

SEXUAL TROPHY, REVENGE PORN, OR JUST A PRANK? AN EXAMINATION OF  
GENDERED SEXTING PRACTICES IN SEVEN U.S. UNIVERSITIES

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates how and why college students engage in sexting and challenges prior research that often frames sexting as an inherently risky or dangerous behavior. I broadly define sexting as the electronic sharing of nude or semi-nude images and the written or spoken communication that accompanies them. I gathered quantitative survey data (N = 1,922) to capture the breadth of young people's engagement in sexting, and qualitative interview data (N = 101) to capture the depth of these experiences. Using this mixed-methods strategy, I develop a comprehensive understanding of the types of sexting practices young people engage in, their motivations for engagement, and how gender dynamics influence these interactions.

I find that sexting is not one homogeneous action; it consists of a wide range of diverse rituals. I label these interactions as rituals because the individuals who participate in them may generate social solidarity and emotional energy through coordinated actions. I incorporate Collins' interaction ritual theory as a theoretical framework to analyze the processes through which sexting rituals take place. This theory is useful because it provides a set of conditions that are necessary for a synchronized ritual to occur. In addition to using interaction ritual theory to analyze the different elements of sexting rituals, I also build upon this theory by extending it from offline to online interactions and incorporating symbolic meanings to account for the complex ways gender influences online interaction rituals.

Symbolic objects are a fundamental element of the sociological analysis of rituals. Nude images are an excellent case for studying the role that symbolic objects play in rituals because participants may attach many diverse meanings to them. I find that the meanings participants attach to nude images are often very gendered and influence the type of ritual they engage in and whether or not it generates a sense of solidarity. In most cases, the meanings that women and men attach to nude images are distinct and shape their rituals dramatically.

In this three-paper dissertation, I examine three distinct types of sexting: romantic sexting, sexting with friends, and sharing images of others. My analysis of romantic sexting extends interaction ritual theory to intimate mediated interactions by examining how sexting interactions map onto the interaction ritual theory model and why young people experience unsatisfying sexting interactions focusing predominately on heterosexual interactions. While some women and men felt unsatisfied after engaging in unsynchronized sexting interactions, young women were more likely than men to report experiencing pressure to share images of themselves and receive content they found unpleasant. These findings highlight the prominent role that traditional gender beliefs continue to play in young people's most intimate interactions.

My examination of sexting with friends extends the sexting literature to platonic image sharing, a sphere that has largely been absent from previous scholarship on sexting. I find that women and men attach gendered meanings to these images and these meanings shape the rituals in which they engage. While women perceive nude images shared between women as symbols of positive affirmation and engage in body positive rituals, men are more likely to perceive nude images shared among men as symbols of gross-out humor and to engage in humor-related rituals. These findings contribute to literature on gendered bonding rituals.

Finally, my examination of sharing images of others explores how women and men turn intimate heterosexual interactions into collective rituals of sexual rejection and pursuit. I find that women share images of men with their peers to cope with unwelcome sexual advances, while men share images of women to demonstrate their sexual prowess. The perceived desirability of men's and women's images influences these rituals. These papers provide a comprehensive analysis of young people's sexting practices and highlight avenues for future research to explore how additional dimensions of intersectionality shape intimate online and offline rituals.

## INTRODUCTION

As digital technology has become more advanced and more widely available, online intimacy has become an increasingly common element of romantic relationships and may involve sexting, which I broadly define as the electronic sharing of nude or semi-nude images and the written or spoken communication that accompanies them. A variety of highly publicized scandals involving nude digital images and sexting endure in Americans' collective memory. Readers may remember the hacking of over one hundred celebrity iCloud accounts in 2014 that gained national and international attention as predominantly women celebrities' private photos diffused across the internet (Moloney and Love 2017) and the infamous and career-ending sexting saga of Congressman Anthony Weiner (also known as Carlos Danger). Academics, news outlets, and production companies interested in exploring this growing phenomenon often identify common themes that separate sexting motives and behaviors into oppositional categories: flirtation versus harassment, love versus revenge, consensual versus nonconsensual, and victim versus perpetrator.

In fact, arguments for and against sexting have become a prominent feature in popular culture. TV shows like *Law & Order SVU* (Season 10, Episode 20) and *The Stranger* (Netflix miniseries 2020) tell cautionary tales about the dangers of sexting. *Parks and Recreation* (Season 4, Episode 1) and *Family Guy* (Season 14, Episode 13) portray the uncomfortable feelings and discussions that follow men's decision to share unsolicited images of their genitals with other people. Romance novels like *Let's Get Textual* (Hunter 2017) and *Sexting the Boss* (Wells 2020) provide another take on the wild and passionate sexual experiences that may result from sexting. In my dissertation research, interviewees often discussed parents and older siblings warning them of the dangers of sexting. School assemblies reinforced the idea that young people should

avoid sexting at all costs due to its potentially life-altering (or even life-ending) consequences. Simultaneously, friends and eager romantic partners reassured interviewees that sexting was a “normal” part of a modern romantic relationship. While different social actors and organizations may provide a variety of perspectives on sexting and its potential consequences, these perspectives rarely tackle the complexities and ordinariness of sexting.

My dissertation provides an in-depth analysis of how and why young people engage in sexting and challenges the popular notion that sexting interactions fit into black and white categories. I do so by constructing a comprehensive set of survey and interview data to capture the breadth and depth of young people’s sexting practices and analyzing the processes through which they sext. I use Collins’ interaction ritual theory (Collins 2005) as a theoretical framework to identify the key elements that compose sexting rituals, and I build upon this work by identifying how traditional heteronormative gender beliefs and the gendered meanings participants attach to nude images shape these rituals. By exploring the patterns that appeared across interviewees’ diverse sexting interactions, I was able to categorize their sexting interactions into distinct types of sexting and discrete sexting rituals. In this dissertation, I will examine three types of sexting: romantic sexting, sexting with friends, and sharing images of others. Exploring these three types of sexting challenges many of the preconceived notions that surround sexting behaviors and contributes to a line of research (see also, e.g., Poletta et al. 2013) that is extending sociological theory into the online sphere.

### **The Criminalization of Sexting**

The sexting panic that accompanied the rise of the sexting phenomenon during the early 2000s has influenced popular culture, scholarship, and public policy. Sexting has been labeled as a risky and avoidable behavior because of widespread fears surrounding the nonconsensual

sharing of sexual images which some also refer to as “revenge porn” (Thomas 2018). Concerns are justified as many young people and adults have been subjected to privacy breaches and harassment, both online and offline, after their nude images have been shared without their consent (Eaton, Jacobs, and Ruvalcaba 2017). The nonconsensual sharing of nude images occurs in many different contexts from typical American high schools, to the U.S. Military, to the New York City Ballet (BBC 2017; Cooper and Pogrebin 2018). Sadly, nonconsensual sharing has also gained national and international attention after individuals who have had their photos exposed have taken their own lives and their families have demanded action.

While law enforcement in the United States had few resources to address these cases when they began receiving media attention in the early 2000s, since then 48 states and the District of Columbia have implemented legislation that criminalizes this act. The only states that have not are Massachusetts and South Carolina (Cyber Civil Rights Initiative 2014). However, these efforts are not without issues or unintended consequences. For instance, problems have emerged related to if and when sexting among minors is consensual. If authorities automatically consider sexting among minors to be child pornography, minors who engage in consensual sexting with no criminal intent may end up facing serious legal repercussions for disseminating graphic images if their activities are discovered (Zhang 2010).

Commercial institutions have also taken action. After the celebrity data breach in 2014 and subsequent criticism related to their handling of the situation, Reddit released a statement in the spring of 2015 stating that sharing any type of nude or sexual content without the subject’s permission was prohibited on their website (Peterson 2015). They revised their privacy policy and ensured subjects could have their photos removed from the site as quickly as possible. Other social media giants including Twitter, Facebook, and Google quickly followed suit, updating

their privacy policies and creating features that would allow users to identify and report images that others shared without the subject's consent. While issues have also accompanied the policing of images shared online without consent and the display of nudity online more broadly, the steps taken to resolve this issue appeared rapidly and unanimously among mainstream platforms.

While there has been significant progress to criminalize the nonconsensual sharing of images, federal and state mandates that incorporate sexting into sexual education curriculums are largely nonexistent. This lack of progress is likely related to the state's unilateral focus on criminalization and the fact that many states already limit the amount of information teachers can share with students in sexual education courses (Guttmacher Institute 2021). While there is variation in the legal classification and potential sentencing for image-related crimes across states, there has been uniform adoption of legislation that criminalizes nonconsensual sexting and an absence of legislation related to incorporating sexting into sexual education curriculums. These contrasting trends suggest that while there is some consensus that the nonconsensual sharing of images is wrong, there has been little progress in developing a collective understanding of why individuals engage in sexting and how policymakers, educators, and parents can help young people engage in safe sexting practices.

### **Limitations of Previous Sexting Research**

Although a substantial number of studies have measured the prevalence of young people's engagement in various sexting behaviors and cyberbullying over the past 10-15 years, the processes through which sexting takes place have yet to receive adequate scholarly attention

(Madigan et al. 2018).<sup>1</sup> Similar to the trends seen in popular culture and public policy, scholarly research has largely focused on examining sexting as a potentially harmful activity. Additionally, this work has been limited with respect to the data researchers have collected on young people's sexting behaviors and attitudes. I will discuss these two limitations below.

First, previous survey studies on sexting have collected little data on respondents' sexual attitudes, motives, and behaviors. While there is variation across studies, questions about sexting are often limited in number and scope. For instance, some studies only ask respondents about one type of sexting interaction (e.g., sharing images of the self) or only ask yes/no questions to gather very basic data related to the prevalence of sexting behaviors among survey respondents (Houck et al. 2014; Winkelman et al. 2014). More detailed surveys offer additional insights, although they often limit the number and type of options they offer respondents (e.g., "image recipients" may be captured using a closed ended question with limited options), focus on sexting interactions that occur in specific types of relationships (e.g., within romantic relationships), or fail to capture key features of the interaction like motivation to share images (Drouin and Landgraaf 2012; Henderson and Morgan 2011; Oswald et al. 2019).

Additionally, many survey and interview studies of sexting in medical and psychology journals focus on the potential risks and negative consequences of young people sharing private information online (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019; Albury and Crawford 2012; Choi and Temple 2016; Eleuteri, Saladino, and Verrastro 2017; Karaian 2014; Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaíta, and Rullo 2013; Temple and Choi 2014). In fact, several studies of sexting examine the relationship between sexting and a variety of negative psychological and health outcomes such

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<sup>1</sup> While sexting is sometimes a form of cyberbullying, a major goal of this dissertation is to delineate distinctive functions and contexts for sexting, ranging from those that are damaging and illegal to others that are positive in many respects.

as depression, impulsive behavior, and substance use among youth (Houck et al. 2014; Perkins et al. 2014; Ybarra and Mitchell 2014). There is also a growing amount of research produced by think tanks and other organizations that documents the prevalence of cyberbullying (Eaton et al. 2017; Lenhart et al. 2016).

