Understanding sexting among young adults in Hong Kong

Abstract

This article examines the sexting practice of young adults in Hong Kong. Drawing on data and analysis from in-depth interviews and an online survey, we look into the sexting practices of young adults aged 18-29 and examine the characteristics of their sexting behaviors from a sociological perspective. Generally speaking, young adults find sexting with someone they only knew online interesting and fun. The motives of young adults for engaging in sexting vary among gaining sexual pleasure, searching for correlated sexual activities, and enjoying the autonomy of self-representation through anonymity. By comparing the perception of sexters and nonsexters, we find the discrepancy among the social cognition towards sexting and argue that while sexting is socially unacceptable in Hong Kong, the social stigmatization of sexting also reflects in the sexting practices of young adults and impacts their attitudes towards sexting. This article seeks to fill in the blank of sexting-related study in Hong Kong and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the nature and characteristics of sexting practices among young adults within the social and cultural context of Hong Kong.

Keywords:
Hong Kong, sexting, sexters, nonsexters, young adults, smartphone dating applications (apps), dramaturgy, deviance, social stigmatization, moral standards

Arthurs:
Chan Wing Yan, Vanesse; Chan Wing Yin, Terrence; Lau Yu Ying, Jessica; Ren Yue, Ronnie
Introduction

As a term newly developed in the 21st century, sexting has gradually come into the sight of the academic field in recent years with concern mainly on sexting-related risks and dangers posed to minorities and young people (Livingstone and Helsper, 2009). Enabled by new communication technologies and digital devices, sexting refers to the communication of “sexually explicit content” (Ringrose et al., 2012, p.9) and “peer-to-peer exchange of sexual messages…created and exchanged via text or image messaging” (Livestone et al., 2014, p.2). Sexters usually engage in sexting through text messages, mobile phones and/or the Internet such as social networking sites and online chat programs (Ringrose et al., 2012). Besides, a more narrowed definition of sexting centers around the exchange of sexually suggestive images. Western scholars tend to define sexting as “the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images” (Lenhart, 2009) and “practice of using a camera cell phone to take and send nude (including semi-nude) photographs” (Chalfen, 2009).

Considering that little is known about the sexting practice in Hong Kong and the possible difference of sexting practice among different societies, we hope to broaden the research scope to include more circumstances. In view of various definitions, we adopt the broader definition of sexting which includes the exchange of both “home-made pornographic images” of oneself (Chalfen, 2009) and sexually suggestive written texts via text messages, mobile phones and/or the Internet.
Sexting is referred to 性短信/情慾短信 (sex text/ erotic text) in Chinese language in Hong Kong. The prevalence of sexting among adolescents and YAs has been widely discussed in the mass media and academic field of the United States since 2008, when the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy released a national survey reporting that 20% of youth had sexted (Hasinoff, 2014). Following the national survey, Lenhart (2010, as cited in Gordon-Messer et al., 2013) reported that, 13% of the YAs in the United States aged 18-29 had sent sexually provocative nude/semi-nude images and 31% had received sext messages via cell phones in 2010. Gordon-Messer (et al., 2013) updated the data as 30% of the YAs had sent sext messages and 41% had received sext messages in 2012. Similar surveys were conducted in many countries such as Canada, Australia, Sweden, and Japan, but little resources have been found regarding the prevalence of sexting among YAs in Hong Kong. Given the influence of globalization and development of communication technologies around the world, we estimate the prevalence of sexting among YAs in Hong Kong as enjoying the continuation of the upward trend.

By examining the media coverage of sexting in major news platforms as well as the social media sites in Hong Kong, we found that sexting is rarely covered in news reports and public posts of Internet users, and mainly appears in relation to sexting related crime, sex education of youth, and sexual abuse events. While discussions mainly focus on the legality and safety of sexting, little is known about the reasons and motivations for individuals to engage in sexting behavior. Meanwhile, only limited investigations over sexting in the social and cultural context of Hong Kong
have been conducted. Under this background, this research endeavors to examine the sexting practice of YAs in Hong Kong by looking into the sexting experiences of YAs ages 18-29 and the perceptions of nonsexters in Hong Kong. We aim to understand from sexters’ perspectives the relationship between sexting, sexual pleasure, relationship. By comparing the perceptions of sexters and nonsexters, we investigate the social stigmatization of sexting and the social influence on sexters’ attitudes and behaviors. This article provides a nuanced understanding of the sexting behaviors of YAs in relation to the sociocultural environment of Hong Kong society and facilitates future study on sexting with qualitative analysis and insights.
Literature review

