological research on sexting, the investigation of this form of communicating sexual desires using cell phones pulled from various disciplines to develop a complete frame of its complexity. By using text messaging to communicate their sexuality, the sexter participates in a social interaction. Research on the use of technology to communicate sexuality has looked at how people use the Internet as a means to express their cybersexuality (Bright 1992; Döring 2009; Waskul 2004). The research done for this paper pulled from using text messaging as a means of communication and the use of expressing sexuality in the cyber world.

The research done for this study looked to identify the process of sexting as a social interaction. Specifically focusing on sexting in an intimate relationship, the research focused on the presentation of sexual interests and desires through text messaging. How do individuals see sexting? How do individuals use sex and technology in sexting? What is the nature of the images sent and/or received in an intimate relationship? Utilizing text messages as a tool to portray a person's sexuality as a social interaction, this research study aimed to research sexting and what it looks like.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Little research has been done on the social interaction known as sexting. Communicating sexual needs and desires via text messaging, literature was pulled from various aspects of the social interaction. From the introduction of private telephones to the emergence of the Internet, social interactions have found ways to use these developments for social purposes, particularly communicating sexual interests. By incorporating new technologies into their lives, people learned to send text, picture, or video messages with their cell phone, which have become an instrument for sexual expression. More specifically, the use of text messaging expanded people's communication techniques due to its convenience and, most notably, sexting has gained popularity amongst the youth (Brown, Keller, and Stern 2009; and Lenhart 2009). Text messaging communicates a message from a sender to a receiver whether it is a simple greeting or a form of sexual expression; cell phones are used as a form of social interaction between people, particularly in an intimate relationship. This literature review will discuss how people have incorporated text messaging to communicate, using technology to be sexually expressive, doing gender and the presentation of self in the frontstage.

### Using Technology to Communicate

With the advancement of technology, particularly in telecommunications, past research has shown that these advancements are used as tools for social interactions (Jin and Pena 2010; Crystal 2008; Faulkner and Culwin 2005; Ramirez and Broneck 2009). The higher the usage of technology as a means of communication, most notably with cellphones and text messaging, the more comfortable people feel using these features for

social interaction (Faulkner and Culwin 2005; Pierce 2009). With the development of the text message, and the social interactions that occur within this media, different studies have shown how people incorporate its usage in everyday life (Faulkner and Culwin 2005; Pierce 2009; Tutt 2005; Valentine and Holloway 2002).

A study by Faulkner and Culwin (2005) found that some people use text messaging as their preferred means of communication and that a wide range of people use this style of messaging for all types of social interactions and activities. In 2003, the total figures for text messaging was at 20.5 billion text messages being sent. In that same year, about 44% of the mobile device users were between the ages of 5 – 24 years old (Faulkner and Culwin 2005). Previous studies found that there were gender and age difference between preferred methods of communication, in which text messaging was favored amongst women and the youth (Baron 2004; Jin and Pena 2010; Davie et. al 2004; Faulkner and Culwin 2005; Harrison and Gilmore 2012; Tossell, Kortum, Shepard, Barg-Walkow, Rahmati, and Zhong 2012). Being comfortable with text messaging, the youth have incorporated its use in everyday social interaction between parents, friends, partners, teachers, etc.

*Comfort With Text Messaging.* With the advancement of cell phones and the ability to send and receive text messages, the transformation of human communication found its way into the hands of the population (Crystal 2008; Faulkner and Culwin 2005; Pierce 2009). Text messaging established a convenient mode of communication, intertwining email-type messages with a device that was readily accessible throughout the day, the cell phone. With the overall success of cell phones and, to a larger extent, text messaging and picture messaging, the youth and young adults were able to

communicate with one another on personal levels in which they felt comfortable with. Grinter and Eldridge (2001, 2003) commented on how the success of text messaging can be viewed as an individual's desire to unite others into their intimate circle of communication through the security and privacy that they feel with this feature. Similarly, Pierce (2009) found that text messaging could provide a safe opportunity for teens that experience high anxiety when talking in person with their peers to express themselves.

These findings were consistent with the research done by Grinter and Eldridge (2003) that discovered teens have a high need to feel connected with their peers and to maintain their identity. Teens used text messaging as a means to satisfy their needs of staying connected with their peers. Additionally, text messaging was a favored method of communication by teens to close friends, partners, or loved ones concerning personal nature, and helped establish identities while simultaneously offering privacy from parental ears. The privacy that teens felt with text messaging provided a comfort zone for them to interact with others on a more personal level, which they felt phone calls did not give them the same privacy (Faulkner and Culwin 2005). Studying how adolescents, teens, and young adults interacted with others via text messaging led previous studies to find that there were differences in the way these age groups utilize this social media to communicate with each other.

*Expressing Emotion Using Text Messaging.* Studies showed that using text messaging on a regular basis induced the use of a set of rituals, along with a style of language that use punctuation, abbreviations and emoticons (Crystal 2008; Derks, Bos, and von Grumbkow 2007; Ling and Baron 2007; Provine, Spencer, and Mandell 2007;

Tossell et al. 2012). Text messaging integrated new writing techniques to communicate specific emotions. Emoticons, which are various combinations of text characters to form a facial expression, represent and depict certain emotions. Using text messaging as a way to communicate on a daily basis, development the conversation that could parallel that of face-to-face conversation. As the emotional cues in face-to-face conversation afford its acceptance between speaker and listener, emoticons in text messaging give the sender and receiver that same acceptance of the social interaction. Although, the studies on the use of language in text messaging found punctuation, abbreviations and emoticons as a relatively weak analysis of the meaning they provide as social discourse (Ling and Baron 2007; Tossel et al. 2012).

*Gender Differences in Text Messaging.* Throughout numerous academic and research fields there have been studies that show the use of technology differ by gender (Davie, Panting, and Charlton 2004; Faulkner and Culwin 2005). With mobile communication increasing everyday, the different uses of text messaging by men and women have been considered by the quantity of use, use of language and preference of communication style.

Women preferred to use text messaging and the research showed that more men have never sent messages and women were more active at the higher levels of both sending and receiving. Faulkner and Culwin (2005) also found that the gross text messaging activity, including both sending and receiving messages, was categorized by gender, where women were slightly more active than men. With women averaging approximately 6.3 messages per day and men 4.8, these findings are also consistent with other studies that show women are more active in their use of all communication tools

(Faulkner and Culwin 2005). Men viewed text messaging more as a business tool and women viewed it as an additional means for extending their responsibility and care for loved ones. Women had higher levels of both sending and receiving text message. Women who have more communicative and conversational type relationships would build and maintain these connections by communicating with text messaging (Faulkner Culwin 2005; Grinter and Eldridge 2003).

Research done on cell phone usage found that women used more emoticons and men used a diverse set of emoticons in their texts to communicate emotion (Tossell et al. 2012). Women were able to formulate and process their conversations by typing their conversation through a text message. Conversations done by women through text messaging were used as a tool for facilitating social interaction and to create a visual conversation. Men used text messaging to conveying information and therefore would rather talk on the phone in order to communicate the business they need to discuss and get straight to the point (Baron 2004; Tossell et al. 2012).

There was an expectation within the culture that people carry their cell phones with them at all times. A study found that 70% of women kept their phones powered on all the time and 50% of men turned their phones off at night (Davie et. al 2004). This showed how women stay connected to their interpersonal life throughout a 24 hour period, where as by turning off their cell phones men showed that their interpersonal communication is “on” only during the times that they choose. Women showed their everyday commitment to their identity and interpersonal relationships with those they communicated with. Men showed that telecommunication was not important to keep with

them at all hours of the day, which showed they have less of a need to stay in connection with their cell phone (Faulkner and Culwin 2005; Davie et al. 2004).

*Text Messaging in Intimate Relationships.* Past studies have shown that women and college students were more likely to text friends about problems and have more communicative and conversational type relationships using text messaging as a means to build and maintain their relationships (Jin and Pena 2010; Faulkner Culwin 2005; Harrison and Gilmore 2012). The participants found text messaging was important to stay connected with friends, loved ones and romantic partners, due to the convenience that text messaging provided. Being able to stay connected with their partner offered a way for the participants, especially those that were in college and women, to use text messaging everyday (Jin and Pena 2010; Harrison and Gilmore 2012). Within romantic relationships, text messaging was associated with positive relationship qualities and building stronger bonds between the partners.

### Expressing Sexuality

The advancement of technology has created a virtual space for sexuality to be expressed and performed (Burns 1997). Using the Internet as a virtual space for communication and sexual expression, the development of a stage for social interaction outside of traditional non-verbal and verbal expression, created virtual sexuality (Bright 1992; Döring 2009; Waskul 2004). Research on pornography, cybersexuality, gender, and relationships, largely composed by images, systems of meaning, and forms of interaction, were used in everyday social interaction (Waskul 2004).

*Producing Amateur Pornography in Virtual Space.* Research on the process and parties involved with the production of sexually explicit material for public eye in virtual

space was created either professionally by the “adult industry” or by amateur releases, people that produced material independently (Döring 2009; Grove, Gillespie, Royce, and Lever 2009; Maddox, Rhoades, and Markman 2009). Few professional porno actors had control of the production and presentation of their sexual expression, contrasting to the multiple amateur releases everyday of self-produced pornography that contain authentic sexual encounters. Cyberpornography included the portrayal of a myriad of sexual activity and the Internet was used to transmit the sexually arousing and stimulating photos, video clips and films, comics and text. One category of pornography expressed in virtual space was erotica/softcore pornography, which depicted the positive portrayals of naked individuals, simulated sex and affection, with a power balance between sexual encounters (Döring 2009; Maddox et al. 2009). With the expansion of cyberpornography formerly excluded groups have the availability of sexually explicit material through the Internet. Presently, the few studies done on cyberpornography have limited conclusions on providing accounts of the differential processes and parties with the involvement of the production and distribution of erotica/softcore pornography (Döring 2009; Maddox et al. 2009).

*Displaying Cybersexuality on the Internet.* Performing cybersexuality through different forms of technology, such as personal computers and the Internet, research has examined the function of expressing sexuality in a virtual space (Carroll et al. 2008; Grov et al. 2009; Manning 2006). Bright (1992) discussed that people get excited about new technologies and the availability to express their sexual identities in the virtual world. The Internet brought about dramatic changes in the amount and variety of sexual information and/or sexual scripts that were available to people. Research has found the

Internet allowed for human sexuality to explore new forms of communication and expression (Bright 1992; Ramirez and Broneck 2009; Ross 2005). The Internet was a place of emergent cybersexuality that aroused and simulated sex, because it was a sexual space midway between fantasy and action (Ross 2005). The Internet enabled people to interact with others and perform sexual fantasies that they would not otherwise perform in real life.