Much of the literature focuses on the unique dangers that women face when they engage in sexting. Researchers suggest that women are more likely than men to feel pressured to share images of themselves with others (Lippman and Campbell 2014; Thomas 2018), receive troubling unsolicited images (Mandau 2019), have their images shared without their consent (Burkett 2015; Eaton et al. 2017), and face more serious consequences if their images are exposed (Salter 2016). While the potential risks that accompany sexting are well-documented, some scholars suggest that common narrative of women and men filling traditional gendered roles as victim and perpetrator and men pressuring women into sharing photos does not reflect the majority of sexting interactions (Hasinoff 2012; Lee and Crofts 2015). Previous sociological literature on gender and sexuality provides valuable insights into how traditional gender beliefs shape these patterns and why these patterns persist in intimate interactions that take place online and offline.

### **Sexting and Gender**

Gender is a relational social structure composed of hierarchically arranged masculinities and femininities that intersects with many axes of identity including race, ethnicity, and social class, and it plays an influential role in how and why individuals engage in sexting. Beliefs about gender are closely related to beliefs about sexuality and may influence how women and men perceive and engage in sexual behaviors. A sexual double standard stems from the persistent belief that women are passive and relationship-oriented while men are active and sexually

adventurous (Bogle 2008; Bradshaw, Kahn, and Saville 2010; Crawford and Popp. 2003; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). While men may experience pressures to demonstrate their masculinity and sexual prowess by being sexually active, women may experience conflicting pressures to signal that they are sexually emboldened while avoiding being shamed for engaging in sexually promiscuous behavior. These expectations may contribute to unequal and gendered power dynamics in intimate relationships.

While there is variation in how individuals grapple with traditional gender beliefs, scholars suggest that ideas related to the sexual double standard are persistent because they align with traditional views of masculine and feminine sexuality (Masters et al. 2013). Social science research has found that traditional gender beliefs have a persistent influence on young people's sexual relationships and hookup culture as well as on how people perceive women and men's sexual decisions (Allison and Risman 2013; Armstrong et al. 2012; Currier 2013; Eaton and Rose 2011).

The sexual double standard contributes to gender inequalities identified in previous sexting studies such as girls and women experiencing greater pressure to share nude images and greater risk of having their photos shared without their consent (Ringrose et al. 2013). Looking at the literature more broadly, scholars have expressed concerns because women are more likely to engage in self-objectification than men and this may contribute to unhealthy sexting behavior. Self-objectification is much more common among women and girls due to a mix of life experiences, media representations, and socialization, which teach them that they are objects that others will view and judge based on their appearance (Berger 1992; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Moradi and Huang 2008). Scholars suggest that women and girls may be vulnerable to pressures to share images of themselves and sexting may be harmful for their psychological well-

being and self-esteem. However, it is important to note that women and girls do not passively engage in sexting and several studies provide evidence of women sharing nude images to overcome body insecurities (Caldeira and De Ridder 2017; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz 2015). Many of my women interviewees reported a mix of experiences that ranged from negative interactions that involved pressures to share and feelings of fear and resentment to positive interactions that left them feeling body positive and empowered. In some situations, feelings of disempowerment and empowerment coexist as young women grapple with their own gender beliefs and expectations. Scholars have yet to explore the ways in which girls and women may use sexting to cope with and challenge harmful gender beliefs such as body degradation and male sexual entitlement.

Less work has explored men's engagement in digital intimacy. Unlike the naked feminine body, which scholars suggest people inherently judge as sexual, the naked masculine body may have a variety of meanings attached to it. Images of men's naked bodies may be perceived as sexual, but they may also be viewed as a symbol of "gross out" humor, daring antics, entertainment, or intimidation (Salter 2016; Amundsen 2020). Several studies have analyzed the trend of men sharing unsolicited photos of their genitals as many people wonder why men send these images and what they can do about it (Mandau 2019; Ringrose and Lawrence 2018). My interviewees also brought up these questions, often reflecting on how they felt confused as to how they should interpret and respond to these images. Although sending unsolicited "dick pics" takes place online, it bears some resemblance to "flashing" and many consider it a way for men to sexually harass others (Mandau 2019). Whether it is labeled as a sexual advance or an act of harassment, it is getting its own amount of media attention as policies that outlaw the nonconsensual sending of sexual images develop.

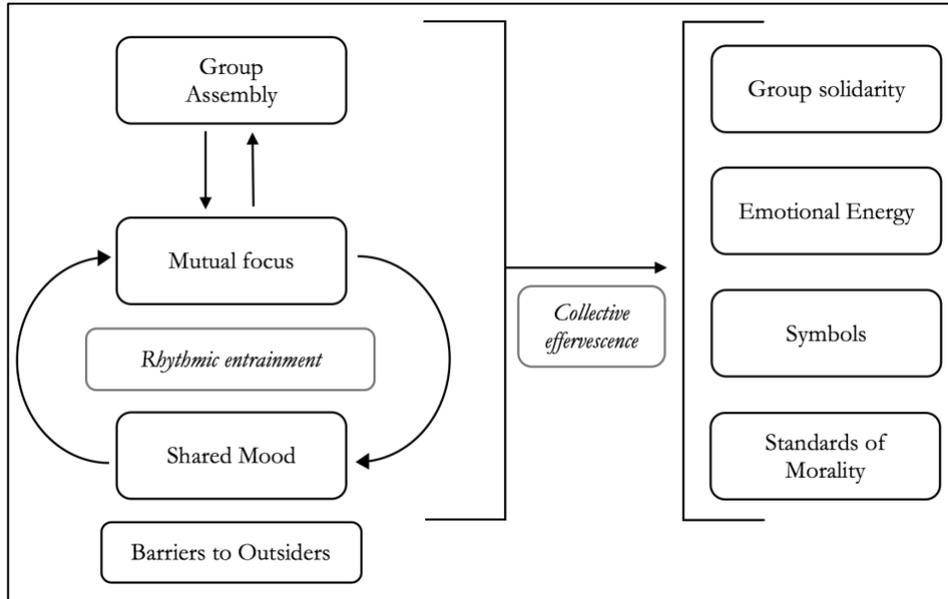
To better understand how gender dynamics shape sexting interactions, it is important to develop a theoretical framework that captures the processes through which sexting rituals occur and the conditions that separate successful and unsuccessful rituals. For this purpose, I integrate interaction ritual theory into my study of sexting, which I will describe in the next section.

### **Theorizing Meaningful Online Interactions**

Rituals are interactions that generate social solidarity through coordinated actions. While Durkheim (1912) first introduced rituals into sociological thought by studying religious rituals, scholars have continued to build and expand on his work. For example, Randall Collins (2005) created interaction ritual theory (IRT) to model the processes through which individuals form social bonds to one another by connecting interaction rituals, emotion, and social solidarity. He applies his theory to many different contexts from informal occasions like sporting events or smoking breaks to formal focused occasions such as weddings and festivals. He argues that interaction rituals involve four conditions, which you can see in my simplified model of Figure 1 that appears in Collins (2005, page 48).

The first condition is *group assembly*, which requires that participants gather in one location and can influence one another through their physical presence. The second condition is that there is a *barrier to outsiders*, which separates participants from individuals who are excluded from the ritual. The third condition is *mutual focus*, meaning that participants focus on a specific object or activity and are aware that they share this focus. The fourth and final condition is that participants have a *shared mood*.

Figure 1: Interaction Ritual Theory Model



Collins argues that when participants meet these conditions and strengthen them through unconscious rhythmic entrainment (adjusting their behaviors so that they become synchronized), the ritual creates a high level of intensity. Potential outcomes of successful rituals include emotional energy and solidarity that strengthen the bond between participants, who must repeat the ritual regularly to maintain this bond. While some interaction rituals may fit this model precisely, it is an ideal type, meaning that it is an abstract concept that captures certain elements of a social phenomenon rather than one specific instance or case. The rituality of interactions rests on a spectrum from perfect to no sense of synchronization. Low levels of ritual conditions and synchronization will likely influence the outcome, producing little to no sense of solidarity between participants. Some scholars argue that negative unequal interactions can even produce negative emotional energy, which may include feelings of disinterest, resentment, or even hatred (Boyns and Luery 2015).

While Collins' model is a valuable tool for studying many different types of interaction rituals, it has two limitations. First, the initial condition of interaction ritual theory is that participants are physically assembled together. This condition is problematic for individuals engaging in mediated online interactions. Verbal and physical cues are important tools that are likely absent when communicating via voice, text, or even video chat. While there is some evidence that interaction rituals can and do take place in mediated spaces, there may be some limitations (DiMaggio et al. 2018). For instance, Maloney (2012) finds that interaction ritual chains appear on pro-anorexia websites as a way for participants to generate emotional energy, promote group solidarity, and sustain their pro-anorexic identity. When analyzing religious rituals in online Muslim chat rooms and forums, Becker (2011) observed that some ritual processes transfer successfully to online spaces, others produce ambiguous outcomes, and others are not attempted. Whether or not individuals successfully engage in intimate sexual interaction rituals online remains up for debate.

The second limitation is that Collins devotes little space to the ways that unequal gender relations and expectations may prevent sexual partners from experiencing harmonious solidarity-generating rituals. In fact, Collins does little in the way of theorizing how intersecting identities such as sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, or social class may shape interaction rituals. His main explanation for unsuccessful sexual interaction rituals focuses on a lack of synchronization due to individual pleasure-seeking which he terms the "selfish penis model" (Collins 2005: 228). In addition to being limited in scope, this explanation assumes men are pleasure-seekers and women are pleasure-providers. While this proposition aligns with contemporary work on hookup culture, which finds that sexual pleasure is often one-sided and male-centric in casual heterosexual interactions (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012; Wade 2018), it is a one-sided

explanation that does not address how traditional gender beliefs constrain women's behaviors and inhibit the synchronization of sexual interaction rituals. To better understand how sexting interaction rituals may be gendered, it is vital to acknowledge the role of symbolic objects in interaction rituals.

### **Incorporating the Sociology of Meaning**

Symbolic objects or totems often play a role in Durkheimian rituals (Durkheim 1912). They may have different meanings attached to them depending on the context in which they appear, and these meanings will likely influence the rituals in which they are involved (Goffman 1967). Cultural sociologists have made important advances in this area of research. For instance, Tavory and Swidler (2009) explore how social actors navigate semiotic spaces where multiple contested meanings exist to better understand resistance to condom use in rural Malawi. Cerulo (2018) examines how individuals decode the messages that perfume manufacturers try to send and how social location influences the meaning people attribute to commercially marketed perfumes. This work suggests that material and immaterial objects may have multiple discordant meanings and participants' social traits may influence their understanding and application of these meanings.

Nude images are an especially valuable case for studying the relationship between objects, their symbolic meanings, and interaction rituals. While people usually interpret images of nude or semi-nude bodies as intimate content (with the possible exception of medical diagrams), they may attach many different types of meanings to them. Boudoir photos taken before a wedding signify romance and sexual intimacy, a pinup girl in a soldier's bunk reminds him of the comforts and happiness of home, while a man exposing himself on the subway implies an uncomfortable imposition. The meanings that individuals attach to nude images may

depend on many different factors including the type of relationship that exists between the sender and recipient and any gender expectations or power dimensions that shape their interactions (Jerslev and Jepsen 2020). Because individuals often attach powerful meanings to nude images, sending and/or receiving nude images may also shape the relationship that exists between participants: strengthening some, creating new tensions in others, or breaking some apart completely.