Current available researches on the subject of sexting have focused mainly on studying the prevalence of sexting among adolescents and YAs, and more researches employ quantitative research methods than qualitative methods. Meanwhile, as sexting relates to the circulation of sexually explicit materials, it gives rise to widespread concern over the negative impacts of sexting (Livingstone and Helsper, 2009). Chalfen (2009) identified sexting as creating uncomfortable and unanticipated legal, social, and emotional problems for participants. Scholars also show interest in studying the negative consequences of sexting practices in terms of associated risks and crime (Chalfen, 2009; Hasinoff, 2013). They have focused on the potential relationship between sexting and sexual behaviors including but not limited to unprotected sex, unplanned pregnancy, number of sexual partners, and problematic behaviors (Kosenko et al., 2017). Under the current academic framework, little is known about the motives for individuals to engage in sexting practice. Few researches offer sociological understandings and insights for the characteristics of sexting practices as well as the attitudes and perceptions of sexters.

At the same time, limited investigation over sexting among YAs has been conducted in Hong Kong. Scholars have investigated relevant topics including the use of smartphone dating applications and its impacts on sexual risky behaviors among youth and/or among college students in Hong Kong (Choi et al., 2016; Choi et al., 2018). Nevertheless, their study mainly focuses on the relationship between smartphone dating applications and further sexual activities, leading the discussion to
potential sexual abuse assisted by the use of dating applications. Other scholars have studied the body display among users on social networking sites in Hong Kong and provide insights for user’s identity construction through online body display on Facebook (Chan et al., 2014). Although the author mentioned sexting as one form of online body display, the article majorly focuses on the public display of body image on social media sites and its relationship with narcissism and body image satisfaction.

By contrast, Liong and Cheng’s recent study (2019) is more relevant to our research on sexting. Different from us, Long and Cheng adopted the concentrated definition of sexting as “the sending of nude or sexually provocative pictures by an individual of himself or herself to another person through a cell phone and/or the internet” (p.337). By this definition, they identified sexting as a form of media production involving the presentation of the sexual self (Hasinoff, 2013; as cited in Liong and Cheng, 2019), and focused on the mediated nature of sexting and its relations with objectification and sexual liberation. Similar to most of the current available research on sexting, Liong and Cheng (2019) conducted a quantitative research method in their study with 361 respondents from the questionnaire and argued that sexting “is both sexually objectifying and liberating” and “carries with it both positive and negative expectancies” (p.341).
Methodologies

We explore small-scale qualitative and quantitative research methods combining in-depth individual interviews and an online survey with analysis of YAs’ sexting practices and the perception of both sexters and nonsexters. By comparing the data from in-depth interviews and the online survey, we are able to unfold the possible discrepancies between the attitude and perception of sexters and nonsexters and generate rich sociological insights into YAs’ sexting practices.

In-depth interview

We have conducted 7 in-depth interviews with sexters ages 18-29 during the period of March 20, 2020 to May 23, 2020. 2 of our interviewees are female, and 5 of them are male. One of the interviewees (male) is homosexual, one (female) is bisexual and the rest are heterosexual. We have a diversity within the interviewees in terms of their sexting experiences. One female interviewee started sexting for the first time this year because of the COVID-19 situation, and one male interviewee started sexting in middle school when he was 15 years old, we also have one interviewee who has rich sexting experience and claimed to have more than 50 sext partners since May 2019. The diversity of their sexting experiences provides us a more comprehensive picture of the sexting practice of YAs.

In the special situation of COVID-19, we conducted online interviews with all the interviewees, and the average time for all the interviews is 30 to 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted mainly via mobile phone call and audio call on the
Telegram with granted permission from interviewees for audio recording. Online interview allows us to reach the interviewees without geographic limits. It shares similar characteristics with sexting in terms of having conversations via mobile phone, social networking sites or online chat programs, and is able to create a familiar and safe environment for the interviewees to talk and share. Meanwhile, we are limited by the form of online interviews. Comparing with face-to-face interaction, mobile phone calls and audio calls via communication apps increase the distance between interviewers and interviewees and make it hard for the researchers to identify interviewees’ first reaction and make prompt reactions with follow-up questions.

