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The Role of Sexting in the Development of Romantic Relationships

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The Role of Sexting in the Development of Romantic Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Using Knapp's stage theory of relationship communication, this pilot study examines "sexting" in the broader framework of relationship development, from initiation to termination. Likert-scale questions (1 = highly unlikely; 5 = highly likely) and open-ended questions were administered through Qualtrics to a small population (N = 45) of undergraduate mass communication students to determine on what communication technology, and in which stage(s) of relationships, sexting is most likely to occur. Quantitative results showed that Snapchat was considered the most appropriate medium for sexts (M = 4.60), followed by texting (4.27). Research shows that these mediums are used when relationships reach a high level of intimacy, which was corroborated as participants felt "bonding," the relationship stage where intimacy and commitment are highest to be the most likely time for both sending (M = 4.58) and receiving sexts (4.64). Results also showed an overestimation of the likelihood to receive a sext (M = 2.51) compared to sending one (M = 2.33). The qualitative results highlighted a contradiction between the importance of comfort, and a heightened intensity and arousal associated with discomfort. A larger-scale study will be conducted in the future to look for gender differences as an explanation for these differing preferences. Together, the results paint sexting as a normative, even expected, part of courtship and intimacy formation, rather than a deviant behavior caused by the corruption of technology.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal relationships are built on communication. While individuals are unique, the way they communicate with each other as their relationships progress is relatively predictable. Mark Knapp developed his relationship stage model in 1978 to reflect this predictability (Knapp, 2005). Knapp's "staircase" model, depicting ten steps of relationship escalation and de-escalation, has been the hallmark for understanding how communication in relationships evolves and the importance people place on certain interpersonal motivations and desires as the relationship progresses (Welch & Rubin, 2002). However, there has been relatively little change to the model since its inception, and many scholars argue that the sudden ubiquity and convenience of communication technologies necessitates a reevaluation of romantic relationships as we know them (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Yang et al., 2014; Lefebvre, 2018).

The role of communication technologies in romantic relationships can be better conceptualized by first understanding an entirely different facet of human behavior and biology: nutrition. For example, many evolutionary theorists blame obesity on modern day food production taking advantage of ancient biological systems (Harari, 2015). Our ability to artificially synthesize fats and sugars on demand has evolved faster than our physiological desires. Our genes still expect the starvation that once defined the existence of our ancient ancestors. In today's industrialized world, however, "people

who have inherited these genes deposit fat in preparation for a famine that never comes" (Speakman, 2013). Just as certain physical characteristics evolve through natural selection to ensure survival and reproduction, so does behavior. (Buss, 1993). Adaptive behaviors are those that increase reproductive success, and are passed onto future generations. Humans are social creatures (Harari, 2015), and the maintenance of personal relationships is one such adaptive behavior which we have continued to enhance through newer forms of technology.

Although we are told not to "judge a book by its cover," research shows that physical attractiveness is a major cue in determining whether or not we decide to initiate a relationship (Walster et al., 1966). Dating applications like Tinder allow people to make this judgement efficiently (Kallis, 2020), while minimizing risk of embarrassment (Sprecher, 2009). Facebook and other social networking sites like Instagram and Twitter let people cautiously approach others through risk-free "likes" and friend requests (Alhabash & Ma, 2017), while texting and Snapchat allow for the maintenance of more intimate relationships across previously un-traversable spans of time and distance (Yang et al., 2014).

Risk, in relationships, has been replaced with ease and efficiency. Yet, according to one study, more people than ever are involuntarily single and struggling to find romance, with singlehood being long-lasting instead of temporary (Apostolou & Wang, 2019). Of the Americans that do find romance in today's digital age, 51% say their partner is often distracted by their phone during conversations, with 40% reporting their partner's cell phone use as a significant bother (Vogels & Anderson, 2020). These technologies even seem to haunt people while away from their partner, or after the

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relationship is over. In a 2020 Pew research study, 70% of young adults ages 18-29

report having checked up on an ex using a social media platform, and 34% of the same

population report that their partner's social media use made them feel jealous and unsure

about their relationship (Vogels & Anderson, 2020). Like excess fat storage, the craving

for surveillance and uncertainty reduction is an adaptive trait that has become perhaps too

easily satisfiable (Harari, 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the role that these

technologies play in relationships, namely whether they create entirely new behaviors or

merely give us new ways to enact old ones more efficiently.

        According to Baym (2009), "research on the internet is a domain too often

plagued by the notion that everything is new." In her 2009 essay, she argues against the

assumption that because certain technologies are new, the behaviors that accompany

them must also be new. She urges researchers not to treat the internet as an isolated

phenomenon, reminding us that human beings exist behind the screen, and they will use

the internet to carry out human motivations, desires, and behaviors that have existed long

before technologically mediated forms of communication (Baym, 2009). For example,

"creeping" or "stalking" on social media might be a new phenomenon, yet seeking

information about a person without direct interaction has always existed. For example,

one might become informed about an attractive other by observing their interactions at a

party instead of approaching them directly, in what Berger coined "passive strategies" of

interaction (Berger, 1979).

        However, from the perspective of Knapp's relationship stages, some might argue

that communication technologies do in fact result in novel behavior. Although dating is

obviously nothing new, online dating sites and applications allow one to curate and

perfect an ideal identity for themselves and anonymously scan an array of potential

partners before interacting with anyone face-to-face. In her study on Tinder, LeFebvre

(2018) dubbed this a kind of "pre-interaction stage," suggesting that Knapp's existing

staircase may not fully account for some new communication technologies .

Sexting is another novel behavior that may not fall neatly under Knapp's

umbrella. Sexting refers to the sending or receiving of sexually suggestive nude or nearly

nude images or videos via cell phone or the internet (Lounsbury et al., 2011). As of

2009, 33% of 18–24-year-olds had participated in sexting, and 40% of one college

student sample knew friends who had sexted (Lounsberry et al., 2011). These statistics

were recorded before the release of Snapchat in 2012, which some say is now the most

used platform for sexting (Vaterlaus et al., 2016) because of its unique affordances,

which will be discussed later. The choices and ease with which to conduct

technologically mediated interpersonal relationships, of which sexting is a natural by-

product, is only increasing. Instead of proposing a total overhaul of Knapp's relationship

staircase, this study hopes to place sexting somewhere within the existing model. The

"pre-interaction" phase afforded by Tinder only exists in the context of Knapp's original

first stage of initiation. Similarly, sexting may prove to be somewhat unique from

Knapp's original conception, yet still have its own place somewhere in the original.

Therefore, a survey will be conducted using Knapp's original model as a theoretical

framework, asking participants to place sexting in what they feel is the most appropriate

stage.

A series of open-ended questions will also be provided to hopefully gain more insight on the potential normativity of sexting in the expected course of romantic relationships.

CHAPTER 2

THEORIES OF RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Many theories and models have sought to explain how relationships change over time. Burgess & Huston (1979) proposed their social exchange theory, which views interpersonal communication from an economic perspective where individuals are constantly evaluating the cost-reward ratio of their relationship. Berger & Calabrese (1975) suggested that relationships are fundamentally about "uncertainty reduction." Early on, individuals are focused on reducing uncertainty, and intimacy eventually results as uncertainty is reduced to the point of comfortability for both parties. Drawing on both perspectives is Taylor & Altman's (1987) social penetration theory, which conceptualizes relationships as an orderly penetration to greater breadths and depths of information sharing.