### **Three Empirical Articles on Sexting**

Young people use nude images to bond with one another in diverse and gendered ways. In the three papers included in this dissertation, I will examine three distinct types of sexting: romantic sexting, sexting with friends, and sharing images of others. These three types of sexting emerged organically from my interview data. While I used my survey to identify potential interviewees who had varying levels of experience sexting, there were no sexting-related requirements for participating in a follow-up interview. When I coded all 101 interviews, I found that 89 interviewees had participated in romantic sexting, 68 had participated in platonic sexting, and 55 had participated in sharing images of others. I will analyze each of these subsets separately in the papers that follow. These three analyses will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of young people's sexting behaviors and motives and extend interaction ritual theory by addressing the patterns that characterize online and gendered rituals.

#### *Article One – Out of Town and Out of Sync: Understanding Romantic Sexting Practices as Online Interaction Rituals*

Article One investigates how sexual interaction rituals take place online and why some interactions are satisfying while others are not by analyzing the interviews of the 89 college students I talked to about their experiences sexting with romantic partners. I integrate traditional gender beliefs into interactional ritual theory to develop a more comprehensive understanding of

how sexual interaction rituals are gendered. This article connects the literature on interaction rituals (Collins 2005; Goffman 1967; McFarland et al. 2013) and the literature on traditional gender beliefs and their influence on women's sexual behaviors (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012; Wade 2018). While Collins (2005) attributed ritual failure to individual pleasure seeking, incorporating traditional gender beliefs provides valuable insights into how women may strategically engage in intimate interactions and end up feeling out of sync and unsatisfied.

I find that online sexual interaction rituals largely follow the IRT model even when the condition of physical co-presence is absent. However, traditional gender beliefs may explain why many young people, especially young women, experience unsatisfying sexual interactions. I find that when women interviewees relied on gender beliefs to guide their decisions while sexting, they experience unsynchronized interactions and feelings of frustration rather than sexual arousal. More specifically, they are more likely than men to experience pressure to share images with romantic partners and receive content that they find to be unpleasant. The findings presented in this article build upon interaction ritual theory by highlighting how this theory extends to intimate online interaction rituals and how traditional gender beliefs contribute to women's experience of unsatisfying sexting interactions.

*Article Two – Friends + Sexting = Frexting: How Gendered Bodies Shape Online Bonding Rituals*

Article Two provides in-depth insights into how and why young people share nude images in platonic relationships by analyzing the interviews of the 68 college students who spoke with me about their experiences sharing nude images with their friends. This article builds upon previous work on gendered bonding rituals. Previous literature suggests that humor and joking are central elements of boys' and men's bonding rituals (Flood 2008; Kehily and Nayak 1997; Lyman 1987) because norms related to heteronormative masculinity prevent the formation of

more intimate relationships (Diefendorf and Bridges 2020; Lewis 1978). In contrast, previous research on women's bonding rituals suggests that talking about appearance and "fat talk" is a popular bonding ritual among women (Dellinger and Williams 1997; Nichter 2001). While these rituals include sharing one's vulnerabilities and receiving positive reassurance, scholars suggest that these interactions may have negative effects on body satisfaction (Salk and Engeln-Maddox 2011). While several studies have explored how these gendered bonding rituals may translate to sharing nude images online, these studies have been limited in scope and depth (e.g., Albury and Crawford 2012; Caldeira and De Ridder 2017; Salter 2016; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz (2015).

I find that it is relatively common for young people to exchange nude or semi-nude images online with platonic friends. However, women and men attach gendered meanings to nude images shared within the context of platonic relationships and often engage in two distinct bonding rituals. I find that it is participants' shared understanding of the nude image that enables them to engage in this ritual successfully and contributes to a sense of trust between participants. While women are more likely to send images to their friends for positive affirmation, demonstrating a shift from body degradation to body admiration, men primarily send images to show off or joke around, highlighting how heteronormative masculinity continues to limit men's bonding rituals. The findings presented in this article add to the literature on gendered bonding rituals by highlighting how women and men attach distinct meanings to the images they share with their friends and how these meanings shape distinct gender rituals.

*Article Three – Men Find Trophies Where Women Find Insults: Sharing Nude Images of Others as Collective Rituals of Sexual Pursuit and Rejection*

Article Three examines the sharing of nude and semi-nude images of others by analyzing the interviews of the 55 college students who talked to me about engaging in this practice. This article builds on two lines of complementary research. It extends previous work on the

relationship between men's displays of heterosexual masculinity (Duckworth and Trautner 2019; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) and the collective pursuit of women (Cosma and Gurevich 2019; Flood 2008; Grazian 2007) as well as previous research on femininity and women's strategies for rejecting men's sexual advances (Ronen 2010; Snow et al. 1991). While this literature provides insights into how rituals of sexual pursuit and rejection take place in-person, few studies have explored how women and men share their digital intimate interactions with one another (Burkett 2015; Hess and Flores 2016; Ringrose et al. 2013; Thompson 2018).

I found that while women and men may both share images of others, when they do so, they often participate in two very different rituals. I examine how the symbolic meanings attached to men's and women's nude images in the context of intimate heterosexual interactions shape collective rituals of sexual pursuit and sexual rejection. I find that men share images of women as trophies to demonstrate sexual prowess and receive praise from their peers, while women share images of men to cope with unwelcome sexual advances and receive support from their peers. These feelings of domination and commiseration are gender-specific and linked to the perceived desirability of men's and women's nude images. The findings presented in this article extend work on interaction ritual theory and gender by highlighting how the meanings individuals attach to symbolic objects transform intimate interactions between individuals into highly gendered cooperative group activities.

### **Contribution and Future Directions**

Together, these articles challenge the common assumption that sexting is an inherently risky and dangerous behavior by highlighting the diverse ways that young people use nude images to bond with one another. In addition to highlighting three of the different ways that young people may engage in sexting, I also provide in-depth insights into the processes through

which they sext and their motives for engaging in these different types of sexting. To fully understand young people's sexting experiences, it is vital to analyze how traditional gender beliefs and the diverse gendered meanings participants attach to nude images shape online sexting rituals. These meanings influence how individuals perceive nude images and they behave. As a result, sexting rituals may reproduce and / or resist unequal gender relations.

Based on the findings I present in this three-paper dissertation, there is a variety of questions that future studies should pursue. First, how do other dimensions of gender and sexual identity influence young people's engagement in sexting and online interaction rituals more broadly? Future research should investigate populations not adequately represented by my data to determine what additional benefits and/or challenges LGBTQIA individuals encounter when they engage in online intimacy. While this study provides provisional evidence that sexting in LGBTQIA relationships may be more synchronized than sexting in heterosexual relationships, and that men who identify as gay may be more willing to engage in platonic sexting than men who identify as straight, including sharing images for positive affirmation, there are too few individuals who identify with non-heterosexual sexual orientations in this sample to make any definitive statements. These are important areas of investigation for future research to explore.

Second, how will these rituals evolve as young adults move through the life course and what will future generations' engagement in digital intimacy look like? While conventional wisdom suggests that young people will share fewer sexual images as they mature and technology will continue to evolve to enable individuals to engage in safer online interactions, these conclusions are far from certain. Future research should monitor how intimate online rituals evolve as tech-savvy adults pursue long-distance relationships and search for ways to

“spice things up” while tech companies produce new innovations that promise greater online security as well as new threats such as AI generated nudes (Clahane 2020).

Finally, how can the findings presented here promote healthy and safe digital intimacy? While the persistent concerns about young people’s engagement in sexting are well-grounded, focusing on criminalization and framing sexting as an inherently dangerous behavior fails to acknowledge the complex realities of digital intimacy. In fact, this approach may put individuals who find themselves in harmful situations in greater danger because they are afraid that they’ll be in trouble for sexting and avoid asking for help from their families, teachers, or the authorities. Instead of focusing on sexting as an activity that they should fear and prevent, parents and educators may better protect young people from harmful sexting interactions by teaching them how to use the internet safely and engage in healthy intimate interactions online and offline. While policymakers have made significant progress in addressing the nonconsensual sharing of nude images, they must take additional steps to adequately protect individuals who share private information online.

## METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

I collected the data for this dissertation project using a mixed methods approach over the course of the 2018-2019 academic year. I gathered quantitative survey data to capture the breadth of young people's sexting practices and qualitative interview data to capture the depth of these experiences. This Methodological Appendix provides a detailed outline of the two-part data collection process and descriptive statistics related to participants' demographic features and engagement in sexting. While I analyzed subsets of this data in each of the three dissertation articles, the Methodological Appendix offers readers a look at the survey and interview samples in their entirety and more in-depth insights into the patterns that appear in the survey data.

### **Survey Data**

I collected survey data from undergraduate students at seven universities between August 2018 to April 2019 using Qualtrics, an online survey platform. I modeled my survey recruitment strategy after England's Online College Social Life Survey by distributing my survey at multiple universities across the U.S. to increase variation in my sample. After receiving approval from the University of Arizona Institutional Review Board in spring 2018, I contacted instructors at a wide variety of universities across the U.S. and requested that they distribute an online survey on sexting in their fall 2018 and/or spring 2019 classes for course credit. I identified instructors who were willing to participate at seven universities representing five different regions of the U.S. (Table 1). Although these universities do not constitute a nationally representative sample of college students, they do contribute to greater variation in characteristics that are related to region such as race and ethnicity.

Table 1: Characteristics of University Survey Sites (n = 7)

<b>ID</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Undergraduate Student body</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Classes Surveyed</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>	<b>Mean Response Rate</b>
1	Midwest	> 10,000	Public Research	3	495	76%
2	Midwest	> 10,000	Public Research	1	302	66%
3	Northeast	< 5,000	Private Liberal Arts	2	38	75%
4	Northwest	> 10,000	Public Research	3	32	28%
5	South	< 5,000	Private Religious	43	546	49%
6	South	5,000-10,000	Private Research	7	56	33%
7	Southwest	> 10,000	Public Research	11	448	61%

After I received approval to conduct my research from the Institutional Review Board at each university, I began recruiting survey participants in university classrooms. I did this by providing each participating instructor with a PDF instruction sheet that included a brief description of my research project, a URL link to the online survey, and a URL link to an alternative activity. Students completed the online survey or alternative activity outside of the classroom within a designated timeframe determined on a case-by-case basis (students typically had a two-week window to complete either activity). I provided an alternative activity so students who did not want to participate in the survey could complete a similarly rigorous task and receive the same amount of course credit. At the end of each activity, I asked students for their university email address so that I could create an accurate list of students who participated in either activity. I sent these lists to instructors after the deadline to participate had passed so that they could award course credit to participants. Although individuals often view sexting as a sensitive topic, most students completed the survey rather than the alternative activity, contributing to a high response rate for the vast majority of classes surveyed.

The majority of participating instructors agreed to award course credit to students who completed the survey or alternative activity. Across the 70 classes in which I distributed my

survey, there was a 63% response rate. Response rate was significantly lower in classes in which the instructor did not offer course credit. Because of the high participation rate, non-representativeness is related to the classes in which I distributed the survey. Although classes were largely sociology classes, only 9.5% of the sample were sociology majors (n = 182). There does not appear to be a significant difference in sexting between sociology and other majors. Thus, major does not appear to significantly influence representativeness.