Cybersexuality built a foundation for social interaction to explore sexual desires and expressions that people may not have felt comfortable exploring in reality (Döring 2009; Grov et al. 2009; Ross 2005). In the area of amateur pornography, for example, the Internet has facilitated the development of production, distribution, and reception. Pornography on the Internet established a stage where sexual experiences were presented with minimal control and regulation. Sexual desires and scripts that were once hidden behind closed doors have become readily available for the public eye through amateur pornography displayed on the Internet (Bright 1992; Döring 2009; Maddox et al. 2009; Wysocki and Childers 2011).

As cybersexuality expanded the possibilities of real life sexual fantasies to be encountered in the virtual world the underlying motivations for expressing cybersexuality were exploration (Bright 1992; Döring 2009; Ross 2005). The capability of viewing graphics on a screen created an element in cybersexuality that was not available with written text as people were able to visually express their fantasies in the virtual world through producing amateur pornography. Actions in the virtual world released inhibitions that have allowed people to express fantasies that may not partake in their everyday life.

Sexual encounters have also been expanded by cybersexuality that are a mediated form of sexuality often characterized by sexual scripts.

*Motivations to Watch Cyberpornography Differed by Gender.* Men and women were found to experience cybersexual preferences on the Internet differently (Bright 1992; Burns 1997; Döring 2009; Maddox et al. 2009; Ross 2005; Wysocki and Childers 2011). Maddox et al. (2009) established that offline and cyberpornography was used by a higher frequency of men than women. Men were more interested than women in oral sex, anal sex, and using pornography on the Internet as motivations to induce sexual arousal and masturbation. Men were significantly more likely to use cyberpornography for masturbation than women (Stack, Wasserman, and Kern 2004). Heterosexual women were found to have very little motivation in using the Internet to watch pornography and were more likely to experience sexual harassment in the virtual world. Women who viewed Internet pornography were reported to feel less desirable to their partner and that they had to compete with the “fantasy women” featured in pornography, both sexually and in terms of physical appearance (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Bridges, Bergner, and Hesson-McInnis 2003; Grov et al. 2009; Manning, 2006).

*Reception of Pornography and Intimate Relationships.* Although men and women express cybersexuality differently, Manning (2006) discussed that couples that viewed pornography together may be a means to become closer intimately in their relationship. Similarly to offline pornography, individuals primarily experience cyberpornography in moments of solitude, but some research has explored how couples in committed relationships used pornography to enhance their sexual experience together (Döring 2009; Grov et al. 2009). Some of the main reasons found for the interest and/or use of

pornography were: curiosity, sexual stimulation, masturbation, and enhancement of one's sex life with their partner. Research found that pornography was perceived as benefiting romantic relationships most when it was experienced with a partner, as a means of enhancing and expanding a couple's sexual repertoire or as a means of fostering sexual communication (Döring 2009; Manning 2006). Interacting and engaging with adult websites and other online venues alongside respective partners, may help defuse some of the discomfort when trying to articulate their sexual desires to each other. As a means to better convey sexual desires and help better understand fantasies, sexual variety depicted online provided a good source of reference for the couples. Although, some research indicated that prolonged exposure to pornography may be related to doubts about the value of marriage and could even lead to higher endorsement of non-monogamous relationships. Generally, the reception of pornography in intimate relationships when viewed together was found to positively enhance the couple's sexual experience together (Döring 2009; Grov et al. 2009; Manning 2006).

#### Definitions of Sexting

Within the literature available on sexting, there were various definitions of sexting (Bowker and Sullivan 2012; Judge 2011; Leary 2010; Levick and Moon 2010; McLaughlin 2010; Svantesson 2011; Wolak and Finkelhor 2011). Leary (2010) described sexting as an umbrella term due to the various social aspects that sexting falls into.

Sexting was a broad concept that was defined slightly different throughout the literature.

*Legal Definition.* According to federal law any involvement of a minor in regard to a nude or semi-nude photograph is defined as child pornography. The act of sexting violated the criminal statute due to the “definition found in the federal child pornography

statute, 18 U.S.C. § 2256<sup>1</sup>, (which) refers to illegal images with minors as those involving sexually explicit conduct” (Bowker and Sullivan 2010:28). In January 2009 a legal case of six Pennsylvania teens made its way into the headlines as one of the first sexting cases in the U.S. for manufacturing, disseminating and possessing child pornography (Brunker 2009).

*Media Generated a Moral Definition.* In 2009 the media started reporting sexting as it pertained to teens being prosecuted as sex offenders, according to criminal law (Arcabascio 2010; Stone 2011). Marker (2011) analyzed multiple articles on sexting in the media and found sexting was constructed as a moral panic. Media reports on the Pennsylvania teens and other teens across the country soon after became the advocating factors of sexting as a moral panic and negatively attributed characteristics of the social interaction. The different sexting incidents reported by the media on teens being prosecuted as sex offenders sensationalized sexting as a widespread problem growing amongst teens in the United States. Specifically reporting on the gender and age of the teens, the media positioned adolescents as having a high risk of sexting and being reprimanded (Albury, Funnell, and Noonan 2010; Kierkus and Hilinski 2010). With the advertisement of sexting through the media as a moral panic, public opinion of sexting marginalized it as a negative social interaction (Marker 2011).

Numerous reports on the many different cases that involved teens and their sentencing in juvenile court for sexting have been conducted by the FBI, *Cosmogirl.com*, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, and other organizations about the definition and frequency of sexting amongst teens (Bowker and Sullivan 2010; Stone 2011; Wyoscki and Childers 2011). While the activity associated

with juvenile sexting technically violates criminal statutes, Bowker and Sullivan (2010) encouraged prosecutors to use discretion, vested with their positions, to confront the activity appropriately. According to Marker (2011), the negative portrayal of sexting by the media created a misunderstanding that sexting is an act that is morally wrong to do. While little academic research has been done on sexting, the media has given attention to teens involved only in regards to the images that were produced and prosecuted as child pornography, but the term sexting seemed to have a broad spectrum of behaviors (Stone 2011; Wysocki and Childers 2011).

*Research Definition.* There have been online studies that have been conducted about the description of sexting (Wolak and Finkelhor 2011; Wysocki and Childers 2011). An empirical definition of sexting was based on research done by the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center, which chose "youth-produced sexual images" to be a more precise definition of what the media coined as sexting. The focus of the survey looked at the problematic form of sexting being the images created by minors that were constituted as child pornography according to the media and to the recent criminal cases (Judge 2011; Wolak and Finkelhor 2011).

There were two typologies of sexting that were concluded in Wolak and Finkelhor's (2011) research as aggravated and experimental. The study identified aggravated sexting as child pornography by the intended usage and reckless misuse of sexually explicit material via cell phones by teens. The second typology identified the use of sexting as being experimental for the teens involved. Experimental sexting included pictures of the sender who sent the image to an established partner in a relationship, to a potential romantic partner, or purely for attention. The typology of sexting being

experimental provided the first empirical framework of the functions, motives, meanings and implications of sexting.

*Definitions of Sexters.* Teens and young adults who received sexually suggestive images were more likely to say that they used their cell phone to entertain themselves when bored (Lenhart 2009; Wysocki and Childers 2011). Lenhart (2009) found teens outlined general scenarios in which sexually suggestive images were shared or forwarded to their romantic partners and peers through text messaging. The participants were aware of the lack of control over where the pictures would end up after sending the image to a partner. Sexually suggestive images sent via text messaging to romantic partners have become a form of relationship currency. Teens sent sexually suggestive images as a way to feel sexy (Sex and Tech 2008). Sending sexual images, the teens and young adults used sexting as a way to know that the recipient would be sexually aroused by the image.

#### Demographics and Sexting

Little empirical research has been conducted in relation to sexting and the social interaction that takes place between sexters (Drouin and Landgraff 2012; Ferguson 2010; Harrison and Gilmore 2012; Lenhart 2009; Ringrose et al. 2012; Weisskirch and Delevi 2011; and Wysocki and Childers 2011). Some academic research on sexting has focused on adolescent and young adults, gender differences, relationship status, and attitudes while lacking evidence of sexuality, race and ethnicity (Brown et al. 2009). Although, being a relatively new social phenomenon there have been some findings done by different organizations and academic fields in pursuit to gain a better understanding of sexting, specifically the youth and young adults. Little research has yet reported the sexual outcomes of sexting, the spectrum included forms of attention seeking behaviors

to the portrayals of the transmitted images, which varied considerably from conventional erotica/softcore representations to sexually explicit images.

*Teens and Young Adults.* Research has focused on specific age groups and their sexting behaviors, which found teens and young adults to have high affiliations and connections to sexting (Brown et al. 2009; Lenhart 2009; Wyoscki and Childers 2011). The development of technology throughout a teen's life has had an affect on how often they used sexting and the level of comfort they had with their cellphones and text messaging (Cox Communications 2009; Ringrose et al. 2012; Sex and Tech 2008). Studies by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and 'Cosmogirl.com' found that 20 percent of teenagers (22 percent of girls and 18 percent of boys) sent nude or seminude images of themselves via multimedia message. These organizations surveyed teens and young adults with the goal to try to better understand the intersection between sex and technology. The proportion of teens and young adults that were sending sexually suggestive text and images were found to have emotional connections to the receiver, which gave them reason to sext.

Teen and young adult sexters included attention-seeking behavior, which was identified as form of high-tech flirting, bravery of being intoxicated to sext and the exchange of transmitted images, varied considerably from media depictions of sexting being merely sending sexually explicit images (Brown et al. 2009; Faulkner and Culwin 2005; Lenhart 2009; Stone 2011; and Wyoscki and Childers 2011). For teenagers to carry out flirting, text messaging provided privacy that phone calls did not give. Presenting sexual content in text messaging, teens used text messaging ways that reinforce their behaviors and identities to potential sexual partners. Wyoscki and Childers

(2011) explained that people have become more comfortable with text messaging and the younger generation has mastered it, which increased their experience with sexting.

*Gender Differences in Sexting.* Generally, the recent studies on sexting have found that there are gender differences between the motives, meanings and nature of sexting (Brown et al. 2009; Drouin and Landgraff 2012; Ferguson 2010; Harrison and Gilmore 2012; Lenhart 2009; Ringrose et al. 2012; Weisskirch and Delevi 2011; and Wysocki and Childers 2011). Women shared provocative or sexually explicit images of themselves more than men. Studies found that women answered that they felt pressure to send sexually suggestive messages or images. The women were either sending them to a boyfriend or someone that they had an interest in pursuing a relationship with. Wyoski and Childers (2011) found men less likely than women to have participated in sexting. Women reported higher incidents of phone sex and sending nude pictures of themselves through their cell phone.