Breadth refers to the quantity of topics open to discussion, while depth refers to the degree to which each topic is divulged. According to this perspective, people are onions to be peeled (Vangelisti, 2002). Onions aren't peeled from the inside out, just as people do not generally divulge their deepest, darkest secrets on the first date. People's breadth and depth are peeled back in a predictable order; and this penetration into more vulnerable layers is what moves relationships into more intimate places (Carpenter & Greene, 2016). Ultimately, the forward progression of relationships relies on reciprocity and the unspoken agreement that if *you* increase the breadth or depth of your

disclosures then *I* will return the favor (Knapp et al., 2014). Information is the currency

of relationships. If we fail to trade equitable quantities and qualities of information, one

of us might perceive the relationship to be of a greater cost than benefit, leading to

termination (Burgess & Huston, 1979).

Knapp's Staircase Model

While these theories explain certain motivations at certain points in relationship

progression, Knapp's staircase model remains the most consistent and comprehensive

representation of a typical relationship from start to finish (Avtgis et al., 1998). Knapp's

model draws on the theories of social exchange, social penetration, and uncertainty

reduction to describe the steps through which a relationship progresses, from initiation to

termination. Regardless of individual differences, intimacy follows the same patterns of

escalation and de-escalation. Escalation includes the stages of initiation,

experimentation, intensifying, integrating, and bonding, and is characterized by an

increase in self-disclosure, and a gradual merging of identities (Knapp & Vangelisti,

2005). De-escalation is the mirror image of escalation, and contains the stages of

differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and eventually terminating. If

escalation is characterized by a merging of identities, de-escalation is characterized by a

reclamation of one's individuality, and recognition of interpersonal differences

previously unnoticed in earlier stages. Relationships inevitably follow this parabolic

progression unless a sort of balance between intimacy and individuality is achieved.

Holding on to intimacy extremes often leads to a kind of "burn-out," while healthy

relationships rely on a balance between intimate and innocuous interaction (Knapp et al.,

2014).

Escalation

The earliest stages of a relationship, initiation and experimentation, are characterized by *guarded* information seeking filled with behaviors like "small talk," which Knapp et al. (2014) compared to two dogs sniffing each other. The goal is to gather sufficient information about the other person, while minimizing risk to oneself. The other person is doing the same thing; therefore, communication here is much more covert than overt. Both parties are aware that judgement is taking place, and a silent agreement exists to communicate using conventional formulas to display oneself as pleasant, likeable, and socially adept (Fletcher et al., 2000). These interactions are so scripted that our conscious awareness of them is typically very low:

"Morning, Bob. How ya doin'?"

"Morning, Clayton. Go to hell."

"Fine, thanks." (Knapp et al., 2014).

Dialogue here relies on culturally determined formulas requiring minimal cognitive effort, so we can not only observe the other person, but also engage in managing our own subtle self-presentation. The initiation ritual simply serves as a socially acceptable curtain behind which we can conduct our observations of the other and ourselves.

Therefore, progressing past initiation is subject to a kind of uncertainty reduction paradox. Our primary goal during initiation is to reduce uncertainty about the other person, yet, we withhold deeper information about ourselves like our fears and desires out of an anxiety over that very uncertainty. So, how does a relationship ever move past initiation? Research suggests that we use overt small talk to pick up on covert

similarities. One study (Ireland et al., 2011) suggested that the *way* people speak matters more than *what* they speak about. According to the study, couples who had greater similarities in nonconscious language *style* were more likely to go on second dates, regardless of the content of conversation. Similarities in posture, eye gaze, and hand gestures have also been found to be predictors of interpersonal liking and understanding (Fletcher et al., 2000; Rubin et al., 1988).

Once couples enter the experimentation phase, communication becomes more conscious and deliberate, as couples tend to grasp at commonalities. They begin to increase the breadth of conversation while still keeping the depth relatively shallow. Their hope is that they might stumble upon a point of common understanding over which they can begin to experiment with different levels of depth. In a 1998 study by Avtgis et al., people reported connectedness and comfort replacing the nervousness and caution of initiation. Yet, a feeling of uncertainty was still unanimous. This stage was also marked by "bragging" and attempts to impress (Avtgis et al., 1998). We've decided we like each other, but we still don't really know each other. We'd like to get to know each other, but we only want the other person to get to know our ideal self. Experimentation is a kind of audition where both individuals are striving to live up to an idealization of themselves.

According to Knapp (2014), experimentation is characterized by a low tolerance for inconsistency. Problem is, people are naturally inconsistent. We change our minds, attitudes, and appearances constantly, but pretend as if we don't during the early stages of a relationship (Umphrey & Sherbloom, 2001). This need for consistency in the other person is reflective of our need for uncertainty reduction. In their study on emotional display Strzyzewskiaune et al. (1996) showed that people found the display of negative

emotions like anger or sadness to be particularly inappropriate early in relationships. Conversely, people also reported greater management of their own negative emotions in these stages, suggesting a self-awareness of these consistency expectations. If a potential partner acts indifferent and mysterious on a first date but cries at the movies on the second, uncertainty about the person might increase.

This may also be a function of the ideal-perception discrepancy described by Fletcher et al., 2000, who found that a lower discrepancy between people's actual and ideal partners predicted greater relationship satisfaction three months into the relationship. However, this correlation began to trail off at around nine months (Fletcher et al., 2000). We not only expect our partners to display internal consistency from one moment to the next, but also consistency with an imaginary version of themselves they are not even aware of. The progression of the relationship depends on it. If behavioral consistency is achieved, relationships will likely transition into intensification, where sex is usually introduced.

Sexual intercourse is commonly associated with later stages of intensifying or integrating, but can occur during experimentation as an isolated act, or even regularly for some couples, depending on individual motivaitons. However, sex during experimentation is thought to be "relatively unimportant for defining the closeness of the relationship" (Knapp, 2005). Seal & Erhardt (2003) found that men whose primary motivation with women was emotional connection tended to wait longer for sex, describing the importance of teasing, building tension, and mutual readiness. Sex, for these men, benefited from being a byproduct of emotional intimacy. However, men whose primary motivation was purely physical viewed sex as a form of competition and

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conquest, placing an emphasis on performance and sexual competence. These men seemed to neither expect nor desire long-term emotional connection with women (Seal & Erhardt, 2003). While consistency is expected, an over adherence to gender roles may halt relationships in their tracks.

Traditional gender roles act as an embodiment of the consistencies we expect early on in our potential partners. Just as there are scripts for initiation and experimentation, there are scripts for flirtation and sex during intensifying. Durkheim (1984) conceptualized scripts as an evolutionary way of enacting social contracts on a modern world devoid of community ties. Simon and Gagnon (1986) suggest that the treatment of sex in Western society creates a separate place for sex outside the realm of the everyday. This results in a normal identity and a sexual identity. Sex is necessary and forbidden at the same time, so we create scripts that allow us to play a character, a hero dissociated from our real selves but embodied during a romantic or sexual encounter. Just as initiation scripts give us a risk-free behavioral template for moving into experimentation, sexual scripts do the same for moving through the potential awkwardness of physical intimacy. Both the hero, and the hero's inevitable love interest are scripted by patterns displayed in the media; and media effects are reciprocal (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). People latch onto scripts of love and sex seen in movies, television, music, etc. and reciprocate those scripts onto themselves and others.

Traditional scripts view women as "gatekeepers," and men as "players." The burden of conquest and sexual performance is placed on the man, while women are expected to present the illusion of resistance, to provide a challenge or game for men to play (Dworkin & O'sullivan, 2005; Sakaluk et al., 2014). In one study on mixed gender

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focus groups, Sakaluk et al., (2014) found support for the scripts that single women who appear sexually are judged negatively, that "men are expected to be skilled and knowledgeable during sex" (Sakaluk et al., 2014), and that deviation from one's expected gender roles can harm one's reputation. In another script study, Joskowski et al. (2018) found that men expected women to lightly thwart a man's physical advances after going home together from a bar or party. If a man leaned in for a kiss or a touch, women were expected to push back. This push-back was actually viewed as a form of subtle consent by most of the men in the study (Joskowski et al., 2018), which supports the notion of women as "gatekeepers." Initial refutation of sex is perceived as a part of the game, as a nonverbal way of consenting to sex while staying in character.