Considering the characteristics of online interaction and phone call, we designed the interview questions to be clearer and more precise to avoid possible misunderstanding of certain sentences and wordings. Our interview questions contain three parts: 1) facts about their information and sexting experience including age, number of sext partners, romantic relationship, years of sexting, preferred platforms, etc. 2) details about their sexting practice including discussion over sext content, presentation of self-image, quality of sext partner, motives to engage in sexting, etc. and 3) their attitudes towards sexting including how they distinguish sexting from actual sex and romantic relationship, and how they perceive the social acceptance of sexting in Hong Kong society and how they react under the social influence. Our interviewees are able to respond to these questions without feeling uncomfortable and offensive and offer us abundant information and perception toward sexting. Some show strong interest in discussing the subject of sexting with researchers and provide
diverting and inspiring insights based on their sexting experience. As a result, we organized the interview script into a 30-page-long Microsoft word document.

As for interviewee recruitment, similar with many Chinese societies, Hong Kong society remains a relatively conservative culture and it is rare for people to frankly speak and talk about sex in the public (Blundy, 2017). Therefore, we used a snowball sampling method and recruited 4 of the interviewees by the recommendation of researchers’ friends and friends of friends. Snowball sampling method allows researchers to reach the hidden group of people which is difficult to access for researchers (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). Besides, we reached out to potential interviewees on Tinder and Heymandi and recruited 3 of the interviewees from Heymandi. As introduced by our interviewees, Tinder and Heymandi are popular for Hong Kong users who are looking for sext partners. Our researchers registered an account on Heymandi and initiated conversations with several users of the applications. While the users remain anonymous when using the applications, we are not able to fact-check with the identity and information provided by our interviewees. Nevertheless, we find the interview result trustworthy as it comes from real sexters on dating applications. Without being identified, they are more willing to share with us their experiences and perceptions towards sexting.

**Online survey**

We have conducted an online survey from March 25, 2020 to April 24, 2020, in order to collect the public's view towards Sexting of YAs in Hong Kong. Ninety respondents’ views were gathered and analyzed.
Design of the questionnaire

The questionnaire comprises 16 questions. Before the respondents read the questions, they need to read the consent form and declare if they have agreed with the terms and aged 18 or above.

The questionnaire comprises two parts. In the first part, questions for demographic information such as age, gender, occupations, sexual orientation and relationship status are laid out. For the purpose of the study, respondents are also asked about if they have past sexting experience and their knowledge on sexting.

The second part is set to gather their perception towards sexing, including questions regarding deviance, intimacy and safety etc. Likert-scale and open-ended methods are used in setting the questions.

Demographics of the respondents

Among the ninety respondents, around one-third of them aged between 18 and 21, sixty percent of them aged 22-25, four per-cent aged between 26 and 30; and the rest (around two percent) aged over 30. Around thirty percent of the respondents were female, and the rest are male. A majority [90 %] of the respondents considered themselves as heterosexual; 5.6 percent of them consider themselves as homosexual, 1.1 percent of them claimed as bisexual, and pansexual, and prefer not to say. The majority [91.1 %] of our respondents claimed that they are students, with few respondents having different occupations such as civil servant, creative marketing manager or work in the Education sector.

Regarding their relationship status, more than half [53.3 %] of the respondents
are single, while around two-fifths [42 %] of them are in a relationship, and with one married case, and one considers him/herself as in “open relationship”.

When asked about their sexting experience, 60 percent of them reveal that they have no sexting experience before, while 36.7 percent say that they have sexting experience. 3.3 percent are not willing to disclose.
Findings

We have interviewed seven sexters who meet their sexting partners on dating apps. They generally have a more open-minded attitude towards relationships. Most of them (71%) have sex partner(s) before. 57% of them started sexting in their teenage. The media of sexting including text and images, most of them (71%) have experience of both, while some only engage in sex text but they do not send explicit pictures to other people. In the following, we will present our findings on the sexting behaviors in Hong Kong, including their motivations, attitude, and how they compare sexting with intimate relationships.