*Relationships and Sexting.* Sexually explicit images were shared between romantic partners, in lieu of, as a prelude to, or as a part of sexual activity or sexting was viewed as one part of a sexual relationship (Lenhart 2009). Also, sexually suggestive images between two people, where at least one of the pair is hoping to become romantically involved, were shared. Feelings of attachment in romantic relationships with the involvement of text messaging were influenced by sexting (Drouin and Landgraff 2011; Weisskirch and Delevi 2011). Research on young adult relationships found that people with insecurities of the relationship would want their partner to provide a sexually explicit image, text or video. The measure of sexting attitudes has not been widely validated, as reflected by the social interactions guided by relationship status. The study

by Drouin and Landgraff (2011) found that non-sexting messages were more common among those with secure intimate relationships. Sexting was more common among those with less secure relationships with their partners. Anxious attachment emerged as a significant predictor for sexting. However, when gender was considered as a moderator, woman with attachment anxiety was a predictor for sending only sexually explicit pictures. Whereas men were more likely to send sex text and picture messages.

Limitations of the study were the relatively small sample sizes and variance in definitions of sexting (Drouin and Landgraff 2011; Lenhart 2009; Weisskirch and Delevi 2011).

*Attitudes Towards Sexting.* Recent research suggests the possibility that as technology changes, the way that romantic partners find each other and the way they attract each other also changes (Wysocki and Childers 2011). Lenhart (2009) revealed that attitudes on sexting were diverse amongst the youth were one end of the spectrum was sexting was a safer alternative to real life sexual activity. There were some teens that branded these images, particularly the images of women, as inappropriate and made judgments about the people who appear in them. However, the research studies found that the participants were more interested in real-life partners, in which they wanted a physical relationship and preferred face-to-face contact (Wysocki and Childers 2011).

### Dramaturgy

The Dramaturgical perspective can inform an understanding of sexting. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) paralleled individual action in public or private settings as a theater production where the performer portrayed their role in an act. Goffman (1959) explained that a social script was not a material thing, but a display of appropriate patterns that were coherent and embellished by a performance

and accepted by an audience. By approving an acceptable performance, societal values were ritualized and represented the self in everyday social interaction.

*Impression Management.* The performer pursued to display accurate social roles for the audience, which was approved by the audience as authentic when performed correctly (Goffman 1959). The audience, the receiver of a text message, was a reference for judgment to the performer of their message they sent. If the performance by the sender was accepted and approved by the receiver, then the performance was executed correctly. The performer tried to present the accurate representation of a scripted role in front of the audience by performing the correct script in order to produce the best performance (Goffman 1959). Using text messages as a means for performance showed that the individual was self-interested in their appearance of the message to the receiver. Consciously making an effort to manage how others perceived them, the performer's act was verified when the audience accepted or dismissed the scripted performance. The production of the self through following scripted roles in social interaction occurred in the front and back stage of the performance (Goffman 1959).

*Backstage.* The backstage was a private area for the performer and gave them time to prepare and reenter into the frontstage (Goffman 1959). The performer can review what happened in the frontstage while in the backstage. Reviewing their performance in the backstage, the performer has the opportunity to attempt to change their emotion and what they think was the reality of the situation if there was a fumble or mess up of the script (Goffman 1959). Managing the presentation of self in the back stage, while the performers had time to compose their text messages, the performers made conscious assessments of how to present their text to their audience.

*Frontstage.* During the frontstage the performer displayed an appearance and manner to define the situation according to the surrounding audience (Goffman 1959). The frontstage was a setting used as means for the performer to project correctly the social script to others. Through controlled performance and interaction, the performer presented the social script in the frontstage to prove consistent knowledge of their act (Goffman 1959). Communicating through social interaction the activities and characteristics of a role, the performer in the frontstage correctly presented a representation of the normative meanings for a specific role. Utilizing nonverbal and verbal cues as a means of presenting the act, the frontstage was where feelings of embarrassment occurred if there was a fumble or mess up in the scripted performance of the social self (Goffman 1959). Sending a text message to communicate a social script, the performer was able to perform in the frontstage via a cell phone.

The different functions used by the performer of the front and back stage allowed for construction and presentation of a social script sustained by the receivers interpretations of the social situation as accurate (Goffman 1959). Settings may vary either being frontstage or backstage but the actions that occurred while in those stages do not change (Goffman 1959). Paralleling text messaging as a stage for performance, the performance presented the self to an audience and had the opportunity to be in a private space in the backstage to prepare for the following act, while composing the next text message. Sending a text message became public view to the receiver of the message, which made the reception of a message the frontstage. Text messaging allowed the sender to perform in the frontstage by sending the text, but also, used the response time to set up the next performance in the backstage. Focusing on the presentation of self, the performer

utilized text messaging as a frontstage and backstage to perform scripted roles, specifically of gender.

*Doing Gender.* West and Zimmerman (1987) reconceptualized gender as something people do in their social interactions in the presence of an audience rather than being intrinsically apart of their social self. As Messerschmitt (1993) elaborated, doing gender in public spheres, such as the frontstage, constructed gender ideals that are a foundation to various social interactions. Doing gender involved socially directed perceptions, interactions, and activities that strived to portray characteristics as a means to communicate masculine and feminine essential qualities (West and Zimmerman 1987). Social interaction and relationships were fundamental to doing gender. Because gender was socially created and displayed through social interaction, every day management of the presentation of self embedded normative social scripts of gender (Goffman, 1976). Performing gender through social interaction and presentation of self, West and Zimmerman (1987) focused on the understating and construction of gender as a negotiated process influenced by the social situation and the desire to correctly follow expected scripted roles. Doing gender emerged from the social situation by accomplishing the essential qualities of what it meant to be masculine or feminine.

Masculinity and femininity were done daily through gendered scripts that were learned through the identification of what it means to be a man or woman (West and Zimmerman 1987). Performing the socially approved form of femininity was referred to as doing emphasized femininity, which the performer represented submission, nurture, compassion and displayed sexuality in the private sphere (Connell 1987). Additionally, doing emphasized femininity was accomplished through compliance of the subordination

to men and oriented toward accommodating to the interests and desires of men (Connell 1987). Doing traditional masculinity was accomplished for men's approval, which went simultaneous with the sexual subjugation of women (Connell 1987, 1995; Kimmel 1987). Subjugating women as a means of doing masculinity, men used this as a means to prove their masculinity to other men, which helped provide a currency to achieve hegemony (Connell 1987, 1995; Kimmel 1987). Connell referred to hegemonic masculinity as the socially acceptable form of masculinity, which dominated femininity as well as various subordinated masculinities. Thus by doing gender, men used hegemonic masculinity to be dominant over women who were doing emphasized femininity. The socially accepted hierarchical arrangements of gender were displayed in social interactions through hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987).

*Application to Sexting.* Building on both Goffman's (1959) perspective of impression management and West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of doing gender, this study will apply gender performance to show how individuals manage their self-presentations of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity through sexting. Doing gender by using sexting as a means to construct and reinforce hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, the social interaction will be understood as a display of scripted gender roles by the sexter. The presentation of sexting in the frontstage of text messaging will look at the performance of men and women managing doing gender. Considering text messaging as both the front and backstage to manage the presentation of self, the application of doing gender and dramaturgy will guide the analysis of sexting.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

This research study aimed at building a framework of sexting to initiate a foundation for further sociological inquiry of this social phenomenon. With the lack of empirical research on sexting, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the experiences and perspectives of individuals who used sexting in their intimate relationships.

#### Participants and Sampling

The sample for this research included twenty-three in-depth interviews of college students from a college campus in Southern California. The age group of the interviewees targeted for the study was between eighteen to twenty-one years old. The sample for the research was directed to this specific age group as their experience with technology, specifically cell phones, has predominated a majority of their life experiences. Also, a relatively equal ratio of women to men participants was sought for this study.

*Recruitment of the Participants.* Convenience sampling was utilized for the promotion of the research. Flyers<sup>2</sup> were distributed around the campus and in classrooms explaining the nature of the research and asking for volunteers to be interviewed on their experience of technology and sexuality. One interviewee contacted me from the flyer via email interested in participating in the research. All correspondence with the interviewees was conducted via email and the interviews were carried out in the library on campus as a mutual location for the interviewee and myself.

Using snowball sampling, I asked if the first interviewee knew of anyone that may be interested in participating in the study. From that participant, I received contact information for two more participants. After contacting them, two additional interviews

were scheduled with them. After conducting the interviews with the two interviewees, I inquired from them if they knew anyone who would like to participate in the study. This method of inquiry occurred after each interview was complete. Each interviewee gave me two or three contacts that they thought would be interested in participating in the interview. Approximately half of the contacts responded to the email I sent inquiring for their participation in the interview. With the exception of the first interview, all of the interviewees were found for the study using this method.

There was some exclusion to the participation of the study that was made. Two potential participants, who were twenty-three and twenty-four years old, were excluded as they were above the age bracket I was looking for. Through the use of the snowball sampling there were twelve men and eleven women that completed the in-depth interviews about sexting. Being aware of the ratio of women and men participating in the study, no exclusions were performed in regards to gender. The participants of the sample were directed to a specific age group and an equal ratio of men and women, which initiated as a convenience sample and transitioned into a snowball sample, after only one person contacted me from the flyers.

### Interview Process

All in-depth interviews performed for this research study were tape recorded and conducted in private meeting rooms available in the library on campus. Each interview began with a statement of confidentiality, to assure the participants that the researcher would be the only person using their interviews for research purposes. Acknowledging the sensitivity of the material, the participants were insured that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to refuse responding to a question or to discontinue

participation of the interview at anytime. Additionally, the interviewees were reassured that there was no judgment to any of their responses and that their participation was to gather research for a thesis.

A set list of initial open-ended questions about sexting was used in each interview (Appendix A). Follow up probing questions were designed during the interviews to further inquire more detail about a specific response from an interviewee. By writing down key terms the participants used, I took notes during the interviews as a reference to follow up with a probing question after the interviewee finished a response. Probing the interviewees on their experience with technology and communication techniques while growing up, their use of technology in intimate relationships, using technology to express their sexuality, and their perceptions and experiences with sexting, were different topics of interest discussed in each interview. By having the participants give detailed responses about their experience with sexting, a depiction was created of how intricate this social interaction was for them, which encompassed a relationship between technology, communication and sexuality.