However, most people view these scripts as an undesirable obligation. Dworkin & O'Sullivan (2005) found the adherence to tradition to be particularly stressful for men. While most men in their study reported an adherence to traditional male-initiated sex, and an internalization of carrying the burden of both theirs and their partner's sexual enjoyment, most reported desiring the opposite. "I've felt lonely," stated one man. "I know she's not gonna start it. I would like for her to come to me. It's hard to, um, just always initiate it myself" (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005). According to another: "...like if I was always the initiator, I would feel as though she doesn't find me attractive and she doesn't...she doesn't, like, want me" (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005). Of those that reported adherence to traditional sex roles, they tended to do so out of insecurity. One man stated:

Usually when...when she initiates, I have this thing I guess is in my unconscious— that I have to be like...I have to perform...like now. And right now! Like...all kissing

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and hug-ging aside. Like, I have to be erect—we have to have sex—so...I guess there's a certain amount of pressure to that (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005).

The preceding evidence paints early relationship progression as a torturous exercise in which we demonstrate our ability to live up to romantic archetypes. Scripts for initiation, experimentation, and sex during intensification are like disguises at a masquerade ball. We want our partners to pick a character and play it well, but we ultimately want to see who is under the mask once the party is over.

Intensifying is also characterized by an increase in self-disclosure as couples look ahead to stages of greater intimacy. Here, people disclose their vulnerabilities as if bearing their necks to an attacker (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). They give the other person insight into their imperfections as proof of honesty and commitment (Thorhauge & Bonitz, 2020). Some have suggested this increase in vulnerability to be a test of trust. In other words, we don't only disclose at first *because* we trust someone, but in order to see if they are trust*worthy* (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Emotional ammunition is willingly given, and the recipient must prove their reliability by receiving it gracefully and keeping it safe (Umphrey & Sherblom, 2001).

As relationships transition into integrating and bonding, people actually begin to desire inconsistency, and more egalitarian gender roles (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2014). Interactions are personalized, and partners shed their "public" personas in favor of more personalized and unique ways of communicating. They may begin to communicate in a sort of language of their own that friends or family of either member wouldn't recognize (Vangelisti, 2002). In other words, they *integrate* into one unique entity. Among the

emotionally motivated group in Seal & Erhardt's (2003) study, one man reported the necessity of "letting the macho bullshit down" in order for an emotional connection to take place (Seal & Erhardt, 2003). According to the authors, "Men's narratives supported the assertion that men's romantic experiences are an interrelated, but distinct phenomenon from their courtship and sexual experiences" (Seal & Erhardt, 2003). While courtship and sex are about conquest, romance is about vulnerability, and vulnerability leads to unity. Vulnerability also requires an acceptance of inconsistencies, and those that are unable to let go of their need for consistency in others and themselves may tend to falter at this stage in relationships. Once each other's inconsistencies are accepted and cherished, intimacy trophies like rings or clothes are exchanged, couples may move in together, and friendship circles merge (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005).

Bonding involves the contractual consecration of the relationship. This is considered different from the intimacy trophies of integration because, according to Knapp & Vangelisti (2005), "the institutionalization of the relationship hardens it, makes it more difficult to break out of, and probably changes the rhetoric that takes place without a contract." Whether explicit or implicit, interactions and conversations are subtly, yet fundamentally, altered by its presence. Although this alteration may not always be detrimental, this ultimate sharing of identities is usually followed by an attempt at reclaiming some individuality.

De-escalation

Not all relationships are destined to fail. Research shows that successful couples are those that become comfortable at a lower level of intimacy and are able to reintroduce menial behaviors like small talk without losing the ability to be intimate. In short, a

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reclamation of individuality is necessary after reaching a peak of intimacy. However, the success of the relationship depends on whether the reclamation is proactive and voluntary, or reactionary. Couples may try to cling to their heightened intimacy, indicating a possible understanding between the two that nothing substantial exists underneath.

Sternberg (1987) conceptualized three dimensions of love: intimacy, or feelings of closeness, sharing, communication, and support; passion, or physiological arousal and an intense desire for unity; and commitment, the conscious decision to maintain love for another. Most relationships are lacking in at least one of these dimensions. For example, a couple can have commitment without passion or intimacy, resulting in *empty love* (Sternberg, 1987). A common fear in relationships is "moving too fast." This may lead to *fatuous love*, in which there is commitment and passion, but intimacy has not had time to develop. Conversely, a long-term marriage might display *companionate love*, where there is commitment and intimacy, but passion has been lost. Research links intimacy and commitment with relationship security and satisfaction, while passion is less significant (Madey & Rodgers, 2009). According to Sternberg, intimacy and commitment are relatively stable, while passion comes and goes (Sternberg, 1987). When viewed from Knapp's perspective, this finding is obvious, since the primary purpose of the escalation stages is to build intimacy through small-talk, self-disclosures, and trust (Knapp et al., 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Couples with fatuous love or infatuation, in which only passion is present, have not built the foundation of intimacy for long-term relationships to safely retreat to. Couples in these relationships are likely to differentiate.

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Differentiation happens when couples begin to talk about the ways in which they are different (Vangelisti, 2002). Activities they once did together may become individualized, or individuals may search for new activities away from their partner that affords them more individuality. Maybe one member of the couple takes up golf on the weekends or joins a book club with a new group of friends. Communication indicative of this stage is the reversion from "we" statements back to "I" statements (Ireland et al., 2011). More frequent conflicts are likely to arise here, but are not inevitable. Couples may speak of their differences objectively, or in an emotionally tinged, yet futile effort to steer the relationship in a better direction (Vangelisti, 2002). It's as if a couple has fully explored their similarities, and the only things novel left in the relationship are differences previously hidden by the skyrocketing intimacy and passion of escalation (Knapp et al., 2014). Again, success here depends on what lies underneath the fading passion.

Next, couples begin to *circumscribe* and *stagnate*. Couples circumscribe when they restrict topics of communication to "safe areas" (Welch & Rubin, 2002). They know each other so well that they know which topics of conversation will produce which reactions. In order to avoid conflict, couples *circumscribe* around those topics. These touchy subjects may have once aided in increasing vulnerability and intimacy during escalation. However, if increasing intimacy is no longer a motivation, these topics may become sources of tension (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). Circumscribing couples still like each other, and feel committed to each other despite their differences (Welch & Rubin, 2002), but stagnation eventually sets in.

Stagnation is a pivotal "limbo" where couples can either recommit to, or let go of the relationship (Vangelisti, 2002). This stage is characterized by a lack of communication; couples do lots of thinking and little talking as they conduct their own independent evaluations of the relationship (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). Re-adopting an economic perspective on the relationship (Burgess & Huston, 1979), couples here begin to evaluate the cost to benefit ratio of staying with the person and may start to wonder if they couldn't "do better" elsewhere. In fact, Simpson (1987) found that one's belief in whether or not they could easily find a desirable alternative partner to be a reliable and independent predictor of decisions to stay or leave at this stage.

If costs are deemed to outweigh benefits, couples may avoid each other and eventually terminate. Avoidance is to termination, as integration is to bonding. When couples avoid each other, they have made their choice. Just as bonding is the consecration of unity, termination is the consecration of separation. In avoidance, communication is conducted in order to avoid physical interaction.