Motivations of sexting

Fun and excitement

Feeling excited and fun is one of the major reasons for sexting. Among our interviewees, most of them started sexting when they felt bored and had nothing to do. For example, during the coronavirus in 2020, they cannot go out to meet new people and thus they feel bored and start sexting online. Some people start sexting during exchange due to boredom as well. 57% of our sexter interviewees started this behavior in their teenage because they are curious about sex. Talking about sex can make them feel excited.

“I think it was exciting. I didn’t have any relationship in high school, so all I know about sex is just talking about it. I feel good/high when someone talked about sex with me.”

[Mr. K]
Findings from the survey results also coincide with the interview results. In Question 11D (Fig. 4), most [87%] of the respondents who claimed to have sexting experience agree that “sexting is interesting and fun” Generally, half [50%] of the respondents also hold a perception that “it is interesting and fun.”

**Sexual pleasure**

Sexting is a way to gain sexual pleasure generated by sexual imagination. Most of the sexters (86%) reveal that they can gain sexual pleasure in the process. Some of them feel sexually excited during sexting and have the urge to masturbate. Some of them would actually masturbate when they sex text someone. The type of sexual excitement, according to the majority of interviewees, is different from the sexual pleasure gained in actual sexual intercourse. It is created by the imagination created in texts or partially exposed photos. For example, playing with words in sex text and the use of synonyms can generate more imagination than the actual sex, which is very direct.

“If you explicitly go out for sex, your whole person is already there. You lose the imaginative space. The imagination is the anticipation because she would say something to seduce you.”

[Mr. D]

“No pictures are even better because imagination is the best.... If you have imagination for someone, how they look doesn’t matter.”

[Mr. I]
Expecting further sexual activities

Most of the sexters (57%) expect further sexual activities after sexting. Through sexting, people can understand each other’s sexual practice better. If the sexting goes well, the sexters may meet each other in person and have actual sex. Besides, sexters may also develop deeper relationships with their sexting partner, though it may not be their intention when engaging in sexting in the first place.

“There are a few types of sexting partners. Some people look good in photos, but maybe they are rude or hard to communicate when we start chatting. The second type is the one I would approach when I have sexual needs. The third type is the one I would date in real life. There is one that I was dating for a while. Another one ends up having a relationship with me.” [Mr. K]

In the survey, we asked [Figure 8] our respondents to speculate the reasons why young people engage in sexting, with 13 options provided as suggestions, and an open-ended option for them to fill in. Among the options, “To initiate further sexual activities in real life” is the reason most [76.7%] people have chosen. For those who claimed to have sexting experience before, most [88%] have chosen “To initiate further sexual activities in real life”. Meanwhile, 67% (two-thirds) of the nonsexters in the survey also held the idea that YAs sext to initiate further sexual activities.

Self-reassurance

Sexting can be a method to understand sex and personality better. One of the female interviewees reflected that she wants to please the men during sexting because
it is a way to reassure herself. Through the interaction with her sexting partners, she can also know the qualities that boys are looking for in girls.

“I treat sexting as a tool for testing what the market wants, how boys see myself, what they seek for, and how to maintain a better relationship with boys.”  

[Miss M]

Dissatisfaction of the current relationship

Dissatisfaction of the current relationship is also one of the reasons that people engage in sexting. Two of our interviewees, both males, are currently in an intimate relationship. They continue to sext with other people because they think their intimate partners may not be able to provide what they desire for.

“I sext or seek sexting partners because I have dissatisfaction with my relationship in real life. To me, I want further sexual activity when I sext. I want something more than sexting, which I cannot get from my partner. That's why I want to get something more from others… It's kind of cheating because you want to have sex with other people”  

[Mr. D]

“My girlfriend is too busy. She has no time for this (sexting)... I don't think it’s cheating because everyone has a desire. I need to find some fun for myself.”  

[Mr. I]

Qualities of sexting partner

Appearance is one of the major criteria in sexting according to our findings. To sexters who find privacy as a major concern, they would describe (or make up) their
appearances before starting the conversation instead of sending pictures, in order to enhance the engagement of sexting. Interviewee Mr. R expressed that the only factor concerns him in sexting partner’s quality would be appearance, in particular body figure. While to sexters who are willing to send their own pictures to sexting partners, they would prefer exchanging each other’s pictures prior to starting the conversation of sexting. Real appearances could add to the realness of the conversation.