The survey asked about “sending sexual images” rather than “sexting” to encourage respondents to think about all of the images they had sent prior to taking the survey that they may have considered sexual in nature. Additionally, as part of the survey introduction, I specified that respondents should recall a wide variety of images in their responses including semi-nude images and images shared with non-romantic connections such as friends or classmates:

The first half of this survey will ask you about your experiences sending and receiving sexual images in four different scenarios.

Sexual images include all digital photos and videos that are shared online or in-person and depict nudity or semi-nudity such as suggestive photos involving revealing clothing, swimwear, or lingerie, dick pics, topless photos, and/or photos or videos of genitalia or sex acts.

Please try to recall all of your experiences and answer the following questions as honestly and accurately as possible. Your responses will contribute to research that explores the diverse ways in which sexual images are shared today.

Although it is not possible to know exactly how each survey respondent interpreted the term “sexual images” or how they may have interpreted other terms such as “nudes” or “sexts”, their responses indicate that asking them to reflect on their experiences sharing sexual images caused them to recall many different experiences. In the following section, I provide descriptive statistics related to survey respondents’ demographic characteristics and their engagement in the four different sexting interactions included in my survey.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

At the end of the data collection period, a total of 2,052 students had responded to the survey. I dropped 130 respondents who did not finish the survey and ended up with 1,922 complete responses. Because only five respondents identified as transgender, there were too few cases to conduct follow-up interviews or perform a robust survey analysis to understand the unique benefits and challenges these young people may have experienced when sexting (four respondents identified as transgender women and one respondent identified as a transgender man). As a result, the analyses below include a total of 1,917 cisgender responses. The demographic characteristics of this sample appear in Table 2 below.

The main purpose of the survey was to collect comprehensive data on college students' engagement in sexting. To do this, I created four sets of questions that asked respondents about their engagement in four different sexting interactions: sending images of the self, receiving images from someone else, sending images of others, and receiving images of others. When respondents reported engaging in one sexting interaction, they would answer several general questions about their engagement and a series of detailed questions about the most recent time they engaged in this sexting interaction. Descriptive statistics related to survey respondents' overall engagement in these four types of sexting appear in Tables 4 - 7 below.

Interestingly, very few differences appeared in this study with respect to how race and ethnicity shaped participants' sexting practices. One explanation for this lack of variation may be that sexting interactions often took place within racial and ethnic groups. While participants of color occasionally commented on experiencing racism when they chatted with strangers on dating applications like Tinder, these experiences seemed to be a rare experience for most of my interviewees.

Table 2: Survey Respondents' Demographic Characteristics (n = 1917)

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Count (Percentage)</b>
- Women	1315 (68.6%)
- Men	602 (31.4%)
<b>Race and Ethnicity</b>	
- Non-Hispanic White	1036 (54.0%)
- Black or African American	167 (8.7%)
- Hispanic or Latino	220 (11.5%)
- Asian	152 (7.9%)
- Mixed Race/Ethnicity	331 (17.3%)
- Prefer not to answer	11 (0.6%)
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	
- Straight	1619 (84.5%)
- Bisexual	175 (9.1%)
- Gay/Lesbian	61 (3.2%)
- Other	19 (1.0%)
- I'm not sure	43 (2.2%)
<b>Born in the United States</b>	
- Yes	1668 (87.0%)
- No	245 (12.8%)
- Prefer not to answer	4 (0.2%)
<b>First-Generation College Student</b>	
- Yes	522 (27.2%)
- No	1385 (72.3%)
- Prefer not to answer	10 (0.5%)
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	
- Buddhist	24 (1.3%)
- Hindu	20 (1.0%)
- Jewish	78 (4.1%)
- Muslim	32 (1.7%)
- Protestant	198 (10.3%)
- Roman Catholic	559 (29.2%)
- Agnostic	151 (7.9%)
- Atheist	112 (5.8%)
- Other or Something else	327 (17.1%)
- Nothing in particular	416 (21.7%)

To test this explanation, I took a closer look at the survey data which provides a rough estimate of the racial and ethnic composition of survey respondents and their sexting partners. When asked about the last time they received a nude or semi-nude image of another person, the

respondent provided a variety of details about the person who sent them images including their perceived race and ethnicity (Table 3 below). Although this is not a perfect measure since the respondent reports both individuals' race and ethnicity and only captures one instance of sexting, I used this data to identify pairs in which both participants are non-Hispanic white, both participants are non-white, and one participant is non-Hispanic white and one participant is non-white.

Table 3: Image Senders' Race and Ethnicity (n = 1417)

<b>Race and Ethnicity</b>	
- Non-Hispanic White	739 (52.1%)
- Black or African American	119 (8.4%)
- Hispanic or Latino	114 (8.0%)
- Asian	35 (2.5%)
- Mixed Race/Ethnicity	368 (26%)
- Unknown or Other	42 (3.0%)

There were 1,417 respondents who reported that they had received a nude or semi-nude image of someone else. Respondents who reported that both participants were non-Hispanic white made up 39.9% of interactions while respondents who reported that both participants were both non-white made up 32.5% of interactions. Finally, respondents who reported that one participant was non-Hispanic white and one participant was non-white or their race/ethnicity was unknown made up the remaining 27.6% of interactions. While this is a rough measure of racial and ethnic composition, it provides some evidence that sexting interactions typically occurred between individuals who identify similarly as white or non-white.

It is interesting to note that more than half of survey respondents reported sharing images of themselves (56.4%) and receiving images from someone else (73.9%). In many cases, respondents reported sharing images with multiple people and sharing numerous images. For

instance, only 29.8% of respondents reported sharing images of themselves with only one other person and only 14.2% of respondents reported only sharing 1-2 images. While sharing and receiving images of others was less frequent, there is also variation within these interactions as seen in Tables 6 and 7 below. These findings highlight how young people’s engagement in sexting is not a one-time occurrence, but an activity that may involve numerous and diverse individuals and scenarios. I delve deeper into this phenomenon using in-depth interviews.

Table 4: Respondents’ Engagement in Sharing Images of the Self

<b>Asked to share images of the self</b>	<b>Count (Percentage)</b>
- Yes	1385 (72.2%)
- No	511 (26.7%)
- Prefer not to answer	21 (1.1%)
<b>Shared images of the self</b>	
- Yes	1081 (56.4%)
- No	790 (41.2%)
- Prefer not to answer	46 (2.4%)
<b>Number of people (n = 1082)</b>	
- 1	322 (29.8%)
- 2-4	500 (46.2%)
- 5-10	146 (13.5%)
- 11-20	60 (5.5%)
- 21 or more	53 (4.9%)
<b>Number of images (n = 1082)</b>	
- 1-2	154 (14.2%)
- 3-5	223 (20.6%)
- 6-10	182 (16.8%)
- 11-20	164 (15.2%)
- 21-50	185 (17.1%)
- 51 or more	173 (16.0%)
<b>Time period during which sharing took place (n = 1082)</b>	
- Middle School	124 (11.5%)
- High School	779 (72.0%)
- College	815 (75.3%)

Table 5: Respondents' Engagement in Receiving Images from Someone Else

<b>Asked to receive images from someone else</b>	<b>Count (Percentage)</b>
- Yes	653 (34.1%)
- No	1234 (64.4%)
- Prefer not to answer	30 (1.6%)
<b>Received images from someone else</b>	
- Yes	1417 (73.9%)
- No	480 (25.0%)
- Prefer not to answer	20 (1.0%)
<b>Number of people (n = 1417)</b>	
- 1	325 (22.9%)
- 2-4	646 (45.6%)
- 5-10	250 (17.6%)
- 11-20	103 (7.3%)
- 21 or more	93 (6.6%)
<b>Number of images (n = 1417)</b>	
- 1-2	198 (14.0%)
- 3-5	327 (23.1%)
- 6-10	263 (18.6%)
- 11-20	222 (15.7%)
- 21-50	189 (13.3%)
- 51 or more	218 (15.4%)
<b>Time period during which sharing took place (n = 1417)</b>	
- Middle School	249 (17.6%)
- High School	1120 (79.0%)
- College	1041 (73.4%)

Table 6: Respondents' Engagement in Sending Images of Others

<b>Asked to send images of others</b>	<b>Count (Percentage)</b>
- Yes	304 (15.9%)
- No	1599 (83.4%)
- Prefer not to answer	14 (0.7%)
<b>Sent images of others</b>	
- Yes	140 (7.3%)
- No	1762 (91.9%)
- Prefer not to answer	15 (0.8%)
<b>Number of people (n =140)</b>	
- 1	52 (37.1%)
- 2-4	72 (51.4%)
- 5-10	11 (7.8%)
- 11-20	3 (2.1%)
- 21 or more	2 (1.4%)
<b>Number of images (n = 140)</b>	
- 1-2	73 (52.1%)
- 3-5	39 (27.8%)
- 6-10	10 (7.1%)
- 11-20	9 (6.4%)
- 21-50	3 (2.1%)
- 51 or more	6 (4.3%)
<b>Time period during which sharing took place (n = 140)</b>	
- Middle School	23 (16.4%)
- High School	95 (67.8%)
- College	62 (44.3%)

Table 7: Respondents' Engagement in Receiving Images of Others

<b>Asked to receive images of others</b>	<b>Count (Percentage)</b>
- Yes	192 (10.2%)
- No	1708 (89.1%)
- Prefer not to answer	17 (0.9%)
<b>Received images of others</b>	
- Yes	650 (33.9%)
- No	1251 (65.3%)
- Prefer not to answer	16 (0.8%)
<b>Number of people (n = 650)</b>	
- 1	194 (29.8%)
- 2-4	364 (56.0%)
- 5-10	76 (11.7%)
- 11-20	9 (1.4%)
- 21 or more	7 (1.1%)
<b>Number of images (n = 650)</b>	
- 1-2	311 (47.8%)
- 3-5	217 (33.3%)
- 6-10	65 (10.0%)
- 11-20	29 (4.5%)
- 21-50	14 (2.1%)
- 51 or more	14 (2.1%)
<b>Time period during which sharing took place (n = 650)</b>	
- Middle School	96 (14.8%)
- High School	519 (79.8%)
- College	292 (44.9%)

## **Interview Data**

The last question on the survey asked respondents if they were interested in participating in a follow-up interview. I emailed respondents who answered “yes” from two universities in a mid-size city in the South to arrange in-person interviews. I strategically selected interviewees, so my sample was approximately 50% women and 50% men and included interviewees from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. I conducted 101 in-depth interviews between September 2018 and May 2019 (see Table 9 for a breakdown by sexting type). Interviews generally lasted 60-90 minutes, documented interviewees’ sexting experiences chronologically, and revealed how their sexting practices evolved over time.

The majority of my interviewees ( $n = 97$ ) attended a small private university that has a religious affiliation and focuses on undergraduate education. At the time of data collection, the undergraduate student body was composed of approximately 62% women and 38% people of color. Although the university has a religious affiliation and all students take two classes that involve the academic study of religion, students identify with many different religious affiliations and levels of religiosity as seen in Table 8 below.