Communication, according to Knapp et al. (2014) is conducted on the content level and the relationship level. Content level communication refers to the literal words spoken, while relationship level refers to the "metacommunication," or the intent behind the message. Metacommunication is particularly salient during early stages of flirting, but becomes more overt as intimacy and comfort grow. People are more comfortable stating their true thoughts and intentions in the middle of relationships, but hide them during the beginning and end. For example, asking a potential mate to go back to one's apartment for a drink can be interpreted in one of two ways. This can be a literal offer for a drink, or a covert proposition of sex. According to findings by Jozkowski et al. (2018),

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college aged men perceived a woman's acceptance of a drink at a bar as a covert

indication of sexual consent, or a kind of contractual promise that sex was forthcoming,

even though accepting a drink has nothing to do with sex on the overt content-level.

Metacommunication is also salient during avoidance. Couples might start saying they are

too busy with work to make it home for dinner, when they really intend to convey that

they are no longer interested in seeing the other person (Welch & Rubin, 2002).

Termination is when the covert communication of avoidance becomes overt.

Phone numbers are changed or deleted, the other person may be "blocked" on social

media, and one couple may officially change residence. They usually have a "talk" about

ending the relationship, in which communication revolves around reflections on what

went wrong, and speculation ahead to what life will be like without the person. In some

unique cases however, avoidance may be allowed to perpetuate until the relationship

simply dissolves, terminating out of neglect (Vangelisti, 2002).

Although not all relationships are the same -- some never reach certain stages,

while some move out of order, skip stages, or move backwards along the staircase --

Knapp's model provides a comprehensive conceptualization of the possible stages a

relationship may move through from start to finish. The beginnings and ends of

relationships mirror each other; communication near the poles is superficial and covert.

Only the motivations change. In between exist periods of self-disclosure, honesty, and

trust. On the way up, this vulnerability is an intimate tether; and on the way down, a

source of tension. As comprehensive as Knapp's model is, it was conceptualized in a

world without today's ability to mediate communication with technology. This chapter

provides an overview of Knapp's model as it was originally conceived, in order to lay a

foundation for understanding how technologies fit into our existing interpersonal

motivations, satisfy them more easily than ever, and give us the means to carry out brand

new motivations, behaviors, and relationship stages.

CHAPTER 3

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN RELATIONSHIPS

Literacy and fluency over text and on social media has become a cultural and social imperative (Drouin & Driver, 2014). What were once thought of as niche ways to satisfy interpersonal cravings for the tech savvy or socially anxious (Carpenter et al., 2018) have become the primary form of conducting interpersonal interaction from the socially paralyzed to the social butterflies, having infiltrated the normal proceedings of friendships, education, and business (Kelm, 2011). The ability to conduct interactions from behind a screen greatly reduces the risk involved in "putting oneself out there," which has especially strong implications for romantic relationships.

Two things can be true at once. According to social compensation theory, these technologies are able to compensate for a lack of interaction for the socially anxious, while the rich-get-richer hypothesis posits that technology further enriches the interpersonal wealth of the already socially adept (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Whether satisfying competition goals through online gaming, or curating one's identity on social media, communication technologies provide everyone a useful opportunity to connect with others. However, due to their affordances, some argue that communication technologies produce more of a social overcompensation (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009).

"Affordances refer to the communication acts or functions that are made possible by particular features of a communication channel" (Knapp et al., 2014). Certain affordances may be more desirable than others in certain situations or at certain times in relationships. For example, social media and texting have been referred to as forms of "reduced cue" or "cue-lean" media (Ruppel, 2015; Pusateri et al., 2015). In other words, less implicit information about a person is received when interacting online or over the phone. In "cue-rich" forms of communication like face-to-face interaction, one might pick up on cues like body language or facial expression to help interpret a message. The absence of these cues through technologically mediated communication are thought to reduce self-consciousness, thus increasing the user's willingness to disclose more personal information (Ruppel, 2015), since nonconscious betrayals of truth through subtle cues are hidden.

Other affordances include: asynchronicity, identifiability, accessibility, scalability, replicability, retrievability, and editability (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017; Knapp et al., 2014). People can interact on their own time, taking as long as they need to perfect their messages and edit their appearance, which has been shown as a desirable affordance during arguments (Pusateri et al., 2015). They can decide the size and make-up of their audience, how that audience will perceive them, replicate behaviors that garner positive reactions, and theoretically "retrieve" or erase behaviors that garner negative ones.

These affordances combine to give the individual the illusion of control (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017) causing what is referred to as the "privacy paradox." The privacy paradox refers to the contradiction between internet users' increased concern

for privacy and their simultaneous increase in information disclosure over the internet (Kokolakis, 2017). In other words, people are increasingly concerned about privacy on the internet, but use the internet to disclose more personal information than ever.   This contradiction exists because there are two kinds of privacy: informational and psychological (Kokolakis, 2017). Informational privacy describes the degree of control people have over the distribution of the amount and content of their personal information, while psychological privacy refers to the control over how, when, and to whom that information is presented (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). People recognize the lack of informational privacy online, but the psychological privacy afforded by the internet causes people to overestimate their control.

Communication online is "hyperpersonal" (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009); due to the affordances of the internet and social media, the degree and eagerness of self-disclosure exceeds that which is thought to be normal. The topic of concern for this study, sexting, likely takes advantage of this paradox. Individuals may send sexually explicit images of themselves to a romantic partner based on certain relational motivations. Some say the risk and trust associated with sexting is a useful bonding experience (Thorhauge & Bonitz, 2020). Others suggest that sexting is a way to add fuel to a dying flame in the waning stages of relationships (Francis, 2019). Others, still, posit that sexting is a normative replacement for flirting in a culture more concerned with "hook-ups" than long-term relationships (Symons et al., 2018). Despite the risks, people have the confidence to sext because of the psychological privacy of communication technologies; they can theoretically perfect their image, decide who sees it, and retrieve it if necessary. Their perceived control is illusory, however, because the recipient can disperse the

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message to unwanted audiences, who may perceive it differently than the original, intended receiver. According to one study, a sext sent intentionally to a known other is considered an intimate form of trust building, while a sext dispersed to an unintended audience is considered pornography (Amundsen, 2019).

The illusion of control is particularly salient early in relationships, as people tend to rely heavily on cue-lean forms of communication in stages where consistency is most important (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017). However, this does not mean that couples progress linearly from one form of technologically mediated communication to another. In fact, research has supported ideas of "communicative interdependence" or "media multiplexity," the notion that couples add new technologies to their repertoire without necessarily replacing old ones (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017; Pusateri et al., 2015). For example, couples tend to rely on public and editable social media platforms early in relationships, and add more intimate forms of communication, like Snapchat and face-to-face interaction as the tolerance for inconsistency increases. However, social media use between couples still persists alongside the introduction of more cue-rich forms of communication (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017). Couple's use of multiple communication platforms, and the fluidity with which they can transition between modes of communication, significantly predicts relational happiness (Caughlin et al., 2016). Also, the ability to transition from mode to mode during an argument predicts more successful argument resolutions than in couples who "segment" their arguments to one mode or another (Pusateri et al., 2015). A happy couple in today's world is one that can start a conversation face-to face over breakfast, continue it during work over text, and revisit it

before bed over Snapchat. Not only is the quantity of platforms important, but also the relationship's "agility" between platforms.

 While this is a stage study, not a study on multiplexity, it is important to note that these platforms are interdependent on one another throughout a relationship. This study will not argue that certain platforms are used only at certain stages, but that the affordances of certain platforms align more with the motivations of some relationship stages than others. Similarly, the mode and stage in which sexting occurs is likely to vary across relationships. However, the motivations behind sexting are also likely to align more closely with some stages than others. The following sections will discuss the literature on the affordances of dating applications, social networking sites, Snapchat and texting. Coupled with research on the underlying motivations of sexting, this section will lead to research questions regarding the likely relationship stage and communication platform in which sexting is likely to occur.