“For my sexting partner, she must be physically attractive.”

[Mr. D]

“Many people write “for sexting” in their bio on dating apps like Tinder, but they don’t show their faces. Usually I ignore those people because I don’t know if he is a thirty-year-old uncle looking for a sexting partner.”

[Mr. K]

Alongside appearances, communication is another quality concerning sexters. Instant interaction is considered a crucial factor affecting the sexting experiences as it could enhance the realness of the virtual experience.

“I need to feel like we really are communicating and interacting.”
“We need interaction but not solely words.”

[Miss M]

She implied in the interview that she expects more such as chit chats (but not in-depth conversations) with the sexting partner than solely sending sexually explicit texts. Mr. K pointed out his emphasis on communication skills about the tone of communication and thus he expects not “too aggressive but polite” tone from sexting partners.
Privacy concerns and anonymity

Interviewees expressed concern and worries over privacy issues. They would therefore prefer apps which leave no record such as telegram and snapchat to minimize the risk of being recognized. Three of the interviewees showing concern over leakage of pictures and disclosure of identity would also avoid exchanging pictures of their appearances to avoid disclosure of identity. Miss M also expressed strong reluctance to disclose real identities. She has similar practice by not sending pictures including her appearances.

“If I have to sext through the app knowing each other's real identity, I wouldn't want to play at all. It's fine as long as I'm not sending pictures.”

[Miss M]

“If I take pictures of my private parts, I won't show my face. In case the photos are leaked, you can still deny it.”

[Mr. K]

In light of the privacy concerns, sexters prefer to sext with anonymous people, which can provide a sense of safety. Sexters feel relatively safe as the person knows little about you. Many of our interviewees are using Heymandi, an anonymous dating app which doesn’t require users to show personal information and photos. All they need to show is one short sentence describing themselves, or even just an emoji would work. This app is popular for sexting because people cannot see each other’s personal information.
On top of that, the sexters usually move on to other social platforms like telegram after meeting each other on dating apps, which restrict them to send pics due to protection policy. Sexters usually send ‘burning photos’ which will vanish after a few seconds and the sexting partner can only view it once. To protect themselves, most of the sexters do not include their face in the picture if it is sexually explicit, therefore in case the photos are leaked, no one can recognize it.

**Attitude towards sexting relationship**

According to our findings, all of the sexters do not treat sexting as an intimate relationship. Most of them expressed that sexting is just for fun, it does not attach with any responsibility and commitment. For example, Mr. D considers sexting merely as a ‘chatting game’ which he can play with the words. Our interviewees do not consider sexting as an intimate relationship. They do not share concerns in life, there is no in-depth conversation. Moreover, as it is a casual relationship for them, some sexters may find it annoying if the person wants to intervene in his personal life.

“If that person is too aggressive ("chur"), like keep asking me when I don’t reply, I would be turned off…. I would sext with them when I am in a mood. But when I don’t, don’t intervene in my normal life.”

[Mr. K]

“Sexting relationship is causal. No strings attached. No Commitment. Easy come easy go.”

[Mr. D]

“Sexting partner is nobody. It's not serious at all. But it has the potential to develop into a sexual relationship.”

[Miss X]
In contrary, from the survey results, we can observe that the majority of the respondents held that “sexting is a form of intimate relationship”, and most of the respondents who claimed to have sexting experience find this argument supportive, we can then infer that the majority of them held a relatively serious attitude towards sexting, consider it as a form of relationship with strong-bonding. This also resonates with the result given a half [50%] of the respondents think that “having an intimate relationship” is one of the reasons that motivate people to engage in this behavior.

With slightly over half of the respondents who claimed to have no sexting experiences find this argument valid, one-fifth of this group held a relatively cautious view towards sexting, by not considering it as a form of “intimacy”. It can be inferred as one of the reasons why these people, who wish to have an intimate relationship, or hold a more “serious attitude” towards sexting, would not engage in this behavior.

Images presented in sexting

Sexting provides a room for fluid presentation and expression of self. Interviewees expressed experiences adopting different images when facing different sexting partners, in particular when it comes to introducing their physical appearances to sexting partners. Mr. I also thinks that he can be flexible in changing his identities and creates different scenes and adopting different images for the role-play.