Additionally, I met with four interviewees ( $n = 4$ ) from a private research university with 5,000-10,000 undergraduate students. At the time of data collection, the undergraduate student body was composed up of approximately 58% women and 30% people of color. I intended to interview more students from this university, but I could only distribute my survey for course credit in two classes, which limited my pool of potential interviewees.

Interviewees’ demographic characteristics appear in Table 8 below, which shows that my sample is diverse in terms of racial-ethnic background, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. The mean age of respondents was 19.5, and all respondents were between 18 and 25

years old at the time of their interviews. Although sociology instructors were the main distributors of the survey, only 5 interviewees were sociology majors. The most common majors included 17 psychology, 13 music, 10 business, and 7 political science. Although I conducted interviews at two universities in the South, respondents came from 25 U.S. States and territories and 6 different countries.

While the main goal of the interviews was to discuss interviewees' sexting experiences, I also asked each interviewee about their personal life, college experiences, and plans for the future to better understand the social context in which they thought about and engaged in sexting. To better understand interviewees' diverse sexting experiences, I asked them about the first time they sexted and their subsequent interactions, focusing on the four sexting interactions measured in the survey: sending images of the self, receiving images from someone else, sending images of others, and receiving images of others. To collect comprehensive and comparable details about each interviewee's sexting experiences, I used an interview guide that included questions like, "How was the image shared?" "What was the motivation to share the image?" "Who was the image shared with?" and "How did the audience respond when they saw it?"

Within 24 hours after each interview, I wrote a memo to capture my initial observations about the interviewee and their sexting experiences. After a professional transcription service transcribed the interviews, I coded them using Atlas.ti. During my initial rounds of coding, I used open coding to generate deductive codes based on previous sexting research and inductive codes with a wide focus to capture themes that emerged organically from the data.

Table 8: Interviewee Demographic Characteristics (n = 101)

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Count (Percentage)</b>
- Women	60 (59.4%)
- Men	41 (40.6%)
<b>Race and Ethnicity</b>	
- Non-Hispanic White	41 (40.6%)
- Black or African American	24 (23.8%)
- Hispanic or Latino	23 (22.8%)
- Asian	11 (10.9%)
- Native American	2 (2.0%)
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	
- Straight	71 (70.3%)
- Bisexual	23 (22.8%)
- Gay/Lesbian	2 (2.0%)
- Pansexual	1 (1.0%)
- Queer	1 (1.0%)
- Not completely straight	1 (1.0%)
- I'm not sure	2 (2.0%)
<b>U.S. Born</b>	
- Yes	85 (84.1%)
- No	16 (15.8%)
<b>First-Generation College Student</b>	
- Yes	34 (33.7%)
- No	67 (66.3%)
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	
- Buddhist	3 (3.0%)
- Jewish	3 (3.0%)
- Muslim	4 (4.0%)
- Protestant	7 (6.9%)
- Roman Catholic	20 (19.8%)
- Agnostic	10 (9.9%)
- Atheist	14 (13.9%)
- Nothing in particular	27 (26.7%)
- Other or something else	13 (12.9%)

During additional rounds of coding, I used more directed coding strategies to carefully recode all of the interviews, focusing on specific sexting interactions during each round of coding. At the time of the interviews, respondents had participated in a wide range of sexting rituals that I could sort into four different types of sexting. The three types of sexting that I analyze in this dissertation appear in Table 9 below. The final type of sexting, “exposed images”, is distinct because it involves exposing images publicly online or to a large group of people such as an entire high school. I will study it in greater detail in future analyses.

Table 9: Interviewees’ Engagement in Sexting Practices

<b>Type of Sexting</b>	<b>Count (Percentage)</b>
- Romantic sexting	89 (88.1%)
- Sexting with friends	68 (67.3%)
- Sharing images of others	55 (54.4%)
- Exposed images	54 (53.4%)

In addition to identifying the traits that characterized each type of sexting analyzed in this study, I also documented the number of times each type appeared and the qualitative patterns that emerged when interviewees discussed each type. By capturing these patterns, I was able to identify subtypes of image sharing and analyze the distinct motives and behaviors that often distinguish women’s sexting experiences from men’s sexting experiences. While the survey data I collect provides broad measurable insights into the prevalence of young people’s sexting practices, this comprehensive analysis of interview data provides an in-depth look into how and why young people engage in sexting and how their decisions and actions are gendered.

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## APPENDIX A: ARTICLE ONE

### Out of Town and Out of Sync: Understanding Romantic Sexting Practices as Online

#### Interaction Rituals

##### ABSTRACT

Gender scholars have found that traditional gender beliefs play a fundamental role in how women and men understand and behave during intimate heterosexual encounters. Interaction ritual theory (IRT) also provides an important sociological framework for how sexual interactions occur. Drawing from 89 interviews with college students about their romantic sexting experiences, this article integrates traditional gender beliefs into IRT to investigate *how* sexual interaction rituals take place online and *why* some interactions are satisfying while others are not. I find that online sexual interaction rituals largely follow the IRT model even when the condition of physical co-presence is removed. However, the presence of gender beliefs can differentiate between satisfying and unsatisfying interactions. I find that when women interviewees rely on gender beliefs to guide their sexting practices, they experience unsynchronized interactions and feelings of frustration rather than sexual arousal. Women were more likely than men to experience pressure to share images with romantic partners and receive content they find unpleasant. These results provide a theoretical framework for understanding the role that gender beliefs play in online interaction rituals more broadly.

##### KEYWORDS

Gender, Sexuality, Technology, Culture, Qualitative Methods

##### INTRODUCTION

Heading off to college, going on family vacations, or simply not having a driver's license or reliable mode of transportation are all situations in young people's lives when they may find

themselves struggling to stay adequately connected to their significant other especially during long periods of separation (Ogolsky et al. 2017). One way that romantic partners may stay connected while they are physically apart is through sexting, defined here as the electronic sharing of nude or semi-nude images and the written or spoken communication that accompanies them (Parker et al. 2013; Walker, Sancı, and Temple-Smith 2013). However, the effectiveness of this strategy remains unclear. While sociological theory suggests that sexual interaction rituals help intimate partners maintain their sexual bond, Collins' (2005) interaction ritual theory (IRT) posits that sexual interaction rituals require physical co-presence, which may be problematic for individuals for whom this is not an option.<sup>2</sup>

As technology has become more sophisticated and allowed social actors to bridge physical distances in many capacities, scholars have begun to investigate if and how interactions rituals take place online (Longstaff 2017; Maloney 2013). Although it appears as though IRT does translate to online interactions, scholars' findings suggest that there are limitations in relation to the types of interactions that occur online and their outcomes (Becker 2010; DiMaggio et al. 2018). For instance, it is unknown if sexual interaction rituals, the most physically intimate type of interaction ritual, translate successfully to online spaces.

Scholars have yet to provide an analysis of whether or how romantic partners may engage in sexting as a sexual interaction ritual. Instead, the majority of work on this topic has focused on the potential risks and negative consequences of young people sharing private information online (Albury and Crawford 2012; Choi and Temple 2016; Houck et al. 2014; Madigan et al. 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> Collins (2005, page 231) emphasizes that "Intercourse is bodily copresence of the strongest possible degree." But even for less "strong" forms of sexuality, Collins' theorization of interaction rituals in general owes much to Goffman's focus on "those entities in social life that come into being whenever persons enter into one another's immediate physical presence." (Collins 2005, page 24, quoting Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959, p. 254.)

Based on previous literature, the most prominent issues associated with sexting include women feeling pressured to share images of themselves with others (Lippman and Campbell 2014; Thomas 2018), receiving troubling unsolicited images (Mandau 2019), and having their images shared without their consent (Burkett 2015; Eaton, Jacobs, and Ruvalcaba 2017). What remains opaque are the processes through which romantic partners engage in sexting as an interaction ritual to bond with one another and what features distinguish satisfying interactions from unsatisfying ones.

In this article, I use data from 89 in-depth interviews with college students to address two questions: *how* do sexual interaction rituals take place online and *why* are some interactions satisfying while others are not? I find that although online sexual interaction rituals break Collins' first condition (physical co-presence), they largely follow his IRT model. However, traditional gender beliefs contribute to many of the unsatisfying interactions young people, especially young women, experience. Satisfying interactions are spontaneous and pleasurable, in tune (or synchronized) with both participants' sexual desires and produce feelings of solidarity and sexual excitement. I find that when traditional gender beliefs constrain interviewees' sexting practices, their interactions are out of tune (or unsynchronized) with their desires and produce feelings of frustration rather than arousal. Based on these findings, I argue that scholars must incorporate gender beliefs as well as other salient intersectional ideologies into future studies of intimate offline and online interaction rituals to fully understand how these interactions may influence social bonding and gender inequalities. As human interactions are increasingly mediated through technology, it is vital that social theory is adapted to account for new challenges and opportunities in interpersonal communication.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

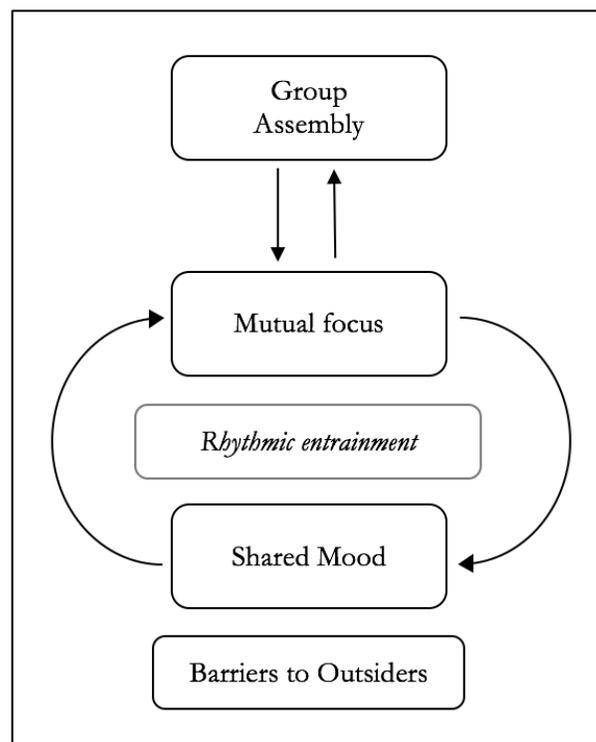
### **Interaction Ritual Theory in Digitally Mediated Spaces**

How social actors construct and maintain social bonds is a central question in sociology. Building on Durkheim's (1912) study of religious rituals, contemporary scholars have studied the development of social solidarity in many different contexts (Goffman 1967; McFarland et al. 2013). They have identified several defining features that separate rituals from other types of encounters including symmetrical or asymmetrical synchronized actions, symbolic objects at the center of the ritual, and subsequent feelings of collective effervescence and emotional energy.