Online Dating and Dating Applications

Many modern relationships begin online. In 2019, 48% of young adults aged 18-29 reported having used a dating site or application at some point (Iqbal, 2021). Dating sites were even more salient for lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults, 55% of which reported relying on applications and websites for meeting potential romantic partners (Vogels, 2020). Knapp et al. (2014) argues that online "dating" is a misnomer, suggesting instead the phrase online relationship "initiation," since relationships that are initiated online typically move offline in more advanced stages (Sprecher, 2009). What is generally thought of as "dating" actually happens offline, while initiation and experimentation, the stages that rely on identity presentation and consistency, occur online.

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While online dating originated on websites like eHarmony in the early 2000's (Sprecher, 2009), most young adults today use mobile applications to meet friends, start relationships, and find casual "hook-ups" (Kallis, 2020). The most popular of these apps, Tinder, currently tallies approximately 67 million users, and only 24% of young adults (18-29) say they have never used the app (Iqbal, 2021). Tinder changes the traditional process of relationship initiation in two major ways: physical proximity, and the "double opt-in" (Iqbal, 2021). Traditional relationships relied on two people existing in close enough proximity for a physical encounter to be possible, either by chance or through a mutual friend. With Tinder, one can input their geographical location and be flooded with potential mates up to a maximum distance away of the user's choosing, people they would have never had contact with otherwise. Second, in order for one person to be able to message another, they must both "swipe right" on each other, resulting in a "match." This limits the possibility of embarrassment and unwanted attention (Kallis, 2020). Only people you already like can talk to you. Conversely, a person trying to initiate a relationship in the real world has no such filters. People are subject to unsolicited flirtation, and being potentially unprepared for a run-in with an attractive other. With online initiation capabilities, one can select exactly the partner they want, present themselves in exactly the way they want to be perceived, and set a date and place to meet in person, theoretically resulting in zero surprises.

Some scholars argue that the affordances of online dating allow for a new stage of relationships altogether. Lefebvre (2018) argues that initiation is no longer the first stage of relationships, that the identity curation and mate selection on applications like Tinder is its own "pre-interaction" stage. Knapp et al. (2014) argues however, that online dating

"illustrates how new communication media can change some features of relational communication without undermining the general principles of relational development."

Knapp would argue that online dating is just a new way to initiate, while scholars like Lefebvre (2018) contend that behaviors facilitated by apps like Tinder have no psychological or behavioral precedent. This study poses a similar question with regards to sexting. Is sexting simply a modern-day proxy for innate self-disclosure needs, or an entirely novel behavior in an unprecedented stage of relationship development?

Social media

Research suggests that social media largely plays off our existing motivations and desires for uncertainty reduction; that we would find ways to reduce uncertainty about another regardless, but platforms like Facebook have just made it easier (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). "Facebook is the new phone call" (Fox & Anderegg, 2014), serving as a more bountiful and "ego-protective" form of relationship initiation and experimentation (Fox et al., 2013). Instead of asking for someone's phone number in person, or calling to plan a date, we can retreat to the comfort of our keyboards, safely find them on the internet, and communicate covert intentions through likes and comments (Sozik & Bazarova, 2014).

Rejection hurts less, and the rewards are greater. Social networking sites have turned everyone into a stalker; most people wouldn't go out and spy on their significant other, but they do the equivalent on Facebook (Fox et al., 2013). We can conduct initiation and experimentation in a matter of minutes by simply scrolling through someone's profile, without their knowledge, in what are referred to as "passive strategies" (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Furthermore, these passive strategies for information seeking were found to be particularly prevalent before the first face-to-face

interaction between two people and less normative as the relationship progressed (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). "Active strategies" like sending friend requests to another's friends and family were most normative once exclusively dating (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). However, the researchers found a dip just after the first face-to-face interaction, but before exclusively dating. The authors refer to this period as a "casual dating" phase in which one tries to avoid being perceived as too interested (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). People's social media use points to a period in relationships where people seem to be holding on to the stoicism and consistency of initiation and experimentation, while being emotionally invested enough to see the person regularly.

However, one novel relationship behavior unique to social networking is "going Facebook Official" (FBO). Similar to pre-interaction on Tinder, and the privacy paradox, the ability to go FBO has thrown somewhat of a wrench into Knapp's original conception of relationship stages. One researcher compared going FBO to exchanging class rings or letter jackets (Sozik & Bazarova, 2014), which would serve the function of modern-day intimacy trophies during integration (Knapp et al., 2014). However, most people view the option of going FBO as more of a stressful obligation than a relationship enhancer. The public nature of Facebook puts pressure on people to "announce" their relationship status earlier than they may like (Fox et al., 2013). According to one focus group (Fox et al., 2013), Facebook does more harm than good later in relationships, echoing the findings by Caughlin et al. (2013) that increased social media use later in relationships predicted relationship conflict. This could be due to the pressure to maintain an appearance of perfection in the relationship long after passion has faded (Caughlin et al., 2013).

Also, *not* posting content becomes more noteworthy than posting content later in relationships. Questions from one's social network may arise if relationship updates become less consistent. Some people may feel they are maintaining two relationships instead of one, and these public and private relationships can be very different. Therefore, FBO can become a kind of gravity well around which the relationship circles, comparable to the way Knapp (2014) argues that marriage contracts during bonding differ from intimacy trophies during integration. However, going FBO is expected to occur even earlier than normal integration, suggesting a kind of shuffling of stages and motivations. In the same way self-disclosure is thought to happen earlier due to the privacy paradox, certain rituals that evoke bonding are expected to happen pre-maturely due to the public pressure of social media.

Snapchat and Texting

The natural transition from public to private personas described by Knapp is paralleled by the transition from public social media interaction to private Snapchat interaction and text messaging. Several studies have found Snapchat messaging and text messaging to start at roughly the same time in relationship development (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018; Vaterlaus et al.,2016; Yang et al., 2014). Although one can privately direct message another on social media, research shows text messaging via cell-phone is considered more intimate, perhaps because of the information required to conduct each. One's social media profile is public, so any of their followers could send them a direct message; but to text someone means their number has likely been given personally, and in confidence, which carries more intimate implications than a public username. Even though the method of communication is the same, texting via cell phone implies more

intimacy (Yang et al., 2014). The same rituals that apply to exchanging phone numbers apply to exchanging Snapchats. Snapchat usernames are not public, and are usually linked to an individual's phone number. People can add the Snapchat of someone they have in their phone contacts, but must be given the exact username to search for otherwise (Bayer et al., 2015).

While text and Snapchat arise around the same time, their affordances are slightly different. Texting marries the affordances of social media with those of more intimate forms of communication. People report feeling obligated to respond quicker over text than over other text-based forms of communication like email or social media direct messaging (Yang et al., 2014). This is likely due to the associations placed on text messaging, not its affordances. For example, emails and texts both involve written words with the option of attaching images, and are both received almost instantaneously. However, because most of us associate email with school or work, we feel less of an interpersonal obligation for punctuality over email than over text (Yang et al., 2014). Yet, texting still allows for asynchronicity. Couples fresh out of experimentation, or in the "casual dating" phase mentioned by Fox & Anderegg (2014), might text to increase intimacy while still requiring the time to think of responses that present themselves desirably. Texting is also useful for conflict and argumentation in more developed relationships, as the intimacy already exists, but the asynchronicity allows people to choose their words carefully in order to effectively defuse the conflict.