Each interview conducted was approximately sixty to ninety minutes in length. Transcriptions were completed for each interview, using pseudonyms for all names of people, locations, institutions, etc, that were used by the interviewees in their responses. The interviews were transcribed word for word, in which the transcriptions incorporated verbal pauses and emotional responses done by the interviewees during their response. The transcriptions of the interviews provided the data needed to be analyzed for themes and patterns of how sexting was accomplished through social interaction by the interviewees.

## Analyzing the Data

After all interviews were transcribed, multiple steps were taken to analyze the interviewees' responses. The core concepts used as a framework for the probing questions (technology, communication and sexuality) were used as a guided focus of analysis throughout this process.

*Separating the Responses.* Reading each interview, I separated the interviewee's responses into gender categories, men and women. Each and every response made by the interviewees was put into two excel documents, one for men and one for women. Once I established the two documents, I went through and read each of the responses to gain familiarity of the responses.

*Memo Notes.* Going through each response a second time, I wrote memo notes next to the responses that had a direct reference to sexting. The third time I read through the responses, I wrote memo notes next to all responses that incorporated any theme that related to sexting, such as sending and/or receiving sexting, definition of sexting, involvement with sexting and perception of sexting.

*Preliminary Coding.* From the memo notes written next to the responses, preliminary coding was used to further develop the themes of sexting. Rereading the data for a fourth time, the different themes that emerged from the data were highlighted with different colors as preliminary codes. The themes that emerged from the preliminary coding were: sexting, relationship, phone calls vs. text messages, technology, convenience, communication, progression, emotion, flirting, liquid courage, "I love you" stage, request to "hang out", real life vs. fantasy, sending pictures, requesting for pictures, texting dirty, sharing with friends, Madonna vs. whore, masturbation, bad name for

themselves, keeping interest, and looking sexy. The preliminary codes were then separated into excel files specific to the preliminary code and gender, compiling twenty-nine excel documents.

*Extracting the Emergent Themes.* Once the preliminary coding sections were distributed into the appropriate excel spreadsheet, the quotes were read for a fifth time. Lastly, the quotes were extracted into subcategories of sexting: technology, communication, relationships, sexuality, and gender. Going through each of the coded responses in the subcategories for the sixth time, the responses that gave the most explanation and detail of the theme and subcategory were chosen to be included in the findings.

### Grounded Theory

Designing a research study on sexting looked to gather responses from the interviews to provide a clear account on the individual's involvement, experience, and perception on the social interaction. Lacking an established theoretical perspective of sexting, the analytical strategy for the data in this study employed a grounded theory approach to the responses of the interviewees (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Using a grounded theory approach to conduct in-depth interviews in this study used a set of probing questions to establish a foundation of questions to use for each interview (Charmaz 2006). By using the set of initial open-ended questions to establish consistency for all interviews, responses to the questions were further developed by follow up probing questions that came about during each interview.

By separating the data, writing memo notes, close readings and rereading of the data, using preliminary coding and data extractions grounded the research by analyzing

the responses of the interviewees' experiences with sexting (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006). By comparing the interviews to each other according to the grounded theory method, the research on sexting developed emergent themes from the interviewees' responses. Looking at the little literature on sexting and comparing it with the themes that emerged from the data, the presentation of self materialized as a theoretical framework from the interviewees' responses on sexting. The interplay of technology, communication, relationship status, sexuality and gender developed with the use of sexting as a social interaction in the interviewees' daily life. Furthermore, the broader social concept of dramaturgy as a theoretical framework emerged from the grounded theory analysis based on the interviews conducted for this research.

## CHAPTER IV: PROGRESSION AND DEFINITION OF SEXTING

This chapter reports the interviewees' comments on sexting and how it was utilized in their intimate relationships. Developing sexting as a type of communication, the interviewees discussed their experiences of communicating sexual desires with their partners.

### Reasons for Texting in a Relationship

The interviewees discussed how texting was used to develop sexting. Cell phones were the key factor in regards to the development of sexting in the interviewee's everyday life. The progression of technological development throughout participants' lives has had an effect on their social interactions. The cell phone was the main device used for communication in their intimate relationships.

*Convenience and Comfort Using Texting.* Before the interviewees talked about the act of sexting and what it looked like for them, they explained how they became comfortable with texting. They described a consistent pattern of early exposures to the technological advancement of cell phones that helped them become familiar using it for their social interactions. Elton explained:

“You can't really talk to them. Yeah, well, because you're in classes and in high school I'd only have an hour-long lunch and I'd try to spend it with that person, but it wouldn't be enough. You'd talk to them where if you were new in your relationship, it would be a little awkward, so you could be comfortable in your own home setting and be talking to them in your bed while you're laying and you're going to sleep and talking to them rather than be nervous in front of them or something like that.”

The comfort that Elton talked about was using texting to talk to his girlfriend without feeling nervous as he would if he were in front of them. Also, texting was

convenient where he was able to text any place he wanted to. Once the interviewees were introduced to texting, they became comfortable using it to communicate and were instantly involved with using it to stay connected to their relationships.

*Direct Contact.* Another factor that made texting a desirable resource to stay in touch with each other was the direct contact the interviewees felt they had with each other. Anna explained:

“And then it would be: ‘Okay, well give me your number.’ And then it’s much more comfortable calling someone’s cell phone than it is calling their home phone. So that’s how, we exchanged numbers. Because it goes directly to you. You don’t have to talk to someone’s mom.”

The interviewees made remarks similar to this due to privacy from their parents, as the cell phone allowed direct contact between each other. Steve elaborated that, “Hearing the dad’s voice on the other end of the phone before you could hear the person, like the girl’s voice, sort of discouraged a lot of communication.” Having direct contact with the person, encouraged communication for the interviewees through personal cell phones. The interviewees explained how hearing a parent’s voice would discourage communication, but the cell phone allowed them privacy.

*Constant Contact.* The interviewees elaborated on using their cell phone to maintain contact with their partner throughout the day. Constantly telling each other every bit of their day, the interviewees discussed continually texting with their partners. When they were separated from each other they started talking through texting, so that they would have short conversations all day long. As Ty explained, “I mean it was always the same routine, like wake up in the morning, text her or she texts me and then go to sleep, texting her or she’d text me, so it was just nonstop texting all day. Talking

about just whatever we could talk about just to keep talking.” The interviewees discussed that they did not feel the need to be in constant communication with their friends or family, but when it came to their relationship they viewed texting as a way to communicate all day long. Nemo commented, “But when I was in a relationship, I would text throughout the day and just be like ‘Hey, what’s up?’ You know, ‘thinking of you,’ and like ‘what are you doing.’ You know? ‘I can’t wait to see you.’” The interviewees talked about texting as increasing communication with their partner. Monica made a comment about communication in a relationship:

“I mean, with a relationship, I think communication is like key. It’s number one. That’s why some relationships don’t work. So if you keep a continuous flow of communication, whether it be texting, whether it be calling, whether it be talking to each other face-to-face – then your relationship overall is going to be a lot better.”

Texting for the interviewees was their tool to know what was going on with their partner throughout the day. They would keep track of their cell phone to see when they would get a text message from their partner and respond to continue the conversation. “It’s embarrassing if you don’t text back and they are waiting for you. It seems like you don’t care,” stated Eve. Showing that they care for one another by responding back to text messages continued the constant communication between partners throughout their day.

*Ability to Control the Presentation of Text.* By using texting as a means to communicate, the interviewees felt as though they had the ability to control their presentation of the text message. Talking on the phone loses the control to have time to think of a response. As Aiden explains the difference in talking on the phone and presenting a text:

“Saving, like text, pictures, even through email. As long as it’s not in real time. Like on the phone, like when you having phone sex it’s like real

time. Like it's happening right there. But like when I think of sexting, I think of like you can actually save it. And you can go back to it any time you want. And that's like the one way I see it...Like especially you can think of something to say."

With the technological advances in telecommunications, the interviewees were able to save messages. Unlike talking on the phone, as Aiden describes as real time, having the ability to go back to text messages gave the interviewees control of their response. The ability to have time to think about a response allowed the interviewees to feel less pressure about responding immediately like on the phone. The interviewees made comments similar to Ella who said, "I have a lot more comfort texting someone than I do on the phone with someone, just because I don't have time to think about what I need to say on the phone where I can with texting." Feeling comfortable with the ability to think about what they "need" to say with texting, the interviewees felt as though they could communicate with each other by presenting what the other wanted to hear.

*Maintained Control of Response Time.* By having the option to respond at their convenience was a feature that the interviewees described that encouraged their texting. This feature gave the interviewees the control with knowing that they had time to articulate a response before presenting it to the other person. They felt that texting allowed them to respond at their leisure. Feeling less pressure to respond immediately as opposed to talking on the phone was another reason the interviewees preferred texting, especially in their intimate relationships. Savannah described her experience with controlling the response time to a text:

"Thinking about how you are going to respond. Like the time process through sexting. I think it's just like you are not put on the spot. Like you have the choice to respond or not. You have the choice to ask your friend, what should I say to this? What should like you have the time to actually process what it's going to mean, how it's going to come off. Whereas if

you are on the phone, I mean, I have been in conversations where I say something, I'm nervous and I'm babbling and I'll say something and I'll walk away and I'm like, why did I even talk about that?"

Talking on the phone required Savannah to continue the conversation even though she was nervous. After the conversation when she thought about what she said, her thought was "why did I even talk about that?" Through texting, she was able to control when she was going to respond, through what she said as "the time process" allowing her to feel less nervous. Ray had similar feelings and said, "I mean, and not that I have a problem with saying what I really feel in person, but it's a lot less pressure when you have a phone in your hand and someone texts you and you have time to respond to it." Being able to communicate his feelings through texting, Ray explained that responding when he wanted to was less pressure than being on the phone.

*Less Engagement of Time.* For the interviewees lack of time throughout the day to talk on the phone gave another reason to use texting in their relationships. Frank said, "Once you are in a relationship with somebody because it is just kind of a quick, 'oh, we are going to do this when we hang out,' 'oh ok.'" The quickness of sending the text allowed Frank to set up a meeting with his partner. With the lack of time to talk on the phone, the interviewees felt this gave them reason to use texting as a preferred means of communication in their relationships. Some interviewees enjoyed talking on the phone, but the convenience of engaging in less time to send a text dominated as the type of communication style in their relationships. As Nemo explained:

"I would definitely say that from beginning till now, texting has become a much larger amount of the relationship because of lack of time to talk on the phone. I mean I've always been able to talk on the phone at night before I go to bed kind of thing or when I used to bike home. But yeah, I would definitely say text messages have become a lot more predominant."