Collins (2005) provides a detailed theoretical model of interaction rituals which I have reproduced in Figure 1 below. He argues that interaction rituals are composed of four conditions. The first condition is *group assembly*, which requires that participants are “physically assembled in the same place so that they can affect each other by their bodily presence” (Collins 2005: 48). The second condition is that there is a *barrier to outsiders* that separates individuals who are participating in the ritual from individuals who are excluded from the ritual. The third condition is *mutual focus*, meaning that participants focus on a specific object or activity and are aware that they share this focus. The fourth and final condition is that participants have a *shared mood* or a similar emotional state throughout the ritual process. When participants meet these conditions and strengthen them through unconscious *rhythmic entrainment*, adjusting their behaviors so that their rhythms become synchronized, there is a high level of intensity. A successful ritual meets all four conditions and may produce four potential outcomes: emotional energy, symbols of social relationship, and standards of morality. These outcomes strengthen the bond between participants, who must repeat them regularly to maintain this bond.

While some interaction rituals may fit this model precisely, it is an ideal type. The rituality of interactions rests on a spectrum which may involve perfect to no sense of synchronization. Low levels of these ritual conditions and synchronization will influence the interaction's outcome. For instance, Rivera (2015) finds significant variation in the levels of emotional energy that develop during job interviews at elite professional service firms. Boyns and Luery (2015) argue that in some cases, interaction rituals can produce negative emotional energy, including disinterest or even hatred toward the interaction ritual and the group in which individuals perform the ritual. As scholars have continued to advance IRT, it is evident that it provides both theoretical utility and flexibility for understanding new interaction rituals.

Figure 1: Replication of Collins' Interaction Ritual Ingredients Model (2004: 231)



Studying sexting as a sexual interaction ritual raises some questions because participants do not physically assemble together, breaking Collins' first condition. However, previous

research has contested the necessity of this condition by examining online interaction rituals in a variety of different contexts. In a study of online discussion forums, Longstaff (2017) finds that rituals can play a powerful role in the formation and destruction of online communities by guiding interactions via symbolic actions. In their study of right-wing political violence, Wahlström and Törnberg (2019) uncover the mechanisms through which social media activity influences right-wing and racist violence. Interaction ritual chains also appear on pro-anorexia websites as a way for participants to generate emotional energy, promote group solidarity, and sustain their pro-anorexic identity (Maloney 2012).

While scholars have found evidence of interaction rituals online, there may be some limitations in the types of rituals that can occur in mediated spaces. For instance, Becker (2011) studied Muslims' interactions in online chat rooms and forums and found that while some ritual processes transfer successfully to online spaces, others produce ambiguous outcomes, and others are not attempted. DiMaggio et al. (2018) applied IRT to internal corporate online interactions and found that while Collins' concepts of mutual focus and rhythm apply to offline and online interactions, some elements of his theory do not transfer to mediated interactions (such as identity formation).

As a result, it remains unclear if satisfying sexual interaction rituals can take place online since the physical and verbal cues individuals usually rely on to synchronize their behavior during face-to-face interactions may be limited if not completely unavailable online (Ireland et al. 2011; Wiltermuth and Heath 2009). When looking specifically at Collins' analysis of sexual interaction rituals, physical separation seems especially problematic. Unlike most interaction rituals in which participants do not touch, for rhythmic entrainment to occur in sexual interactions, Collins suggests that partners' bodily rhythms must coincide through highly

intimate physical contact. It is unknown if sexual interactions, the most physically intimate type of interaction ritual, translate successfully to online spaces.

Another problem with using IRT to understand online sexual interaction rituals is that, similar to Goffman (1967), Collins' account of how gender dynamics influence sexual interaction rituals is limited. He devotes little space to discuss the ways in which unequal gender beliefs and expectations may prevent sexual partners from experiencing the harmonious rituals he describes (Hlavka 2014). His primary explanation for unsuccessful sexual interaction rituals focuses on a lack of synchronization due to individual pleasure-seeking (which he terms the "selfish penis model"). This model is inadequate because it assumes men are pleasure-seekers and women are pleasure-providers and centers around how pleasure-seekers' motives and behaviors prevent synchronization. While this proposition aligns with contemporary work on hookup culture, which finds that sexual pleasure is often one-sided and male-centric in casual heterosexual interactions, it does not address how traditional gender beliefs constrain women's behaviors and inhibit the synchronization of sexual interaction rituals (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012; Wade 2018).

While scholars have begun to account for how sexual interaction rituals contribute to status and power relations (Kemper 2011) and occur in new sexual contexts (Baldor 2019; Orne 2017), they have yet to investigate how this model must be adapted to capture the interactive processes thorough which mediated sexual interaction rituals occur. I suggest incorporating traditional gender beliefs as a key factor into IRT to better understand how these rituals take place online and why some are satisfying while others are not.

#### *Moving Beyond Individual Pleasure Seeking*

Collins' (2005) explanation for why sexual interaction rituals vary with respect to

synchronization and satisfaction centers on individual pleasure-seeking behaviors which often lack reciprocity. He suggests that a prime example of sex that is based solely on individual pleasure seeking is sex work because there is a utilitarian exchange of sexual acts or behaviors for money. The absence of trust and mutual arousal typically reduces the sense of pleasure and solidarity that these interactions generate. While Collins touches upon a few potential motives for why individuals seek out and provide sexual pleasure, he does not address how gender beliefs may influence women and men's motives or behaviors. By examining how traditional gender beliefs constrain women's behaviors and prevent the synchronization of sexual interaction rituals, I contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how gender dynamics shape individuals' most intimate interactions.

It is important to account for the ways that traditional heteronormative gender beliefs may influence sexual interactions because they may have a significant effect on how women and men perceive and engage in sexual behaviors. Despite recent advances in sexual liberation and inclusivity, social scientists have found that society continues to judge women and men's sexual activity and enthusiasm differently (Crawford and Popp 2003; Reid, Elliot, and Webber 2011). A sexual double standard rests on the persistent beliefs that women are passive and relationship-oriented while men are active and sexually adventurous (Bogle 2008; Bradshaw, Kahn, and Saville 2010; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). While there is variation in how individuals grapple with these beliefs, scholars suggest that they endure because they align with traditional views of masculine and feminine sexuality (Masters et al. 2013). Scholars have also found that traditional gender beliefs continue to influence young people's sexual relationships and hookup culture (Allison and Risman 2013; Currier 2013; Eaton and Rose 2011). Digital sexual interactions are not immune to these beliefs which may cause young people, especially young

women, to engage in behaviors that align with deeply engrained gender beliefs rather than their own sexual desires.

Women are more likely than men to experience internal and external pressure to share nude images of themselves with their romantic partners especially when they are involved in heterosexual relationships. These pressures stem from the belief that women must prioritize men's sexual desires and pleasure over their own to attract and keep supposedly sexually adventurous and commitment-phobic men interested (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Previous sexting research provides evidence of how women may internalize these beliefs, finding that some women engage in sexting because they think this behavior is necessary for pleasing boys, capturing their attention, and maintaining intimate relationships (Lippman and Campbell 2014; Ringrose et al. 2013).

Scholars have also documented how women experience external pressures to share nude images of themselves with men (Salter 2016; Lippman and Campbell 2014; Ringrose et al. 2013). In addition to contributing to the internalized pressures women may feel to fulfill men's requests, gender beliefs may influence men's decision to ask for photos. Widespread ideas about male sexuality may contribute to men's interest in viewing the female body, sense of entitlement to view images of their partner, and desire to demonstrate their sexual prowess and masculinity (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012; Pascoe 2012).

Difficulties also extend to instances in which women receive nude images. Women are more likely than men to feel uncomfortable when they receive nude images from their sexual partners. While men and women are well-equipped with the cultural tools they need to interpret and respond to nude images of women, it is significantly more difficult to engage with nude images of men (Eck 2003). This may be particularly problematic when men send women images

of their genitals without any warning or asking for the recipient's consent (Mandau 2019). In these situations, women may try to save face and compliment photos they find disturbing, placing men's desires above their own to keep sexually active men interested.

When women find themselves in situations in which they prioritize their partner's pleasure rather than their own sexual desires, the ritual fails to generate a shared mood of sexual excitement. They may become alienated from the interaction and preoccupied with certain elements of the encounter including how it is proceeding or internal matters which result in feelings of self-consciousness (Goffman 1967: 117). While these interactions may appear successful from the outside and even from a man's perspective, these rituals produce feelings of frustration and disappointment rather than shared feelings of sexual arousal and solidarity.

To fully understand if and how sexual interaction rituals translate to digital spaces, it is critical that we account for the ways in which traditional gender beliefs constrain women's behaviors and hinder the synchronicity of the interaction rituals in which they participate. By doing so, we develop a more nuanced picture of how women experience sexual interaction rituals and the ways in which they grapple with traditional gender beliefs related to their expected and desired roles within these interactions. While traditional gender beliefs typically contributed to unsynchronized interactions that took place between women and men in this data set, it is important to note that they may also influence online sexual interactions within LGBTQ relationships (Pennington 2009).

## DATA AND METHODS

I use data from 89 in-depth interviews with undergraduate students, conducted between October 2018 and May 2019. Each interview lasted an average of 60 to 90 minutes and captured information about interviewees' family background, time in college, and sexting experiences,

ranging from the first time they remember sexting to their thoughts on sexting in the future. I replaced interviewees' names with pseudonyms and removed any identifying information to protect their anonymity.

I interviewed college students (ages 18-25) about their sexting experiences because of their experiences with recent technological advances. Their age group is unique because smartphones and social media became widely available during their adolescence as many began entering their first romantic relationships. Several interviewees referred to themselves as “guinea pigs” because parents and older siblings had little advice to offer on how to navigate this new digital landscape. Interviewing college students is also beneficial because they can reflect on their sexting experiences in high school and college and how these experiences have evolved over time.

I selected my interviewees from a sample of 1,922 respondents to an online survey that I distributed to university students in fall 2018 and spring 2019. I distributed the survey in social science classes. I contacted instructors and asked if they would be willing to distribute an online survey on sexting in their classes for course credit. If instructors agreed to participate, I sent them a document with a description of the research project and URL links to the survey and an alternative activity. The last questions on the survey asked respondents for their email address and if they would like to participate in a follow-up interview.

I contacted students who responded that they were interested in doing a follow-up interview via email. Although I surveyed students at seven universities across the United States, I only contacted students who attended two universities in a mid-size city in the South so that I could conduct in-person interviews. I interviewed 101 students in total and asked each interviewee about their experiences sexting in romantic relationships. While the majority of my

sample (n = 89) reported engaging in romantic sexting interactions at some point in time, 12 of my interviewees reported having no experience engaging in romantic sexting interactions. In this article, I will analyze responses from the 89 interviewees who reported engaging in romantic sexting interactions.

Most of my interviewees (n = 85) were students at a small private university (less than 5,000 undergraduate students). Although the university does have a religious affiliation, it welcomes students of all faiths and is composed of a diverse student body. I also interviewed several students (n = 4) from a mid-sized private research university (5,000-10,000 undergraduate students). I only interviewed four students from this university because only two instructors distributed my survey for course credit to their students. Three additional instructors did distribute my survey to their classes; however, they did not offer course credit which resulted in a very low response rate (20-30%) and very few potential interviewees. Although all of the young people in my sample attended college in the southern United States and this may shape their experiences and views on sex and gender (Jozkowski and Crawford 2016), these findings provide rich insights into the processes through which young people engage in digital intimacy (Sparkes and Smith 2014).