“I tried to create a feminine image by speaking softly to fit in what the “market” (society) expects from women. I would **make up my qualities**. Every quality made up would vary among different men I sext with.”

[Miss M]
Qualities made up also include having a bigger chest (breasts) but young-looking, slightly chubby and being tall but not too tall. She described her image created as “feminine” so as to fit in social expectations on women.

It could be noted that the images presented are often different from their normal self. Mr. K expressed that he would present a “wilder and more direct image” which is different from his real-life self. He added that he is “less constrained” to present different images as sexting is a virtual platform. Mr. D also expressed that he “could be bolder” when he sexts.

“My image is totally different. During sexting, I am a rapist (because of consented role-play). But in reality, I am an educator.”

[Mr. I]

Moral judgement

Interviewees are aware of the moral judgement of sexting. In the context of Hong Kong, people still uphold a traditional view towards sexual practice. Some of the interviewees think sexting practice is not socially acceptable. As a result, they hesitate to share their sexting experience with other people.

“I think it is embarrassing to tell them (friends and family). They may not understand it (sexting) very well. Maybe they don’t tell you explicitly, but I guess they think sexting is a little bit disgusting.”

[Mr. K]

Miss Mo also avoided letting family to find out her sexting experiences. She expressed fear of being stigmatized as having “too much sexual appetite”.
“They might probably think that I am off the track if they find out I engage in sexting.”

[Miss M]

“I think Hong Kong people must have a perception that sexting is very westernized and abnormal. People would tend to avoid this topic. I think they would say something like "Is it appropriate for you to do that (sext)?" They would judge every time. People judging is the biggest reason whether I want to share or not. If I will be judged, why would I still tell them?"

[Mr. D]

From the survey result, compared with sexters, we found that nonsexters carry a more serious attitude towards sexting in terms of viewing sexting as a form of romantic relationship [63%] or for initiating romantic relationship [42%]. We identify the moral standards of the general public towards sexting and relationship from question 8C and 8D, where most people consider sexting with someone else’s partner and sexting with someone other than your partner as highly immoral, and sexting with strangers is also immoral in some way.
**Analysis/Insights**

**Dramaturgy in sexting—A presentation of self**

Adopting different images by sexters in order to be perceived in a certain way resonates with impression management (Goffman, 2004). Goffman suggested that people adopt different roles and different identities in a calculating way hoping that others would in turn have a certain impression towards them. Sexters also adopt calculating strategies which are identified as 'impression management' that they give off desired impressions to be feminine, bold, flirtatious and fun.

Along with presentation of different identities, displaying different gender and sexual expression can drive sexual liberation (Hasinoff, 2013). Displaying and sending nude or sexualized pictures of oneself also involve self-portrayal which can facilitate individuals’ exploration of their bodies and sexual agency. Satisfaction can be derived through positive evaluation of their flexible sexual identities and expression. Sexting therefore provides YAs with high autonomy of self-expression.

**Gender expression and gender performativity**

Sexters’ sexting practice reflects gender performativity. They conform to the regulatory frame of gender (Butler, 1999). For female sexter, Miss M tries to create a “feminine” image by adopting a tender, caring and rather weak image. She perceives these characteristics as femininity that is crucial to attracting men.

Throughout all the sexting experiences she had, she never initiated a sexting conversation since she reflected that taking an active role is not a role of a woman.
She expects men to take the initiative to start a sexting conversation. She conforms to the stereotypes of gender roles and expectations on women to be passive while men to be active pursuers.

‘I could have initiated sext with men, but I just don’t feel like I have to. This might devalue myself and lower my attractiveness in the eyes of men.’

[Miss M]

Male sexters also expressed that they act to be “bold” when sexting. They described themselves as “masculine” by showcasing muscles, “strong in tone” and “active” in sexting. Female and male sexters therefore conform to the gender expectations and thus perform their gender roles.

However, it is interesting that not only the female interviewee reflected that she would prefer having conversations with men who claimed to have rich sexting experience, some male sexters are in fact expecting female sexters to have rich sexting experience. This is different from the gender stereotype that women should be sexually passive and lacking sexual desires. Being sexually active of women in sexting is preferable and would not be labeled as “impure”. Women can freely express their sexual desire on the platform of sexting.