Snapchat, however, has slightly different affordances that result in slightly different usages. Messages disappear after a certain amount of time on Snapchat, the sender is notified if a screenshot is taken, and text can be combined with facial expression

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and body language (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). While Snapchat appears to offer asynchronicity, the disappearance of messages means one must respond before the content of the message is forgotten. There is more strategy to consider (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). For example, once a person opens the snap, he or she will know and be expecting a response. In order to avoid inducing anxiety in the other person, many Snapchat users report an obligation for timely responses once a snap is opened. Therefore, Snapchatting may require a level of commitment suited for more intimate relationships.

People also report using Snapchat for sharing less-than-ideal images of themselves (Bayer et al., 2015; Thorhauge & Bonitz, 2020). One study of college students' use of Snapchat concluded that, "Snapchat was viewed as a lightweight channel for sharing spontaneous experiences with trusted ties" (Bayer et al., 2015). Snapchat use was associated with reduced self-presentational concerns and was used mostly for sharing mundane experiences with close ties. Thorhauge & Bonitz (2020) came to a similar conclusion in their study of German high school students' views on the risk related to sexting and "intimate photo-sharing practices." Participants reported that sharing less-than-ideal images, not sexts, was more indicative of trust and intimacy. All focus group participants claimed to regularly send unattractive or unflattering snaps to people they trust. According to the researchers, these images are "deliberately created to reflect the exact opposite of attraction or beauty" (Thorhauge & Bonitz, 2020), which has implications for sexting. If self-disclosures become more intimate the less ideal they are, then perhaps sexting is more analogous to early relationship behaviors, where people present themselves from a "more beautiful side" (Thorhauge & Bonitz, 2020).

Sexting

One in seven teens have sent a sext, while one in four have received one, according to a 2018 meta-analysis, and the prevalence significantly increases with age (Madigan et al., 2018). The notion of sexting is usually met with a mixture of hushed tones, shock, and horror, because of its social implications in cyberbullying, and legal implications for underaged "sexters" (El Hage, 2018). Yet according to Madigan et al. (2018), "consensual sexting may be a normal component of sexual behavior and development in the digital age. The increased prevalence of this sexual behavior, in older youth in particular, corresponds to their increasing interest in sexual exploration and identity development." This study hopes to extend Madigan et al.'s (2018) assertions one step further. If sexting has become a normative behavior, then how does it fit into the sequence of normative behaviors that already exist during courtship and relationship development?

In order to place sexting within the stages of relationship development, it is important to understand *why* people sext. In one study, people reported feeling that social media was too public to use for sexting, mentioning more personal mediums like texting or Snapchat instead (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). However, it is unclear whether this preference has to do with desires for intimacy, or fear of privacy violations. According to a focus group study by Amundsen (2019), young women reported sexting in order to convey underlying messages about trust. Amundsen (2019) concluded that the understood risk by both the sender and receiver was the very thing that made sexting a trust builder for the participants. Sending a sext was meant to serve as proof of the sender's trust in the receiver, and the receiver's behavior upon receiving the sext as proof

of the receiver's reliability. The underlying conclusion, however, is that sexting does not

occur *because* of trust, but as a way of manufacturing trust that doesn't yet exist or has

perhaps been lost (Amundsen, 2019).

  Research on sexting tends to focus on its consequences (Madigan et al., 2015).

Participants in Amundsen's (2019) focus group felt that a sext distributed by the receiver

to an unintended audience devolves into nothing more than pornography. The sext loses

its underlying message and only the physical element remains. A common narrative is

that girls send sexts, and boys receive and spread them (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Boys

have only to gain from sexting, while girls have everything to lose. Boys earn social

clout from receiving and spreading sexts, while girls receive nothing but ridicule and

harassment (Van Ouytsel, 2016), which prompted the majority of one focus group of both

males and females (Thorhauge & Bonitz, 2020) to view sexting as an unacceptable risk in

which the victim has only themselves to blame if their sexts are distributed without their

consent, since the consequences should be understood beforehand.

  The overwhelming narrative from focus groups and interviews depicts sexting as

an imbalanced activity with significant gender differences (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016;

Walrave et al., 2015). One recurring narrative is that males coerce females into sending

sexts as proof of their love. Males set up ultimatums where a female's refusal to send a

sexual picture of herself is proof of her lack of love (Walrave et al., 2015). Males also

report sexts as a kind of "social currency," sharing them as proof of one's sexual prowess

(Marshall et al., 2018). Other motivations for sharing include blackmail, in order to trap

a female in a relationship, or revenge if the female leaves anyway (Van Ouytsel et al.,

2016). While males tend to use sexts as currency or even weapons, females take a more selfless view of sexting.

Van Ouytsel et al. (2016) found that women sexted more out of a desire to please their partner than to receive a sext in return. Females were aware of male's sexual infatuation with the female body, but reported no such reciprocal infatuation with the male body. The female body is sacred, even taboo, while the male body is simply "less of a big deal" (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). These findings culminate in a dynamic that places the burden of sexting and its consequences on the female. Qualitative studies suggest that female sexters want to please their male counterparts, while males want to please themselves. However, quantitative studies depict a slightly different story, highlighting the difference between attitude and behavior.

While the *scripted* male is a receiver, quantitative data paints a more egalitarian picture. Twenty-eight percent of one high school population identified as "two-way sexters," 12% were "receivers," and only 2% were senders (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013), suggesting that sexting is reciprocal most of the time. Sexting may also be a function of "attachment style." One study found that insecure attachment tendencies predicted sexting, especially for males (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). Attachment insecurity can be avoidant on one extreme and anxious on the other. People that fear a lack of attachment and those that fear too much attachment were both found to sext more often than those with lower levels of insecurity. The most significant interaction effect was the combined effect of gender and attachment style. The study found that males with attachment *avoidance* were the most likely population to engage in both sending and receiving sexts (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012).

It is unclear whether sexting is an attempt at escalating intimacy, or an expression of passion. The scientific literature paints sexting as an expression of desperation and insecurity. Evidence suggests people sext in order to artificially inject trust and intimacy early in relationships, grasp at fading passion during de-escalation, or as a last-ditch attempt at coercion just before the end when verbal communication no longer works. Yet, some anecdotal evidence paints sexting as a potential wonder-cure for stale marriages (Francis, 2019), or even a healthy way to express sexual curiosity and identity formation (Madigan, 2015). Whether sexting is positive, negative, dangerous, or innocuous, the literature agrees that sexting is normative. The following study will evaluate people's *general* scripts regarding sexting rather than their *personal* scripts. Personal scripts refer to one's own actions and behavior, while general scripts refer to people's perceptions of the behavior of those around them (Symons et al., 2018). Since this study is concerned with whether sexting is normative, we are focused on people's *general* views on sexting, rather than their *personal* behaviors. This study uses a combination of likert-type questions to answer the following research questions.

RQ1: Through which mode of technologically mediated communication do people report sexting is most likely to occur?

RQ2: In which stage(s) of Knapp's relationship staircase do people report sexting is most likely to occur?

Since the purpose of the study is to uncover communication norms surrounding sexting, the author also asked open-ended questions about *why* participants thought sexting was likely (or unlikely) at certain relationship stages. Participants were also

asked whether the eroticism, arousal, or intensity of a sext is likely to change as the relationship progresses, yielding a third research question:

> **RQ3:** Does the nature (intensity, eroticism, level of arousal) of the sext change based on the stage in which it is exchanged?

This is an exploratory pilot study using a small, convenient sample with the purpose of collecting preliminary data regarding thoughts on sexting norms. The data from this study will be used to construct a more accurate survey for a larger, more representative population. The preliminary findings will also contribute to the formulation of hypotheses for the follow-up study. While there are expected gender differences between sending and receiving sexts (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016; Walrave et al., 2015), the size and unequal distribution (9 males and 36 females) of the population in this pre-test did not allow for gender differences to be analyzed quantitatively. However, the qualitative responses do reveal the beginnings of potential differences in motivation that will allow for a more educated probing and prediction of these differences in the future.