The quickness in sending a text message to a partner continued constant communication in their relationships on a daily basis.

*Use of Emoticons to Express Emotion When Texting.* The interviewees talked about how they would use emoticons to express their emotions through texting. The receiver could misinterpret the meaning of a text if emoticons were not used. Sicilia explained:

“Yeah, because like texting can be taken, like I can say something in a text, you could take it however you want to take it because there is no emotion over a text message, unless you put a happy face or an angry face. If I don’t do any of the emotion icons, you don’t know how I am actually saying it to you. You know, and so I think even in the sexting way, it could be taken a different way.”

The interviewees explained they had to articulate their responses and use emoticons to provide additional meaning to their text. Texting does not provide the ability to see non-verbal gestures, so adding the emoticons provides a visual for expressing their emotion. The interviewees thought that emoticons were useful in understanding the messages from their partners. A smiley face would mean the interviewee was genuinely happy and a sad face would mean the interviewee was sad.

*Choice to Engage in Conversation.* In addition to the many advantages the interviewees felt with communicating through texting, the ability to choose whether or not to participate in a conversation influenced the interviewees in texting in their relationships. The interviewees didn’t have a choice on receiving a text message, but they discussed how they did have the choice in responding back to a text. Frank discussed this topic:

“Yea, um...yea, I would say yea. Um, I just kind of took more chances as I talked to more people. And uh, I was known to take a chance on a text message more than I guess in person or on the phone. So, because at least

if you make yourself look stupid then you just stop texting each other, you know what I mean (laughs). And then, the time goes on.”

Wanting to display himself in a positive light, if he felt as though he looked stupid in a text message, then Frank would choose to stop texting. The ability to control when they wanted to respond to a text and how they were going to present the text allowed the interviewees to present themselves how they saw fit in a conversation. Texting was less stressful to the interviewees in regards to being able to express their feelings, specifically their partners, as they had time to think of a response and how the response looked. Adding emoticons for visual cues of how they wanted the text message to be interpreted, also gave the interviewees additional reasons to use texting in their relationships.

#### Role of Texting in a Relationship

Texting was used by the interviews to express that they cared for the maintenance of their relationship. The extra effort that the interviewees discussed needed to provide the correct information in a text message helped them understand each other and showed that they were being expressive to each other.

*Maintain Constant Contact to Show Care.* The interviewees felt that by constantly communicating it showed their partner they were thinking of them. Carmen pointed out, “Like ‘Good morning’ or ‘I hope you have a good day’ or something like that, like those are always like kind of brownie points in a relationship.” The context of the message could vary, but receiving a text from a partner showed them that their partner was showing that they cared to maintain communication. As Nemo said, “I had my phone, so we’d text each other. Just like, “I love you,” that kind of boyfriend/girlfriend stuff.” Throughout the day, the couple would text constantly to show that they were participating in the relationship. When the couples texted “I love you” to show their feelings there was

a poignant use of technology in their relationship. The “boyfriend/girlfriend type things” that Nemo talked about were how they showed each other they cared about their relationship throughout the day.

*Starting, Maintaining, and Ending Relationships.* As Olga stated about texting in her relationship, “I guess it’s a sign of the times,” because how involved she was with texting in her relationships. The involvement of texting in the interviewees’ lives was significantly important in starting, maintaining, and ending their relationships.

The interviewees talked about how starting a relationship through texting would be as simple as texting, “So, what are we?” said Steve. By asking this question, Steve was asking what type of relationship it was. Classifying the relationships as being mutually exclusive with each other sexually was important to the interviewees. Having the title of girlfriend or boyfriend meant that they were only sexually active with each other.

Texting each other throughout the day, the interviewees felt as though they were maintaining their relationships. Texting provided a way to schedule dates and meetings with each other. Ty stated, “It was all planning. Texting because I wasn’t near them or stuff like that or it was planning to see each other on this day, seeing if we’re both okay with it or if our parents are okay with it.” Making plans to see each other allowed the couple to maintain their relationship commitment to each other.

As easy and quick as it was for the interviewees to start their relationships through texting, it was just as easy for them to end their relationships. Ray stated that he would simply send a quick text saying, “Oh, I wanna break up. Sorry.” Texting played a role in all aspects of communication in their relationships through the unique features it provided to the interviewees.

### Role of Sexting in a Relationship.

Most of the interviewees' explanation of their involvement with sexting was through texting, although there were some explanations of phone sex and Skype<sup>3</sup> sex. There were some interviewees that would spend a lot of their time sexting and others did not prefer to sext at all (three interviewees, one men and two women). Regardless of the individuals' preferences of sexting or not, there was a consensus on the progression of sexting in a relationship being technologically based and included a form of sexual expression that developed over time.

*Progression of Sexting Over Time in Relationships.* The process of sexting was explained to happen slowly and the progression increased as the couple established their relationship. The continuous conversation that the couples had throughout the day would turn into talking about sexually explicit material after there was a relationship established. Olga stated, "When someone sexts without getting to know me is when I know that they just want you know, the physical. They just want to fuck and just like that's it." Without the establishment of a relationship between the couple, sexting was considered to be purely a physical desire to be with the person.

As the development of the couples relationship continued, the text messages progressed into sexting as they got to know each other more. Frank explained his experience:

"I guess, you know, say if you met a girl in one of your classes in school and like, "oh, she is cute." You know, you start talking to her a little bit in class and eventually you get her number and you are texting each other just normal talk and getting to know each other and then, maybe hang out a little bit, and just start hanging out. And you both like each other and texting could go from just normal conversations to start getting into sexting, you know. Starting off with little stuff, like "what are you wearing?" to, who knows what (laughs). That's the progression I see."

Where as if someone starts sexting immediately after meeting someone the act was viewed as the person's intention were for having sex and was not to establish a relationship. By establishing a relationship, the interviewees sexting progressed over time with each other.

*Motivations of Sexting to Express Sexual Interest.* The goal of sexting was to make the other party sexually interested in the sender. Leona explained that sexting was “Something that would have to be provocative or sexually related, something that would make someone horny.” By communicating sexual interest, the interviewees used sexting as a means to sexually arouse their partners. Providing sexual attraction to each other the interviewees viewed sexting as a way to show sexual interest in one another. By responding to each other through sexting the acceptance of sexting would be mutual.

When one party was not sexually interested, Dan explained:

“Ok, well, I don't know, like you are flirting and like I send something flirty, and then she says something flirty back. That would indicate to me, “oh well I'm interested,” if a girl wasn't interested she either A, not text back or B, say something like “oh cool.” You know.”

Establishing that there was a mutual agreement to flirt with each other Dan knew that the girl was interested to continue texting. There had to be a response by the receiver in order for the conversation to continue showing sexual interest. Motivated by stimulating sexual arousal in the receiver, the sender would send a sext to show their interest in talking about sex. Ben expressed the motivation for sexting in his relationship to keep a sexually healthy relationship. He explained:

“Definitely. Yeah. Like sexting when I'm in a relationship, I'd be more open to it. I mean, you know, as a couple you try to find things out. Like you know, keep it fresh and you know, and I think maybe sexting is one of those things that kind of keeps it like – say like entertaining. Because

texting is a big thing now. It's really big in our generation. And if you can mix that with like you know, keeping it like healthy about sex, then by all means do it. If that's going to help your relationship keep going. You know, if you're like long distance or something, and sexting is going to what keeps you guys together, then sext all you want. You know? I'm all for it. Like people I know, people that Skype and like do that whole web now that Skype is big. They just you know, get naked and get off."

Using the cell phone and Skype as a means to keep his relationship healthy about sex, Ben felt that sexting helped keep the relationship together. Using sexting as a part of expressing themselves sexually, the interviewees used it in their relationships to show their sexual interest in each other.

### The Beginning of Sexting

*The Initiator.* A sexually suggestive text message was needed to initiate sexting.

The initiator of sexting started a conversation that led to talking about sexual acts. John explained this process as:

"Yeah, I would say so. Definitely. I mean it like has to have one person starting sexting. Initiating it. So like – yeah, I mean, I've – like when my girlfriend sext me, I've never really been fully like 'oh my gosh, I really – like I really want to be talking about sex right now. Like I really want to be sexting.' I've never like thought about that. You know, but I'm playing along because maybe I'm more – I'm interested in them, or whatever, and I want to see where this is going to go. You know what I mean?"

An initiator, which started a conversation about sex, did the initiation of sexting and sexting would continue if the recipient were also interested in texting about sexual activity.

*Alcohol Used to Initiate and Excuse Sexting.* The interviewees discussed the use of alcohol as having an affect on the initiation of sexting. Anna stated, "It's easy to drunk text somebody. It's liquid courage." The interviewees felt that it was easier to text someone when they had been drinking. Initiating sexting while they were drinking

alcohol meant they could use it as an excuse to backtrack their statement. “By saying something when you’re drunk and regretting it but at the same time not regretting it because sometimes it works in your favor,” explained Ben when he initiated sexting when he was drunk. The interviewees used alcohol to initiate sexting and as a backup excuse if they regretted sending the message.

*Expressing the Initiation of Sexting.* The initiator’s text would be sexually suggestive and would hint at the possibility of the two people being sexually expressive through texting. Savannah discussed an example of the interpretation of sexting:

“Hey, how are you? What are you doing? Basic daily conversations, flirty and stuff like that. The conversation just kind of like progressed from like flirting to like saying something that was kind of dirty, kind of jokingly and then kind of ongoing and then it just kind of became this conversation that was completely inappropriate. You know, when you start with a winky face saying like something where a semi colon and parentheses you know like a winky face instead of a happy face. Um, completely like, if I could put sex into words, I would be typing on my phone.”

The cue of the wink expressed to her that the conversation was shifting toward being “kind of dirty.” Understanding the text as expressing an interest in sexual arousal, the interviewees had to first initiate the conversation by a cue. As Dan stated, “There is no sarcasm font, so they won’t get it without a winky face.” The winky face indicated that the initiator was acknowledging the possible inappropriateness of the message and they wanted to express themselves sexually to the receiver. The interviewees discussed how the winky face was a way to express the initiation of sexting.

#### The Progression of Sexting

The interviewees explained sexting as an escalation of communicating sexual activity. Nemo talked about this escalation with his experience from his girlfriend sexting him:

“But this was like detailed. I want to do this, this, this. And then even like it goes from like the beginning, the foreplay to the climax to like the after. It was like very intense. It was like reading a porno almost. And that was the first time I ever experienced something like that. I was like, ‘Wow.’ I was like, ‘I didn’t know people actually did this.’ Like this is actually kind of interesting. Like I’m really amazed by this.”