“That's old fashioned and disrespectful if we call women to be “dirty” if we (women) show signs of sexuality, especially in sexting. Some men might prefer sexually active/explicit women to be sexting partners.”

[Miss M]
Despite male sexters showing signs of resistance to gender stereotypes on women to be sexually inactive, there is still a rigid and clear binary opposition of men/women and masculinity/femininity. Stereotypes of gender expression can still be observed among YAs sexters.

**Patriarchy**

Our finding shows the patriarchy is still dominating in the sexting relationship in Hong Kong. Despite the increasing gender equality in modern society, the sexting practices reveal that people are conforming to hegemonic masculinity regardless of their genders and sexual orientations.

Miss M, who is a 22-year-old heterosexual sexter, said that she wants to understand the qualities that men are looking for in women, i.e. the idealized body and women’s performance in sex. She expects women to be the one who please the men in a relationship. Her sexual satisfaction and self-esteem come from pleasing men. This indicates the sexual passivity of women in Hong Kong.

Another example is Miss X, a 23-year-old girl who identify herself as a masculine bisexual. While she sexts with both females and males, she only sends nude/semi-nude images of herself to male sexting partners. She further explained this is because of her role in the relationship. As the masculine gender role in the relationship, she does not expect herself to send sexually explicit pictures to the women. Yet, she would send pictures to the male sexters to please them or seduce them, demonstrating the universal assumption of patriarchy.
On top of that, we find that the women enjoy being dominated in the practice of sexting relationships, conforming to hegemonic masculinity (García-Gómez, 2018). For instance, Mr. I, a 23-year-old heterosexual male who has sexted with more than 50 girls on dating apps, had noticed that most of the girls enjoy being raped and treated rudely during the role play of sexting. They also like to be manipulated in the sexting context. Interestingly, women are willing to be oppressed and dominated in the sexting relationship. From a radical feminist perspective (Musser, 2015), this indicates women are being oppressed in the patriarchal sex. Although the case may not be the same in actual sex, the sexual imagination of being dominated still displays a patriarchal thought.

Discrepancy of the perception of sexters and nonsexters

From the interview, we find that sexters deem sexting as positively related to further sexual activities in real life. This echoes with the result of the survey, which shows that both sexters and nonsexters held the idea that YAs sext to initiate further sexual activities. However, some of the options concerning “peer pressure”, or “to be more mature”, gain zero support from sexters in the survey as well as in the interview. While the general perception (from people who have no sexting experience, or “outside the circle”) consider factors like “peer pressure” or “image management” to be some reasons that people sext, sexters engage in sexting due to different reasons such as autonomy of self-representation, sense of safety remaining autonomous, as well as sexual imagination. It is apparent that there is a discrepancy of the perception
of sexters and nonsexters in terms of motives for sexting, which might lead to further misunderstanding of sexting practices in the society.

Meanwhile, as shown in the finding, nonsexters hold the moral standards of sexting as strongly associated with intimate relationships. However, all sexters from the interview do not treat sexting as an intimate relationship, nor do they mention having intimate relationships as their original intention for sexting. They identify the relationship with sext partners as “random”, “no commitment”, and “no responsibility”. Different attitudes and moral standards between sexters and nonsexters contribute to the social stigmatization of sexting in terms of considering sexting as a deviant form of behavior.

**Social influence on sexters**

In the meantime, the moral judgement and social stigmatization of sexting have an impact on sexters’ behavior and attitude. The worries of identity disclosure, privacy concerns and fear of moral judgement are linked with social perception of sexting. Interviewees reflected that sexting is not socially accepted. They would avoid letting family and friends know that they engage in sexting as they think it is a taboo related to immorality in the eyes of society. Miss M revealed her struggles stem from the potential judgement from surroundings, in particular family. She stated that she tend not to let family members know her sexting practice to avoid being judged and criticized as “desire sex this much” as “off the track (誤入歧途)”. In her statements, we identify the dilemma of sexters in terms of deriving joy from sexting on one hand and showing denial of sexting on the other hand.
“Maybe deep down I think sexting is not appropriate. There should not be such a form of sex exists.”

[Miss M]

“Since I was young, I have a moral value that your private parts can only be seen by your partner. If you take a photo of it, people may think you are perverted. People think your private parts shouldn’t be seen, not to mention exchanging pictures of it.”