CHAPTER 4

METHOD

A Qualtrics survey, approved by the university institutional review board, was

used to present a mixture of likert-type and open-ended questions to a population of 45

undergraduate mass communications students at a large southeastern university. After

consenting to participate, respondents answered a series of demographic questions on

age, race, gender, and sexual orientation. Options for gender and sexual orientation were

derived from the latest practices outlined by Holland & Vangelisti (2020).

To answer RQ1, participants responded to likert-scale questions about the

likelihood of sexting through different communication technologies. The options were

social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.), texting via cell phone, Snapchat, video

chat (FaceTime, Skype etc.), email, and dating applications (Tinder, Hinge, Bumble etc.).

These categories were chosen because of their distinctive affordances. Each mode offers

its own unique capabilities that are conducive to certain relationship stages, with little

overlap. Dating apps and social media are common early in initiation and

experimentation respectively, because of their editability and asynchronicity. Texting,

Snapchat, and video chat offer more intimacy for more developed relationships. Email is

included as an attention check, since all students use it, but tend to restrict its use to

school related or professional interactions (Yang et al., 2014). Therefore, the majority of

participants should report very low sexting likelihood on this platform.

Some platforms, like WhatsApp, are popular globally, but rarely used in the United states (Shwayder, 2019). Since this study is conducted in a population of American college students, these platforms were excluded.

Next, to answer RQ2, respondents were provided with descriptions of each of Knapp's ten stages, in order. However, the names of the stages were replaced with numbers. Initiation is referred to as "stage 1," experimentation as "stage 2" etc. This is to ensure that respondents' opinions are informed by the characteristics of each stage, not by their names. For example, a participant would see the following for Initiation:

Stage 1

- He/she/they seem attracted to me.

- I am concerned with how attractive he/she/they finds me.

- I am interested in knowing more about him/her/them.

They would be shown the same thing for subsequent stages through "stage 10," with corresponding descriptions. Descriptions for each stage were adopted from descriptions developed by Welch & Rubin (2002). The descriptors for escalating stages matched onto their corresponding stages with a mean Chronbach alpha of .92. The mean alpha score for de-escalating descriptors was .89, showing that the listed characteristics accurately describe their intended stages.

Respondents were asked about the likelihood of sending and receiving a sext in two separate questions for each of the ten stages. Sexting was split into sending and receiving since the two are thought to be different behaviors under the sexting umbrella (Gordon-Messer, 2013). Likelihood was measured from 1 (highly unlikely) to 5 (highly likely).

Finally, participants answered three open-ended questions. The first and second asked them to elaborate on *why* they thought sexting was more or less likely at certain relationship stages than others. The researcher was concerned that participants would base their Likert responses on the clear pattern of escalation and de-escalation, not on the stage descriptions. Therefore, the open-ended questions allowed participants to explain themselves, to indicate whether they perceived the descriptions as intended.

To answer RQ3, the third open-ended question asked whether the nature of the sext (arousal, intensity, eroticism) would change as the relationship changes. The open-ended section of the survey mimics mini-interviews, introducing a qualitative component to hopefully further shed light on the connection between sexting and relationship stages.

Open-ended responses were coded by following a progression of coding, categorizing, and thematizing (Saldaña, 2016). Keywords from each response formed codes, and specific words that were repeated across responses became categories. For example, "comfort," was mentioned more than any other word and became its own category. The categories were then analyzed for their underlying motivations in regards to Knapp's relationship stages. For example, "comfort" and "trust" were combined to form the theme, "after uncertainty," denoting the stages where uncertainty about the other person fades as comfort and trust set in. While "comfort" and "trust" are different words with different meanings, they both arise around the same time because of successful uncertainty reduction. After undergoing this process, responses fell into one of two major groups: *during* uncertainty reduction or *after* uncertainty reduction. These themes will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forty-five undergraduate students between the ages of 19 and 23 participated in the study. The participants were 19% male (n = 9) and 77% female (n = 36). Two participants (4.3%) elected not to report their gender. Seventy-six percent (n = 34) of the population was White, and 18% (n = 8) were African American. One participant was Asian, and two people were Hispanic. The large majority of the population identified as heterosexual (80%, n = 36). The rest were either bisexual (n = 5), gay/lesbian (n = 3), or asexual (n = 1).

Platform likelihood was measured from 1 (highly unlikely) to 5 (highly likely). In light of the first research question, sexting was considered most likely to happen on Snapchat (M = 4.60), with texting as a close second (M = 4.27). Dating apps and social media were near the bottom with means of 3.31 and 2.69, respectively. Email was least likely, as expected, with a mean of 1.40.

In response to the second research question, results show a curvilinear likelihood of sexting over the course of relationships, with likelihood peaking at the bonding stage for both sending (M = 4.58) and receiving (M = 4.64) before dropping off steeply at differentiating.

The likelihood for the stage preceding bonding (Integrating) was higher than for the stage directly following bonding (differentiating) for both sending and receiving, illustrated as a gradual increase in likelihood followed by a steep drop-off as seen in Figure 5.1.
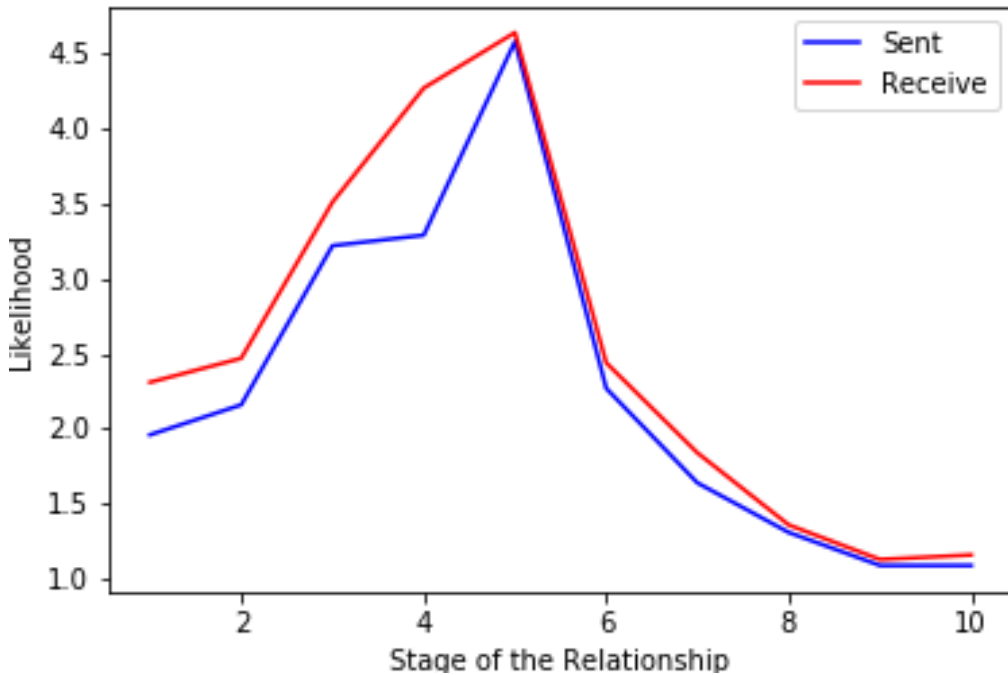

Figure 5.1 displays the change in sexting likelihood for sending and receiving sexts across relationship stages.

Means for integrating were 3.98 for sending and 4.27 for receiving, while means for differentiating were 2.27 for sending and 2.44 for receiving. Means continually increased during escalation and continually decreased during de-escalation. At no point during escalation did the mean dip, and at no point during de-escalation did the mean spike.