The demographic characteristics of my sample roughly match the universities from which I contacted potential interviewees and appear in Table 1. The mean age of the college students in my sample was 19.5. The sample is more racially and ethnically diverse than the universities from which I selected interviewees because I wanted to ensure that I spoke with students from a wide range of racial and ethnic groups. The sample included 39 interviewees who identified as Non-Hispanic white, 22 who identified as Black or African American, 18 who identified as Hispanic or Latino, 11 who identified as Asian, and 2 who identified as Native American. My

sample was also diverse with respect to interviewees’ sexual orientation and religious affiliation as seen in the Table 1 below.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1: Interviewee Demographic Characteristics (n = 89)

Gender	Count (Percentage)
- Women	53 (59.5%)
- Men	36 (40.4%)
Race & Ethnicity	
- Non-Hispanic White	39 (43.8%)
- Black or African American	22 (24.7%)
- Hispanic or Latino	18 (20.2%)
- Asian	8 (9.0%)
- Native American	2 (2.2%)
Sexual Orientation	
- Straight	63 (70.8%)
- Bisexual	19 (21.3%)
- Gay	2 (2.2%)
- Pansexual	1 (1.1%)
- Queer	1 (1.1%)
- Not completely straight	1 (1.1%)
- I’m not sure	2 (2.2%)
Religious Affiliation	
- Buddhist	3 (3.4%)
- Jewish	3 (3.4%)
- Muslim	3 (3.4%)
- Protestant	6 (6.7%)
- Roman Catholic	16 (18%)
- Agnostic	9 (10.1%)
- Atheist	12 (13.5%)
- Nothing in particular	24 (27%)
- Other or something else	13 (14.6%)

I interviewed women and men with diverse backgrounds and many different sexting experiences. As a white cisgender woman who interviewees may perceive as college-age especially when wearing casual clothes, I appeared nonthreatening to men and women

<sup>3</sup> Although I prioritized speaking with a diverse sample of interviewees, the vast majority of respondents discussed heterosexual sexting interactions and few differences appeared when interviewees discussed how their race and ethnicity influenced their sexting experiences. I discuss this lack of racial and ethnic variation in greater detail in APPENDIX D: Methodological Discussion.

interviewees who both seemed to discuss their sexting experiences openly with me. This observation aligns with previous research which suggests that conversing with a woman interviewer may allow men to reflect upon masculinity rather than feeling compelled to live up to its expectations (Sallee and Harris 2011). In addition to presenting myself as approachable, I matched my interviewees' emotions throughout the interviews (e.g., appearing jovial when they described humorous experiences even if I interpreted these interactions as problematic) and reassured them that we were in a space free of judgement and criticism. Rather than being uncomfortable describing these intimate experiences, many interviewees appeared to appreciate the ability to discuss sexting, a "taboo" topic, freely and mentioned it was a *motivation* rather than a *deterrent* for participating (Ryan 2000). For instance, when asked why she agreed to participate in an interview, Sofia, a 19-year-old woman, commented:

I just felt like it was something that it would be cool to do because I've never really talked about. It's always very – it's a taboo subject I guess and especially with girls. It's like you don't really expect girls to do it, more guys at least from everyone else's perspective.

Many interviewees echoed Sofia's thinking. While they may have had many sexting experiences or observations about this evolving practice, they often had few venues in which they could discuss them honestly. To learn more about the contexts in which interviewees sexted (or didn't sext), I asked each interviewee several sets of questions that inquired into their personal background, college experiences, and future plans.

When asking interviewees specifically about sexting, I asked each interviewee about their participation in four different types: sharing photos of themselves, receiving photos from others, sharing photos of someone else, and receiving photos of someone else from another person. If the interviewee participated in the type of sexting, I asked a series of follow-up questions. For example, if an interviewee had shared photos of themselves, I would ask questions about the

specific times they shared photos such as, “Who did you share the image with?”, “What motivated you to send it?”, “How did the receiver react when they received it?”, and “How did you feel during this experience?”. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed me to investigate each interviewee’s unique sexting experiences and highlights the strength of qualitative interviews for studying *social processes* (Weiss 1994).

## DATA ANALYSIS

After all of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and proofread, they were uploaded to Atlas.ti and analyzed. In the primary coding rounds, I used an open coding technique. I applied deductive codes to identify and separate all instances of sexting based on the type of sexting that was engaged in (e.g., sharing images of the self or receiving images of someone) and who participated in this exchange (e.g., casual romantic partner, serious romantic partner, platonic friend). Then, I applied inductive codes to capture themes that appeared from the data.

During the following rounds of coding, I pursued a more focused coding strategy. I recoded all of my interviews, focusing on interactions in which current or potential romantic partners sent and/or received nude or semi-nude images. I coded the qualitative patterns that emerged when interviewees discussed these interactions. During these rounds of coding, I identified many different elements of each sexting interaction including interviewees’ motivations for sharing images, the types of images they shared and received, their feelings during and after interactions, and variation across their sexting experiences. During this process, I also coded interactions as “synchronized” or “unsynchronized”. Synchronized interactions capture sexting experiences interviewees describe as spontaneous, pleasurable, and in tune with both participants’ desires. Unsynchronized interactions capture sexting experiences interviewee describe as constrained, uncomfortable, and out of tune with their desires. I analyze these

characteristics and how they extend IRT to online interactions rituals in the first section of my findings. In the following section, I analyze the role that traditional gender beliefs play in women’s experience of unsynchronized online interaction rituals.

## FINDINGS

In my sample of college students, 53 women and 36 men reported sexting with at least one romantic partner as seen in Table 2 below. Their romantic sexting experiences were diverse and many interviewees had sexted in multiple relationships which provided useful insights into how sexting interactions may vary across relationships.

Table 2: Engagement in Synchronized and Unsynchronized Sexting Rituals by Gender

	Synchronized interactions	Unsynchronized interactions
Women (n = 53)	30 (56.6%)	43 (81.1%)
Men (n = 36)	24 (66.7%)	20 (55.5%)

Note: While some interviewees only experienced one type of interaction, these categories are not mutually exclusive. In my sample, 20 women (37.7%) and 8 men (22.2%) discussed experiencing synchronized and unsynchronized interactions.

I found that romantic partners can and do successfully engage in sexual interaction rituals online. In my sample, 30 women (56.6%) and 24 men (66.7%) reported engaging in synchronized online sexual interaction rituals or online sexual interaction rituals that met all four of Collins’ conditions. These interviewees were diverse. There was no one demographic characteristic that explained why interviewees did or did not engage in synchronized rituals. Interviewees across racial and ethnic identities and sexual orientations reported engaging in synchronized interactions and there were no specific characteristics or patterns that distinguished their interactions. Although the interactions they described did not meet Collins’ first condition, they suggested that these interactions generated feelings of solidarity, trust, and sexual intimacy when physical intimacy was not possible.

However, many interviewees also describe interactions that did not generate positive emotional energy, but an array of negative feelings including distrust, frustration, and disappointment. In my sample, 43 women (81.1%) and 20 men (55.5%) experienced unsynchronized online sexual interaction rituals. Although these interviewees were also diverse, women were more likely than men to report experiencing unsynchronized interactions. In many cases, age also played a role as interviewees described their first sexting experiences as unsynchronized and their more recent sexting experiences as synchronized.

To better understand how sexual interaction rituals take place online, I will first examine how satisfying online sexual interaction rituals map onto IRT. Then I will build upon IRT by analyzing the role that traditional gender beliefs play in unsynchronized interactions that generated feelings of frustration rather than solidarity.

#### *Barriers to Outsiders*

The second condition of IRT is that there is a barrier that separates participants from individuals excluded from the ritual. This condition remains important in digital interaction rituals and may be broken down into two types: physical and psychological.

Because sexting only requires sending and receiving messages on electronic devices, it can happen at any time and any place. This is problematic when individuals receive sexually suggestive messages or images at inopportune moments. Many interviewees discussed finding themselves in these situations. They received nude images while visiting grandmas, grocery shopping with their families, eating dinner, and sitting in church or in class. While their partner may have been in a private space in which they could take and send images, they were not, and this prevented them from participating in the interaction ritual their partner hoped to initiate. While some interviewees simply closed the application before anyone else could see it, several

did try to participate although the lack of privacy limited their options and their comfort participating.

In contrast, satisfying sexual interaction rituals took place when both participants found themselves in private settings in which they could comfortably view the images they received and send photos back if they chose to do so. In these situations, participants did not have to worry about someone looking over the shoulder and seeing intimate content. As a result, they expressed themselves freely. For instance, Tim, a 19-year-old man, reflects on his girlfriend's failed attempt to initiate video sex one night while he was on a spring break trip and the satisfying sexting exchange they had the following morning:

So, we'd been away from each other for about two weeks. And I think on the second week she called me on FaceTime and I could tell just by her mannerisms and the way that she was talking that she wanted to have an exchange on FaceTime at that moment in some sort of sexual terms. But I was in a house with really thin walls and was not really comfortable with trying that out at the moment...

So then I got up the next morning and she sent me a message saying something about wanting me badly the night before. And then I responded with a photo, and then she responded with a photo and honestly that was the longest exchange I've been in. That was like an hour and a half long exchange. And it was through text message.

In Tim's case, he wasn't necessarily worried about someone seeing sexual content on his phone but overhearing the sexual conversation he would have with his girlfriend. When he restarted the conversation the following morning with a nude photo, this quieter interaction created a protective barrier between him and his house mates and enabled him to comfortably engage in this sexual interaction ritual. Tim's desire for physical privacy was consistent across interviewees who reported experiencing satisfying sexting interactions.

In addition to facing issues of physical barriers, interviewees also discussed lacking the psychological barriers they needed to fully participate in sexting rituals with their partners. While interviewees may worry about parents or classmates accidentally seeing a nude image on their

phone screen, some also worried about their partners intentionally sharing their images with other people. The vast majority of my interviewees knew of a classmate in high school who had their nude photos exposed publicly and wondered what this type of incident would do to their reputation and their future. When interviewees expressed concerns about their partner exposing their image, negative emotions like fear and regret stifled any feelings of solidarity and positive emotional energy they may have gained from the ritual.

In contrast, interviewees who experienced satisfying online sexual interaction rituals discussed how they were not worried about their partners sharing their photos without their consent. This sense of trust between partners generated positive emotional energy including comfort and security. Tim also commented on how important feeling emotionally secure in his relationship was to his most recent sexting experience:

We both actually have the photos still. I think there's a big correlation between safety in a relationship and circumstances of that. Like I definitely was more -- I feel very secure in this relationship and that's why I'm able to like send text messages and know that the photos are being held onto and like do it for that long...

It was really different. I think there's a lot more fun and like lightheartedness about it when it's with someone that you don't have any worries with whatsoever. So that was really the difference maker I think with, the difference between those two.

Tim's previous sexting interactions occurred with girlfriends who he was not completely comfortable with and his uncertainty influenced the applications through which he was willing to send messages, the explicitness of the content he shared, and the feelings that the interactions generated. With his current girlfriend, he sexted over text message and sent images of his entire body because he trusted that she would never share his photos with anyone else. In the end, he was more aroused and had more fun with a partner with whom he could express himself without apprehension. Similar to having a private space in which to sext, believing that their images were

safe after the fact was critical for participants to express themselves freely and contributed to shared emotions of sexual excitement and solidarity.