By describing in explicit detail, the interviewees used graphic description to text each other about sexual activity, which started off by the initiator. There were distinct progression through the stages of sexting as the beginning, the foreplay and the climax, which Nemo related to reading a porno.

*Flirting as Foreplay.* Using flirting to communicate their interest in engaging in sexual activity, the interviewees used the winky face as a non-verbal cue to initiate flirting. As Sam explained, “Depending on the relationship, some people would be like, ‘what the heck,’ but my girlfriend would flirt back, play along with the game.”

Understanding the meaning of the initial text was a major factor for the recipient so that they could decide how they wanted to respond to the initiator. The interviewees explained that flirting through texting was meant to respond to the initiation of sexting as a mutual agreement to express sexual interest towards each other. Steve expressed flirting with his girlfriend:

“Yeah flirting with my girlfriend. That’s a pretty generic response. ‘Oh, you’ve – yeah, oh, now you’ve got me all riled up. Thanks.’ Or something like that. And it would be like a sarcastic little like thing with like the winky face emoticon. I’m kind of embarrassed to be saying that I used emoticons but I do.”

Showing that he was “riled up,” meaning he was sexually interested, provided a means to flirt with each other. The interviewees viewed sarcasm to flirt with their partners through texting. As previously stated by Dan, texting does not have a sarcasm font to express that they are flirting, but the winky face helped provide understanding of the message. Ella elaborated on flirting by being sarcastic with her boyfriend:

“I think that’s flirty – or like I joke around with people a lot. Like, with my boyfriend, I’ll be like, “Oh, you’re so not cute. What’s your thing?” I’m very sarcastic, so I’m like – I think that’s my way of being flirtatious. If I’m being really sarcastic, then usually I expect them to take it as I’m being flirtatious, I guess.”

Communicating sexual interest was initiated by flirtatious text messages between the couples. Flirting through text messages was viewed as foreplay for the interviewees. Being physically separate while texting each other, flirting provided communicating sexual interest toward each other.

The interviewees explained that during the foreplay stage the sexually explicit nature of the text messages was not “sexual as in literal, ‘I wanna put my penis in your vagina, [but] sexual until we got to that point,” as Ian explained. Communicating sexual interest by flirting the conversation was not sexually explicit yet. This was part of the progression of sexting throughout the relationship. The introduction of showing sexual interest through flirting, the couple would develop a mutual understanding that each party accepted the flirting. Trista explained this step in her foreplay stage as, “Well, talking dirty basically, saying what I wanna do to you or whatever and texting. At first it’d be discreet and then it would get more and more dirty, so after a while we sent a lot of dirty texts.” The interviewees talked about the texting getting progressively “more dirty” meaning that the content of the texts would become more sexually explicit.

*Describing Sexual Activity.* Steve stated, “I don’t think saying ‘Let’s hook up right now’ is sexting. But describing how you would hook up with somebody that would be.” By texting, the interviewees were able to talk explicitly about their sexual desires to one another by describing what they wanted to do. The interviewees said that they used sexting as a way to describe their sexuality and their sexual preferences. Ray talked about sexting as:

“Like texting dirty, like through a text message. Like oh, you know, ‘I want to fuck you, this and that. I want to do you this way. You know, I’m going to pull your hair, scratch your back.’ You know, stuff like that. Or you know, ‘I’m going to do you doggy or we’re going to go on for hours,’ and stuff like that. And the pictures, of course. The response to the pictures. Like oh you know, ‘great.’ You know, ‘I wouldn’t mind seeing that on top of me,’ or ‘I wouldn’t mind seeing that from the back,’ and anything like that.”

Communicating explicitly the sexual acts that he wanted to do, Ray described how the conversation of sexting contained explicit description of his sexual desires. With the escalation of sexting, the description stage happened as a way to add specific narrative of their sexual desires. By detailing sexual acts, the interviewees considered the sexually explicit conversation as communicating their sexual desires to their partner. As Aiden elaborated:

“Sexting is like when you’re really like vivid and graphic over the use of your texts. Like you talk about penis size, or what you want to do, like in detail, like positions they want to do, or what they want me to do, like me touching them. Oral. You know, or be like full-on sex.”

In order for a conversation to be considered sexting, the progression that led to this stage was essential in the interviewees’ development of their sexual relationship with their partner.

*Sexual Scripts for Performance.* The interviewees explained that the description of the sexually explicit material in this phase was describing sexual experiences that they wanted to happen. The sexters would describe different sexual scenes that they wanted to happen the next time they were together. Explaining in detail what was happening in these scenes was the way the interviewees distinguished this stage from flirting and foreplay. Frank explained:

“Actually saying what you are going to do if you hang out. And, maybe sending a naked picture to each other, so basically talking about when you guys hang out, what you are going to do is probably the farthest point, and I guess, describing it in details. And the pictures, sending nude pictures to each other.”

The interviewees explained that it was easy for them to describe their sexual desires in explicit detail because most of the time the scenes were not made up. Rose said, “Um, yea, what me and Luke would talk about is basically what we would end up doing. So, it wasn’t just this fantasy that we were creating, we would actually do it.” Some interviewees described the descriptive texts as based on reality instead of making something up. The interviewees explained that the development of these descriptive scenes based on real experiences would be detailed and talked about after the situation occurred or as plan for the next time they are together.

*Performing the Sexual Activities in Sexting.* The final phase of sexting explained by the interviewees as initiating physical action from their sexting. By requesting a meeting in person was one way the interviewees explained as an outcome of their sexting. Rose detailed this by:

“I consider sexting when you are starting to tell a person like what you are wearing or what you are doing or anything that is sexual to me is sexting. If you are doing that over text and it would really escalate to where we would actually be doing, like, stuff to each other while we were texting,

but it would get to the point where it would be like, “Well, are you home? Are you home alone?” (laughs) Like, “Do you want to hang out?” Like that.”

The interviewees discussed that the request to meet happened after the description of sexual activities. The motivation after sexting and requesting to meet was for the actions described in the conversation to take place. Ray discussed how he thought sexting was part of a sexual fantasy, but developed how it could be used as a means for sexual activities in the future. Ray stated:

“More of a fantasy, but I would love to do it in the future if it gets to that point. But the fantasy is always there...you’re like oh yeah, I’m going to do this to her. It won’t happen. If it happens, like you know, I’m doing it. I’m doing my fantasy. Like oh, I want to scratch your back. Pull your hair. I’m going to do you to the back, and stuff like that...(It’s) Like a plan. Like the next time we hangout I’m going to do you to the back. Pull your hair, scratch your back. You know. Make you scream my name. Stuff like that.”

Ray understood sexting as a plan for the next time he was going to see his girlfriend and what sexual activities they were going to do. By describing in explicit detail what their sexual fantasies were with each other, the interviewees created a plan of action for their future encounter together.

### Gender Differences in Sexting

Throughout the development of sexting in their relationships, the interviewees discussed differences in their experiences of the progression of sexting. Men and women talked about different experiences throughout the progression of sexting.

*Women Portray Themselves as Sexually Attractive.* Women talked about sending pictures to their boyfriends to be risqué. The pictures varied from wearing lingerie to being completely nude. Savannah discussed the difference between wearing a swimsuit and a bra:

“I would consider it like in a bra or like underwear, I would consider that sexting, but not like in a swimsuit or something like that. It would have to be something where it was kind of risqué. Just because the way our society was built, you are not supposed to show your bra, that’s something that stays under your clothes. Where was a swimsuit, it’s normal for people to be wearing a swimsuit when you are out at the beach or out at the pool or you are in the sun.”

By wearing something risqué, Savannah talked about how a bra would be considered sexually attractive than a swimsuit. Sending a picture of a swimsuit would not be considered sexting as a swimsuit is allowed in public spaces where as showing undergarments are not and considered to have sexual connotations. The pictures that women would send were meant to be sexually appealing to their boyfriends. Women would create the image the way they thought their boyfriend wanted it to look like. Sicilia explained that, “With Alex, it was a lot about he always wanted like certain pictures and it’s always about my butt...he always wanted like certain angles and something.” Women took the pictures to appeal to their boyfriend sexually by creating the image that favored the boyfriend’s sexual desires.

*Women Motivated to Keep Men Interested.* The women would use sexting to maintain their boyfriends’ sexual interest in them. The women didn’t have an interest in sexting other than to keep their boyfriends happy. Monica explained her motivation as:

“Yeah, like with mine at least, like they freakin’ fully describe everything they want to do. You know, so then like I just go with it. And I’m like oh, well, I’m going to do this, this and this, but there’s been times, yeah, I have gotten turned on by it, I’m not going to like, but then there is other times I’m just texting them back so they get excited.”

Monica stated that there were times that her sexting was sexually stimulating to her, but in general she would text back “so they get excited.” If she did not respond back, then that would stop the sexting, which would show that she was not sexually interested. In

order to continue to show that she was sexually interested, she felt that she was sexting to excited her boyfriend rather than for her own sexually interest. Rose further expanded this theme by describing:

“Mmmm... actually didn't start figuring out what I was doing at that point. Like I knew, I knew what I was doing, but I didn't know why I was doing it. I didn't really do that stuff to make me feel happy at first, it was more of just them. Because that's what I did, I was just a people pleaser and I just wanted to make them all happy and, but, I didn't really want to until later on when I got older.”

Rose described how her motivation shifted as she became older. Her initial motivation for sexting was to make her boyfriend happy. After her realization why she was sexting, Rose started sexting because she wanted to.

*Women's Perception of Sexting.* Women discussed if they sexted they could be perceived as a slut. The women explained that they felt that there were perceptions of women sexting and Monica explained:

“Where it's like, ‘Oh, she sexts. She obviously has sexted a lot of guys, and she's a slut,’ like immediately – you know. Or it's like, ‘Oh, this girl is sexting me. She's so easy. She's gonna be easy, and she'll be my after-10 phone call,’ you know. I just feel like that happens, and I don't think that's fair, and I don't think like if you're mature, and you're in college you should think like that or even – because I think about it now.”

Women didn't want to have a bad reputation if they were sexting. The interviewees wanted to present themselves positively to their boyfriends. Sexting was perceived by the women as something done in a relationship, but they also had to take precaution with how they presented themselves. Trista stated:

“Mmmm... I just don't like feeling, like... I'm that drunk, um, porn star kind of sounding person on text message, saying this, blah, blah, blah. Because it's like, I don't want my boyfriend to think, “well, that's so easy for her to do that, then she could do it with other guys.” You know. Um... it's more of me showing that care more about the person of how I text them and how... I react to sexting with them.”