A MANOVA failed to find significant differences in sexting likelihood across the stages based on gender, likely due to the small overall sample and unequal distribution

between males and females. An ANOVA was also conducted to test the likelihood

differences between genders for each stage individually. The results of the ANOVA

were also insignificant. There was, however, a difference in means between sending

(M = 2.51) and receiving (M = 2.33) irrespective of stage (Table A.3 and Table A.4),

supporting the notion that people tend to underestimate their own sexting behavior

compared to that of others (Symons et al., 2018).

Open-ended Results and Discussion

Some participants felt that there were "weird" ways to sext, which further

suggests that there are normal ways to sext. One female said that sexting was "just

weird" if done in the "beginning getting to know you stage" because it "shows your true

intentions." Another said that sexting is unlikely "before you know someone, unless

you're a weirdo." Sexting was also considered inappropriate during de-escalation as,

according to one responded, sexting is "not a solution to a failing relationship."

The very normalcy of sexting makes the weird possible. There are no "weird"

ways to urinate on a busy sidewalk, because public urination is not a culturally expected

nor accepted behavior. However, walking barefoot into a restaurant is "weird" because

"no shirt, no shoes, no service" is written into our cultural stone. Although participants

varied in their motivations for sexting at certain stages, there were expected norms that

most people agreed on, which made violations of those norms possible. Sexting is

"weird" at the poles of the relationship and more normal in the middle.

The second research question asked at what stage sexting is most likely to occur.

While this was partially answered through the Likert scale responses, open-ended

questions were provided for participants to further explain their answers. The results

show consistency between the most likely stage, bonding, and participant's motivations for sexting in their open-ended responses, confirming that bonding is the most likely and accepted stage for sexting in this population.

Although "comfort" was not used by the researcher to describe any of the ten stages to the participants, many of them reported comfort specifically as a primary reason why sexting would occur at the most likely stages. Many also linked comfort with connection, trust, and commitment. One person reported that sexting was most likely when "people feel connected and comfortable with the other person," and least likely "towards the end of the relationship" when the relationship "lacks connection." Others said they would only sext in a "committed relationship" with "100% trust." This echoes findings by Amundsen (2019) who found that females sext as a form of trust building and avoided sexting if they thought the other person was untrustworthy. Amundsen (2019) also found that knowing the other person's interests was an important pre-requisite for sexting. They felt that a generic sext, not tailored specifically for the other person, was merely pornography. This held true for participants in the current study, one of which noted that at later stages, "people tend to gain more information about the other and obtain their interests that they are able to elaborate on. This could lead to more arousing sexting ideas."

The *third* research question asked whether the nature of sexts would change as the relationship progresses. Open-ended answers to the question about arousal, intensity, and eroticism of sexts suggests that they do, with arousal heightened early and decreasing as time goes on. One respondent who emphasized the importance of comfort also said sexting would be more intense in the beginning, "especially before the relationship

becomes official, because there is an element of excitement and *discomfort*." This inverse relationship between likelihood of sexting and intensity of sexts appeared across many of the participants who emphasized comfort. Another female participant reported that sexting is most likely when people are "in a committed relationship or married, because they trust that person to keep the images confidential." Yet, in response to the question about the nature of sexts across stages, the same respondent noted that intensity and eroticism "may decrease during marriage *if* a couple is still sexting," because "a married couple is used to each other's bodies."

Participants also expressed sex as a tipping point, with sexts being more intense and arousing "before sex, before seeing everything." Sexting, according to another respondent, relied on the "anticipation before sex," claiming that after sex is introduced in the relationship, "sexting doesn't carry the same weight." Since sex is likely to start during intensifying (Knapp, et al., 2014; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005; Vangelisti, 2002), the decline in sexting likelihood seen in figure A.1 should occur much earlier.

While uncertainty reduction is thought to be a major goal of communication during escalation (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005), the uncertainty itself seems to be a source of excitement, as one participant reported intensity of sexting coming from "sharing a part of yourself with them that is very private." The process of revealing private information may carry the eroticism as much as the sext itself. Yet the overwhelming majority of females still linked comfort and trust, components of a relationship gained *after* uncertainty is successfully reduced (Vangelisti, 2005), with sexting likelihood. This suggests that eroticism, intensity, and arousal are acknowledged, but may be less important factors of sexting for people. Therefore, in response to the third research

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question, sexts do seem to change with time, decreasing in intensity, arousal, and eroticism as the relationship progresses. However, the large majority of this population was female; therefore, the responses seen in this study may not apply to males.

Research shows that sex for males generally tends to be physically motivated, while sex for females tends to be more emotionally motivated (Eyal & Ben-Ami, 2013; Seal & Erhardt, 2003), which may have an impact on motivations for sexting. The differences in sexting consequences for males and females could also show up in a study of a more representative population. The understanding that leaked sexts can lead to "slut shaming" and social ridicule for females may have influenced the importance they placed on trust and comfort (Sakaluk et al., 2014). Since sexts act as a desirable form of social currency for males, they may view sexting as more likely earlier in relationships, placing less importance on trust, and more on the nature of the sext itself. Perhaps higher eroticism would even increase the value of this currency.

Future research should not only look for gender differences in sexting likelihood at different stages, but also gender differences in platform. Research shows that Snapchat communication typically occurs in relationships once trust and comfort are established (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2014). The unequal gender distribution in this study, coupled with the observed tendency to require comfort and trust before sexting, may have been a reason why Snapchat was considered the most likely platform. The apparent emphasis, reported by males, on sexting early when things are still exciting, "before the honeymoon phase wears off," may cause males to report higher sexting likelihoods in early stages, and also on early-stage platforms like Facebook.

For the participants of this study the importance of "comfort" and "trust" suggests sexting is more similar to the sharing of unflattering and unattractive "snaps" between trusted friends reported by Thorhauge & Bonitz (2020). Again however, this may be a uniquely female response. Future research should quantitatively analyze the nature of sexts (arousal, intensity, eroticism), with a larger sample of a more equal gender distribution, to uncover relationships between gender, sexting likelihood at different stages, and the nature of those sexts. The findings from this study point to an inverse relationship between sexting eroticism and sexting likelihood in females and a potential positive relationship between the two variables for males. Future research should also look for gendered differences in platforms used for sexting in relationships. The potential difference in platforms used could indicate gendered differences in motivations and communication timing in the progression of relationships.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it impossible to achieve a sample of over 250 people, which would have been necessary to demonstrate a small to moderate effect size. But despite its exploratory nature, this study still achieved its purpose.

By placing sexting within the most widely accepted model of relationship communication – Knapp's staircase – this study was able to extend recent assertions by scholars that sexting is a normative part of relationship formation. The overwhelming majority of respondents chose "bonding" as the most likely stage for sexting and corroborated this choice through the open-ended questions, reporting comfort and commitment as necessary pre-requisites. The consistency between the two suggests that respondents interpreted the description of bonding as intended by the researcher, and that sexting does in fact fit neatly within Knapp's model, during stages of heightened trust, comfort, and commitment. Sexting does not appear to behave like Tinder for example, which actually seems to *change* initiation and experimentation behaviors. Rather, sexting likely serves as a modern proxy for our innate desires for interpersonal closeness through self-disclosure.

This study examined the evolution of communication over the course of a typical relationship, as well as how our understanding of communication in relationships has changed over time due to certain technological affordances. By first understanding relationship communication norms without technology, an understanding of how evolving communication technologies fit into the picture was reached, and ultimately how sexting plays off the affordances of those technologies. This pilot study did not argue for negative or positive effects of sexting, and the author was not focused on its prevalence or its consequences. Rather, sexting was conceptualized as just another form of relationship communication and will open the door for future studies to think of sexting not as a deviant new phenomenon caused by the corruption of technology, but as an adaptive behavior based on normal human motivations.

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