[Mr. K]

From their statements, we found the sense of shame and guilt driven by the internalization of the social stigma attached to sexting. The long-existing moral judgement in society might be instilled in them and the idea of online sexuality being deviant is still deeply-rooted in sexters’ mind.

Virtual sexual activity under sex hierarchy

Alongside social construction of their moral values, the idea of “bad sex” also affects their tendency of hiding their sexting habit and self-identification as deviant. To some of the interviewees [Mr. K and Miss M], sexting as a form of virtual sexual activity with people whom they never met is identified as “bad sex” under sex hierarchy (Rubin, 2007). “Virtual” and “with people whom they have never met” are the two major elements distinguishing physical sexual activities in the eyes of the interviewees, which is opposite to the “good sex” such as “at-home” and “bodies-only” sex in the sex hierarchy. They therefore place themselves at the outer limit of the charmed circle of the hierarchy, denying this form of sex as “good” and “normal”. The erotic behavior is denied by the interviewees who at the same time enjoy this form of practice.
Limitations of our research & Suggestion for future studies

Limitations of the current study have been recognized that results should be taken with caution when generalizing the findings. Suggestion would also be provided for future studies on this topic.

First, the majority [5] of our interviewees are Chinese men living in Hong Kong, only a few [2] women were interviewed for our qualitative research. It would have been beneficial to include more female interviewees. With much of the research on sexting examines sexting behaviors of women, a more equal proportion of gender would have benefited the project to provide a more comprehensive view of sexting.

In addition, the study would also be beneficial if the size of interviewee base could be larger. Possible explanations of the relatively low number of interviewees are the sensitivity of the topic, and of the period of the project where the outbreak of COVID-19 limits researchers from reaching out interviewees. More interviewees might have provided more information for the study.

Given the limitation of the study, scholars or researchers who wish to continue to explore the topic are advised to identify the difference between sexting with one’s romantically committed partner, with people know in real life, and with someone only know online. In addition, effects of demographic factors like sexual orientation on people’s perception towards sexting, which were not the focus of this study, can also be analyzed. It is also advised to explore how sexting is affected by the features and roles of dating applications and other communication technologies.
Conclusion

In this article, we unwrap the little-studied phenomenon of sexting in Hong Kong society and provide a comprehensive knowledge for the sexting practices of young adults. Facilitated by the emergence and development of new communication technologies, sexting practices of young adults have characteristics shaped by technology that are different from physical social interactions. The sense of security without personal identification and the concern over privacy issues are the double-edged sword of technology which has large impacts on sexting practices as well as people’s lives in the modern societies.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong’s specific cultural and social context also influence the sexting practices of young adults. The traditional patriarchal culture and the socially conservative attitude towards sex have shaped the sexting practices of young adults. Differences between mainstream social perceptions and perceptions of sexters generate social misunderstanding and stigmatization of sexting. The moral standards are, to some extent, internalized by young adults, and shape their sexting practice to be more private than public, and more personal than social.

This article offers insights for both sexters and nonsexters, and younger generations and elder generations, in learning the sexting practice and attitudes of young adults from a sociological perspective. Given the limited scope of this research and the lack of current available researches on the subject, opportunities exist for future researches on sexting in Hong Kong.
Reference


Appendix - Findings from the quantitative research

Blue: representing respondents claiming to have sexting experience before

Orange: representing respondents claiming to have no sexting experience before

Grey: representing respondents preferring not to disclose

Fig. 1 results of Question set 8, “to what extent would you consider ‘sexting with [xxx]’ as an immoral act?”
Fig. 2 results of Question 10 “Do you agree that sexting is a form of deviance”

Fig. 3 results of Question set 11(A-C) “To what extent would you agree “sexting with [xxx] is alright’?”
Fig. 4 results of Question 11(D) “To what extent would you agree “sexting is interesting and fun?”

Fig. 5 results of Question set 11(E-F) “To what extent would you agree “sexting with [xxx] is safe?”
Fig. 6 results of Question set 11(G-I) “To what extent would you agree “It is more interesting to sext with [xxx]? ”

Fig. 7 results of Question 11(j) “To what extent would you agree “sexting is a form of intimate relationship?”

Fig. 8 results of Question 12 “What do you think are the reasons that young people engage in sexting themselves? (Choose at least one)”