Women did not want their boyfriends to perceive them negatively by thinking, “Well, that’s so easy for her to do that, then she could do it with other guys.” The interviewees felt that if they were not in a relationship they would be considered a slut for sexting. Also, they took precaution sexting in their relationships, because they did not want their boyfriends to think that they are sexting other guys.

*Men Using the Pictures for Masturbation.* The interviewees discussed using the pictures for masturbation. Elton explained his experiences, “Yeah, so we both sent them. Yeah. Well, me, it would be my cock and then it would be her nude and then we would go back and forth. It would just depend. Jerking off. Yeah. Or I would look at the picture while I was calling, talking to her.” Men would talk about the sending and receiving of sexually explicit pictures and how they would use them to go back and look at them at a later time. John explained how he understood sexting as a means for quick pleasure:

“Yeah. I think you know, when I think of the word sexting, I think of the intent to masturbate, and one party being more into it than the other party. The other party just wanting to please the other party by playing along. I mean, they may be into it, but maybe not as much into as the other person. And the whole intent is for one person to get pleasure, quick pleasure.”

The quick pleasure that he discussed was for the intent to masturbate. Having the ability to save the pictures and conversations, sexting was used by the interviewees as a means for masturbation. Aiden further explained his usage of sexting:

“Masturbate to them. Look at them. Sometimes it’s just like I’ll be bored and I’ll literally just go through pictures. I’m just like I will just like watch them, whatever. I have pictures and then I have videos and it’s just like the pictures I normally just like look through cause I’m bored and I just want something nice to look at. In a sense, nice and amusing to look at. So I’ll look at that.”

The interviewees used the technological advancement of sexting to fulfill their sexual needs and desires.

*Negative Views of Women Sexters.* Men discussed how they thought if a woman sexted them without being in a relationship, then they considered her to be a slut.

Without an established relationship, Dan explained his perspective:

“A girl who sext. I don’t know, like she is a slut. I mean every guy likes a slut once in a while, but like I said early something along the lines of ‘a girl to bring home to mom.’ Like ‘mom, this is so-and-so’ we are having dinner, you know, like that’s not the type of person I would want. You know. Like if they want to be freaky, like together like, in person, you know, then that’s a different approach, but when it’s like through text message, I don’t know, like...what if you sent it to the wrong person or something, you know. And then my best friend gets a picture of your tits, you know like, ‘yea, that’s cool.’ No, it’s not, so...I don’t know, I wouldn’t like that.”

Dan distinguished that a between a slut, no relationship, and “a girl to bring home to mom,” in a relationship, and the difference between them sexting. Being in a relationship and sexting was acceptable for a woman to sext according to the men interviewees. Ray explained this perspective as:

“That’s the funny part. It’s like if a girl would send me a picture of them like naked without any hesitation, or me like trying to spit game, that’s not good. I find that – like that’s no good. Like that’s skeeze in my terms of like a slut. But I’ll be friends with her, but nothing like serious or nothing like that.”

Ray discussed this perception of a woman sending a naked picture “without any hesitation” as being a slut. To him, there wasn’t going to be the development of a relationship when he stated that he would still “be friends with her, but nothing like serious or nothing like that.”

*Men Showing Off Pictures.* Men talked about showing their friends the sexting texts and images they were receiving from women. As Ben said, “I really kept a lot of

things to myself but when I hook up with girls, I always told my friends.” The interviewees discussed how they would be influenced by their friends to show who was sexting them and to show off their pictures they received. Ray explained his experience as:

“I guess, you know, when I was in high school. The first girlfriends I talk about sexual stuff, you know, “if you come over we will do whatever, this and that,” just talking about sexual stuff. And I didn’t do the picture thing until I was, later on in high school when I, I didn’t even ask and I’ve had people just send me pictures before. And then, probably the biggest thing with getting pictures is influence from buddies, like “oh, ask her for a picture,” “have you seen this girl?” you know, and they have pictures in their phones and they would be like, “oh, send me a picture” and uh, so, through high school I have had it done.”

There was a distinction between being in a relationship and being single. Men discussed having respect for their girlfriends in regards to not showing their friends their sexting.

Nemo explained:

“So I respect her in a way that I’m not going to ask for anything explicit when I’m not supposed to be asking. She’s my girlfriend. Like sexual pictures. You know. Nude or anything like that. I mean, there’s the cleavage shot on occasion, but you know, she does all that. But that’s about it. Nothing more than that....But then it’s like no, so I thought about it, and like, you know, I’m just going to keep it to myself. That’s my business. No one else’s. You know, I’ll tell them what’s happening, but not show them. Out of respect for the women also. She’s taking pictures of herself. She’s trusting me to keep it to myself so I’ve got to do the same. You know? Keep it to myself and no one else.”

Being in a relationship distinguished whether men would show off their sexting to their friends. As Nemo explained, he would respect his girlfriend because she trusted him to keep the pictures that she sent to himself. It was important for men to show their friends the sexting pictures that they received to their friends only when they were not in a relationship with a woman.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The participants in this research study used sexting as a way to communicate sexual desires and interests in their intimate relationships. Sexting enabled the young adults in the study to express their sexual interests and desires to their intimate partners via text messaging. Understanding that cybersexuality enabled sexual expression to develop as the interviewees felt comfortable using technology to express their sexual desires on a virtual stage, they explained how they used sexting. The independent production of sexting paralleled that of amateur pornography displayed on the Internet as non-professional actors produced sexual expressions for public view, in this case their partners. Through the technological advancement of cell phones and cybersexuality, the production of sexting encompassed these different aspects and developed a communication of sexual desires and interests via text messaging. Sexting utilized text messaging as a virtual stage for social interaction between sexters.

The sexual performance in sexting used the presentation of self to do gender in the frontstage. Sexting provided a virtual stage of performances to do emphasized femininity or hegemonic masculinity. Expressing masculinity and femininity correctly displayed the proper qualities for a man or woman to be accepted by an audience in the frontstage (Goffman 1977; West and Zimmerman 1987). Sexting applied doing gender and impression management strategies applied as a method of presenting masculinity and femininity through text messaging. Doing gender through sexting constructed and reinforced how gender can be enacted through the display of a performance in social interaction. Men and women pursued performing their correct display of a gender performance in their sexting. Outlining cell phone features as a mediator to sexting, the

presentation of sexting, and using sexting as a means to do gender, this discussion section will connect the key findings of the research to the dramaturgical perspective of presentation of self and doing gender.

### Technological Mediation of Sexting

Texting their sexual desires and interests, the sexters were able to use technology as a mediator for the presentation of self. Goffman (1959) discussed the presentation of the self not as a material object, but as a performance of the social roles that are allocated in a given situation. The everyday performance of text messaging allowed the performer to produce a representation of their social self. The presentation of the self through sexting was categorized by acting out a sexual role by following a sexualized script. By approving an acceptable performance through text messaging, sexting was ritualized and represented the self in everyday social interaction. Presenting the self in the most correct manner to the social scripts, the actor used texting to their advantage, by using the response time to think about and create their text messages. The performer pursued to display accurate social roles for the audience, which was approved by the audience as an authentic display of a normative role (Goffman 1959). By interacting with others and reflecting on the performance, the performer pursued the acceptance by the audience as a means of verifying that their performance was correctly portraying the script they were performing (Goffman 1959). The audience, the receiver of a text message, was a reference for judgment to the performer of their message they sent. If the performance by the sender was accepted and approved by the receiver, then the performance was executed correctly and the receiver would respond back to the text message with a response. The performer tried to present the accurate representation of a scripted role in

front of the audience by performing the correct script in order to produce the best performance (Goffman 1959). Using text messages as a means for performance showed that the individual was self-interested in their appearance of the message to the receiver and tried to accurately present their self-image through text messaging. Consciously making an effort to manage how others perceived them, the performer's act was verified when the audience accepted or dismissed the scripted performance. The response time and the ability to create text messages to communicate a certain display, text messaging set the stage for the presentation of sexting to occur between sexters.

### Presentation of Sexting

The production of the self through following scripted roles in social interaction occurred in the front and backstage of the performance (Goffman 1959). The features of text messaging afforded the front and backstage to the sender, which allowed them to feel comfortable communicating their sexual interests and desires. The presentation of self was publicly displayed through social interaction, which sexting afforded the communication of sexually explicit material. By responding to the initiation of sexting and presenting the messages in particular ways, the sexters used the front and backstage to perform sexting.

*Backstage.* Managing the presentation of self in the backstage, while the performers composed their messages, the sexters made conscious decisions of how to present sexual interests and desires to their audience. Preparing for the frontstage performance, the reception of the text message by the receiver, the sexter thought about the construction of their response and how the receiver would react to their text message. Making multiple efforts to present their self in the text message to the best of their ability

text messaging allowed sexting to utilize backstage to their advantage to prepare for the frontstage performance. This aspect allowed the sexters to feel less pressure in responding quickly and gave them time to think about how they wanted to present themselves through their text. Paralleling text messaging as a stage for performance, the reception of a text message presented the self to an audience. The sexter was able to retreat to the backstage when the message was sent, during this time they had the ability to review their performance and consider their next act when/if they received a response. By receiving a response, the presentation of the self was verified by the audience as acceptable and was approved, in which the sexter had the opportunity to perform in the frontstage once more.

*Frontstage.* During the front stage the performer displayed an appearance and manner according to the surrounding audience and used text messaging as a stage to present their sexual performance accordingly. The frontstage of the performance was where the social self was presented publicly and the sexters created text messages to display appropriate sexual messages to the recipient of their sext. While in the backstage, the sexter had the ability to formulate the presentation of the text message by using the response time to prepare for their frontstage performance. According to Goffman (1959), the performer in the frontstage offered a performance to the audience for the maintenance of social behavior. Utilizing text messaging offered a frontstage for the sexters as they constructed a performance of sexually provocative messages to display their sexuality. By interpreting the performance, the receiver of the sext was able to judge the performance and chose whether or not the performance was acceptable by responding to

the message. The audience, the receiver of a text message, was able to judge the performance of sexting in the frontstage, which established sexting as a social interaction.

### Producing Sexual Scripts for Sexting

Goffman (1959) explained the production of the self through following scripted roles that represented the correct performance in front of an audience. Consciously making an effort to manage how others perceived their sexting, the performer's act was verified when the audience accepted the scripted performance as a true depiction of sexual arousal. Since the interviewees had direct contact with each other along with the privacy of a personal cell phone, the interviewees produced sexually explicit scripts for the purpose of stimulating a sexual arousal in the reception of sexting. Creating scripts of the sexual activities that the sexters desired to partake in followed the scripted roles as a performance. The initiation of sexting started with flirtatious text messaging that incorporated the non-verbal gesture of a winky face emoticon. Signifying the meaning of the text message to advance the conversation into a flirting, the sexter initiated their sexual interest to the receiver. By understanding the meaning of sexting, the interviewees advanced the sexual scripts by using explicit detail in the sexual acts they desired to perform. The progression of sexting was paralleled to that of the script of a porno, which developed a plot for sexual activity and the performance of that plot by actors.

*Flirting.* Sexting began with flirting and the cell phone mediated the ways in which the sexters were able to present a flirtatious representation through the winky face emoticon. Flirting was understood by the sexters to initiate the conversation of sexting, which set the stage for more sexually explicit material to develop if the audience accepted the performance. The interviewees explained that a text message like, "I want to have sex

with you” was not considered sexting, because of the lack of developing a flirtatious conversation that progressed into the explicit talk of sexual activity. By describing how they would have sex and what they would do if they were together that was described as the correct performance of the sexting scripts. The interviewees’ descriptions of sexting presented their sexual roles as a couple. The initiation and flirting created a foundation for sexting to happen before their sexual scripts developed.

*The Progression of the Scripts.* The sexters created a sexual script that distinguished the roles between one another. By describing the sexual activity that they desired from each other, the sexters coordinated their future sexual experiences. The progression of sexting transitioned through different stages into their relationships, which developed the sexual script of their relationship. The real life presentation of the different stages in the scripting of sexting presented the self as sexually desirable. The sexual interaction that the interviewees described was the initiation, flirting and “talking dirty”, which produced the sexual scripts that they would plan to act on in the future. Goffman’s (1959) performer followed a script that reaffirmed the values of a situation. Using their sexual scripts as a way to display their sexual interest of each other, the intimate relationships were using sexting to reaffirm their sexual desire in the relationship. The interviewees developed and progressed through the different stages of sexting to represent their sexual role in their relationship with their intimate partner. The sexual scripts were created by the sexters, which established a confirmation of an acceptable performance by the audience. The scripts would include the escalation of the sexual material in the social interaction included a plan of action for both parties that participated in sexting.

### Sexting as a Means of Doing Gender

Men and women present gender as a representation of what it means to be a real man or woman (West and Zimmerman 1987). Using text messaging as a frontstage, sexting was a means for doing gender appropriately by producing, reproducing, sustaining, and legitimating the social meanings prescribed to gender, which was legitimated by the audience. Doing the “right” gender through text messaging, the sexter was able to construct and display their gender role. Showing the legitimacy of their gender role by showing their competence to display being a man or woman correctly, the sexters displayed gender through using text messages as sexual scripts. Communicating through sexting allowed gender to be presented continually through social interaction as a means of creating and displaying hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. As a form of doing gender and presentation of self, sexting encompassed impression management of social scripts via text messaging sexual interests and desires. Performing hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, doing gender correctly became an important frontstage performance (Connell 1987; West and Zimmerman 1987). Men and women used sexting for different purposes and had different perspectives of the act of sexting.

*Emphasized Femininity.* Women used sexting to promote a sexual arousal for the interest and desire of men. In order to do emphasized femininity correctly, the women were conscious of how the presentation of sexting was perceived by men. They did not want to sound like a slut or that it was easy for them to be sexting other men, in which a representation of emphasized femininity was done by women who did want to be perceived as sexually attractive to men. Using sexting as a means to stimulate a sexual

arousal, women disregarded their sexual interests for the pleasure men received of sexting. The interviewees discussed performing sexting not because it made them happy but to keep men sexually interested in them. Women discussed their motivation for sexting was to keep their partners sexually interested, but expressed that they did not want their sexting to be perceived by men as being a slut. By portraying their sexting, especially their pictures, as risqué, the women presented their sexting to portray sexual appeal to portray the correct sexuality of emphasized femininity. How women presented their pictures was motivated for the interest of men, in which the women created images that the men wanted to see. Sexting was utilized as a display of being sexually attractive for a man by a woman, in which the women in the study consciously created their text messages to do gender correctly.

*Hegemonic Masculinity.* The motivation of men to perform sexting was for sexual satisfaction. Since the emergent form of cybersexuality and amateur pornography, sexting was used as a means of masturbation. Hegemonic masculinity was used to show the overemphasis of being a sexual being by asking, “what are you wearing” implying sexual connotations. Displaying hypersexuality, men used sexting to request for pictures and use them for masturbation as a display of hegemonic masculinity. Men’s perspective of a woman sexting without being in an intimate relationship, also displayed their performance of masculinity, by calling the woman who performed sexting a slut. Without the status of being in a relationship with a woman, men’s perspective was that there was a possibility that the woman was not mutually performing sexting with him only. By performing dominance as a means of showing hegemonic masculinity, men’s perspective of sexting from a woman should be for their own benefit only and not other men. When

men were in a relationship they also displayed their masculinity by keeping the woman's picture to himself, so that the friends did not see 'his' girlfriend. Showing exclusive possession of the pictures received from sexting, men performed their masculinity by keeping the pictures for his personal use rather than showing his friends so that the friends would not see his girlfriend in a sexual connotation. When a man was not in a relationship with a woman and received a picture from sexting, they used the pictures a way to show off to their friends their reception of sexting. Displaying hegemonic masculinity by sharing the pictures and/or sexts with other men, the interviewees wanted to display their masculinity in for other men.

The presentation of self was able to show competence of doing gender correctly through sexting. As women utilized sexting to portray their sexuality for the interest of men, they were consciously constructing their presentation of their sexting to do emphasized femininity. In addition, men displayed hegemonic masculinity by using hypersexuality to show dominance in sexting. By showing off to other men their sexting or keeping their girlfriends sexting from other men, the interviewees used the performance sexting as a means of doing hegemonic masculinity. Sexting as a means of doing gender was an important reason for the sexters to display their sexuality via text messaging. The performance of doing gender was an intricate display of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity that utilized the advanced features of text messaging as a social interaction to construct a presentation of self.

#### Suggestions for Future Research

Further suggestions for researching sexting would be to look at the differences in socio-demographics. Looking at the process and meaning of sexting that different

demographic groups experience, is suggested to gain a further understanding of what sexting looks like for particular demographic groups. Researching these different groups would have a means to understand the experiences and perceptions of men and women from different racial/ethnic groups. Also, this research was limited to twenty-three interviewees who were within the age range of eighteen to twenty-one years old. Having a larger sample size with various backgrounds would generate greater amounts of knowledge to continue following how this social interaction affects the presentation of self in different groups.

The interviewees discussed growing up with technology as part of their life. The older generations were introduced to the new technologies at different points in their life cycle. To look at the differences between how different generations incorporated technology in their social interactions, specifically with sexting, would generate a broader framework of how this social interaction is experienced in different age categories. What are the differences between the motivations for people that are older to sexually communicate using sexting? What are the differences between marital status and sexting? Furthering the age demographic to include multiple generations and different marital statuses would expand how the involvement of technology is incorporated into sexual communication in everyday life.

Sexuality would be another demographic that would be especially revealing of the social interaction in sexting. What are the dynamics between same-sex couples and sexting? Researching sexuality and the affects of sexting communicating sexual desires would gain further insight of sexting being a presentation of self and doing gender.

## ENDNOTES

1. 18 U.S.C. § 2256: (a) Whoever produces any book, magazine, periodical, film, videotape, digital image, digitally- or computer-manipulated image of an actual human being, picture, or other matter which—

(1) contains one or more visual depictions made after November 1, 1990 of actual sexually explicit conduct; and

(2) is produced in whole or in part with materials which have been mailed or shipped in interstate or foreign commerce, or is shipped or transported or is intended for shipment or transportation in interstate or foreign commerce;

shall create and maintain individually identifiable records pertaining to every performer portrayed in such a visual depiction.

2. By soliciting flyers distributed to faculty and put up around campus, volunteers were compensated a five-dollar Starbucks Gift Card for participating in the interview. Before any interviews proceeded the volunteer was asked their age and the study was described to them. If there was any question about the participant's age, proof of identification was called for. Due to the sensitivity of the topic all participants were given a list of follow up counseling resources in case any of the participants were extremely distressed. The interviews were audio taped and the recordings were kept in a locked box separate from the informed consent form so that confidentiality was maintained. All transcriptions of the interviews used pseudonyms for any and all identifying names including but not limited to names of people, locations, etc. At the end of the research, the tape recordings were destroyed.

3. Skype was founded in 2003 and headquartered in Luxembourg. Skype is a division of Microsoft Corp. With Skype, you can share a story, celebrate a birthday, learn a language, hold a meeting, work with colleagues – just about anything you need to do together every day. You can use Skype on whatever works best for you - on your phone or computer or a TV with Skype on it. It is free to start using Skype - to speak, see and instant message other people on Skype for example. You can even try out group video, with the latest version of Skype.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your age?
2. What year are you in school?
3. Where did you attend high school?
  - a. Were you involved in any activities? What kinds?
  - b. Did you have a relationship during your high school years?
    - i. How long were you together?
    - ii. Were there any other relationships?
4. How would you make use of the Internet during high school?
  - a. How would you use the Internet?
  - b. What do you think are the differences between text messaging and instant messaging? If any?
5. Have you ever owned a cell phone?
  - a. Could you tell me when was the first time you were in possession of a cell phone?
  - b. Was there anytime that you would use your cell phone during high school?
  - c. How was your cell phone monitored?
    - i. By whom?
    - ii. In what ways was it monitored?
6. About how many of your friends had a cell phone in high school?
  - a. How would you say they would use their cell phone?
  - b. What were the differences between your cell phone use and your friends?
    - i. Similarities?
7. What are your reasons for having a cell phone?
  - a. How has your cell phone use changed since high school?
8. In what ways do you communicate through text messaging?
  - a. Who would you communicate with?
  - b. How often?
  - c. How intimate are you through text messaging?
  - d. What types of media would you send?
  - e. What types of media would you receive?

9. Have you ever heard of the term “sexting?”
  - a. When did you first hear about sexting?
  - b. What do you know about sexting?
  - c. What do you consider sexting?
  - d. How did you find out about it?
  - e. Where do you think sexting originated?
  - f. In what ways has sexting affected you personally?
  - g. Was there anytime when you sent or received a sext?
  - h. Did anyone other than the recipient or sender view your message?
  - i. Has anyone of authority come into contact with your messages?
    - i. If not, do you know of anyone who has been in this circumstance?
10. Have you or anyone you know suffered the repercussions of sexting?
  - a. What were the repercussions?
  - b. Did any action follow?