### *Mutual Focus*

The third condition is mutual focus on a specific object or activity and participants' awareness that they share this focus. This condition applies to online interaction rituals because, when satisfying, both participants are actively engaged in sharing sexual content in the online conversation. There are many different ways that romantic partners can participate in these online sexual interaction rituals. In addition to sending each other images, my interviewees explained that they may give one another compliments, reminisce about past sexual experiences, or describe their sexual fantasies and future rendezvous. For example, Nate, a 22-year-old man, describes what he and his high school girlfriend would talk about when they sexted:

The more physically intimate we got in-person, then more when we were apart, we would talk about those things and also recreating those things, doing new things. But it was usually only after, you know, something was leading up to that or like we'd start to do it but then be like, "No, we'll wait." And then over text, we were a lot bolder than in-person but that was when I was 17.

In addition to reminiscing about previous physical interactions, Nate and his girlfriend also talked about new things that they would like to try but weren't quite ready to pursue in person. Several interviewees echoed this strategy. Some preferred engaging in digital interactions first because it allowed them to explore new sexual activities without any pressure to physically engage in them before they were ready. When successful, these types of interactions solidified the sexual bond between participants and generated feelings of excitement and anticipation for future sexual encounters.

While there is no one correct way to sext, when interviewees described satisfying sexting interactions it became apparent that in addition to focusing on a specific object or activity, it was also crucial that participants' behaviors were synchronized and spontaneous. There was no one

specific action or form of communication that interviewees engaged in that generated a synchronized interaction because interviewees and their partners had diverse sexual and communication preferences. However, there were several characteristics that contributed to a satisfying interaction. On one hand, the sender must share the image to give themselves and the recipient sexual pleasure rather than sending it because they feel pressured to do so or they simply want to get something in return. On the other hand, the recipient must also enjoy receiving the image and feels that they are able to respond honestly. Serena, an 18-year-old woman, explains how she feels when she gets a photo from her boyfriend who she described as a “freaking Hollister Abercrombie and Fitch model”:

Serena: I get excited and I want to run to the bathroom and send him one back.

Intvr: So definitely a positive experience?

Serena: Yeah, for sure.

Intvr: Why do you think he sends you them?

Serena: Because he knows that I get excited and happy, and I like it.

Intvr: And how do you usually react?

Serena: I send one back to him or initiate a dirty talk session or call him on Facetime and we continue through that. It depends.

When Serena’s boyfriend sends her a nude photo to initiate a sexual conversation, she is excited and responds accordingly by sending him a sexual photo or comment back. She perceives his motives as positive, is excited by the content he shares with her, and is happy to continue the interaction spontaneously – without preoccupations or concerns. When he comments positively on her photos she feels “sexy and cute” and the ritual continues in a cycle of rhythmic entrainment, building up both participants’ feelings of sexual arousal.

This interaction is also spontaneous, allowing the two participants to connect with one another, as they become “unthinkingly and impulsively immersed” in the interaction (Goffman 1967: 113). Interviewees who engaged in synchronized online sexual interaction rituals echoed Serena’s description, highlighting their excitement for sharing content and the rhythmic nature of these exchanges. I will describe how traditional gender beliefs inhibit synchronized and spontaneous interactions in more detail in the second part of my analysis.

### *Shared Mood*

The fourth and final condition specified by Collins’ interaction ritual theory is shared mood, which I have alluded to when describing the ideal circumstances for conditions two and three. When online interaction rituals are satisfying, in addition to generating feelings of trust, participants experience feelings of sexual arousal and excitement. These feelings may relate to sending photos of your own, receiving photos, and the interaction as a whole. For instance, when participants share photos in satisfying interaction rituals, they report feeling sexy, confident, and empowered as they become more comfortable with their bodies and receive positive validation from their romantic partners. When asked how sharing photos with her girlfriend made her feel, Martina, a 19-year-old woman, remarked:

Martina: A bit powerful maybe.

Intvr: Why is that?

Martina: Because it’s a picture and you send it and with just that you can make someone else feel so many things. I think that's kind of powerful.

And also I think it has increased my confidence in some way because it has to do with like embracing your body. Actually watching your own body like in a picture it's just – and liking it because someone else likes it kind of thing.

When sharing images with her girlfriend, who never pressured her to share and always provided positive feedback, Martina felt powerful and more confident because her photos generated a positive reaction. Interviewees engaged in synchronized online sexual interaction rituals echoed

Martina's feelings: receiving positive reactions made them feel sexy and confident. Similarly, when they received photos during a satisfying interaction, interviewees experienced feelings of sexual excitement. In addition to being aroused, several interviewees also mentioned that they enjoy receiving photos because they "like what they symbolize. The bond that we have between us. The trust" (Sima, 20-year-old woman). In response, they may send photos in return, positive comments to "gas them up" and let them know that they liked their photos, or other sexual comments to keep the conversation going.

Speaking to the interaction as a whole, interviewees also describe experiencing feelings of fun and rebelliousness as they explored new ways in which they could express their sexuality. Josh, a 19-year-old man, explained how talking about sex was "taboo" at his Catholic high school and sexting with his high school girlfriend gave him a sense of freedom:

It was the first time that I really had someone else to be like, "Well. What do you think about this?" Because I've been thinking about XYZ a lot lately.

And, it was something that can be like, "Okay. Well. Maybe we can try that and see how it makes us feel." It was, I guess, liberating in a sense. But, it was the first time I ever really got to try to figure out what the fuck was going on with all this.

I mean, not that I'm still not trying to figure stuff out. Because, believe me. I am.

In addition to feeling sexually aroused by the content Josh and his girlfriend shared with one another, there was also a presumed shared mood of sexual exploration. While Josh laments that he is still trying to figure things out, beginning this journey with his high school girlfriend contributed to feelings of excitement and rebellion. While it is more difficult to gauge a partner's interest when communicating without many of the verbal and physical cues individuals often rely on in these intimate in-person interactions, expressing one's sexual enthusiasm helped interviewees know that they were on the same page.

IRT provides a useful model for analyzing satisfying online sexual interaction rituals. While these online rituals do not replace in-person intimacy, they appear to help romantic partners stay connected when they cannot see each other in-person. Although participants are not physically co-present, breaking Collins' first condition, the following three conditions remain critical for satisfying online interaction rituals with minor adaptations. Barriers to outsiders must include physical barriers to outsiders encroaching as the ritual takes place as well as psychological barriers to protect the content from outsiders viewing it after the fact. Mutual focus also remains relevant as participants actively engage the content that they share with one another which contributes to a shared mood of sexual arousal. The outcomes of these interactions include greater feelings of solidarity and positive emotional energy including feelings of excitement, security, and trust.

Finally, it is critical that these interactions are synchronized and spontaneous. While there is no one way to sext, participants must "be on the same page" for their interaction to go smoothly and align with both participants' desires. More specifically, image sharers must send images on their own terms and image recipients must be able to respond honestly. While synchronizing sexual behavior may be more difficult with fewer physical and verbal cues to rely on, these findings suggest that open communication and feeling secure in the relationship may enable romantic partners to engage in satisfying online sexual interaction rituals.

While 30 women (56.6%) and 24 men (66.7%) interviewees described engaging in satisfying online sexual interaction rituals, many also experienced unsatisfying interactions. In fact, 43% of women interviewees and 33% of men interviewees only experienced asynchronous sexting experiences. Although Collins acknowledges that IRT is an ideal type that involves a spectrum of interactions that may result in perfect to no sense of synchronization, an analysis of

the interactive process through which social forces influence these rituals is necessary. In the following section, I will examine the role that traditional gender beliefs played in sexting interactions that generated feelings of disinterest and resentment rather than solidarity and trust.

### **Unsynchronized Interactions and the Gendered Politics of Providing Sexual Pleasure**

Forty-three women (81.1%) and 20 men (55.5%) experienced some sexting interactions that left them underwhelmed or completely turned off. While many of the unsatisfying interactions that men described involved leaving one of Collins' conditions unfulfilled (e.g., receiving a nude image at grandma's house), women frequently reported that traditional gender beliefs played a role in the unsynchronized and unsatisfying sexting interactions they engaged in.

Traditional gender beliefs were most likely to appear when women interviewees discussed sexting interactions that occurred during early adolescent heterosexual relationships in which they prioritized men's sexual desires over their own and ended up feeling disinterested and uncomfortable. Interestingly, while some women also engaged in romantic sexting with other women (n = 4), they suggested that feelings of constraint and discomfort typically came into play when they sexted with men rather than women.

I found that there are three distinct scenarios in which traditional gender beliefs shape women's engagement in unsatisfying sexting interactions: charity service, keeping him interested, and receiving unwanted images. I will analyze each of these scenarios separately to highlight the distinct ways that traditional gender beliefs may prevent women in heterosexual relationships from experiencing satisfying online sexual interaction rituals.

#### *Charity Service*

Reliance on traditional gender beliefs was not uncommon in the interviews I conducted, especially when women described their first sexting experiences. When asked why they shared

nude or semi-nude images with their romantic partners, several women in my sample explained that their boyfriends demanded photos and they sent them to fulfill their requests. This interaction usually involved men messaging their girlfriends when they were “in the mood” and wanted nude photos. While girlfriends may be apprehensive at first, their romantic partners would often continue asking for photos until they gave in. Boyfriends may respond with compliments, photos of themselves, or suggestions for additional photos. Because my interviewees felt forced into engaging in these exchanges, they were not sexually aroused by the photos they sent or received. For instance, Robin, a 19-year-old woman, reflects on how her high school boyfriend pressured her into sending photos and how she felt during these interactions:

Robin: I felt bad about myself. I believe that sex is, it's very good to talk about, but, I was very reserved back then. So, I didn't really like doing that. I felt like, if we should be intimate, we should be in-person and physical, not necessarily over the phone. I also feel like I am very reserved, but I'm also very open. So, I was open to the idea, but at the same time, he was pushing me too far.

Intvr: And so, why do you think you did send them?

Robin: I think I gave in because I liked him, and I wanted him to like me back. I thought if I didn't give that to him, he was going to leave me. But that was probably not true. And he made me feel good at times about it.

Intvr: When was that?

Robin: Like he would compliment me, you know, when I sent the nudes. And then I kind of realized like why aren't you complimenting me without that. So, that was kind of going on, and I got tired of it and so. Yeah.

Instead of feeling confident and sexy when she sent nude images to her boyfriend, Robin felt bad about herself because her motivation to share images was the fear that not doing so would lead him to break up with her. While there may have been a mutual focus on the sexual content that they shared and Robin did appreciate receiving compliments, she did not share her boyfriend's enthusiasm for sexting and felt feelings of regret and annoyance. Women who described similar experiences referred to sharing images as a “chore” (Britney, 20-year-old woman) or “charity

service” (Stephanie, 19-year-old woman). In these cases, traditional gender beliefs related to male sexual entitlement appeared to motivate men’s decision to demand photos from their partners and women’s decision to fulfill these requests even when they did not feel entirely comfortable doing so. The negative emotional effects of these interactions become clear when both sides of the interaction are exposed: the demand for photos and the sense of obligation to comply. As a result, these forced interactions did not produce solidarity or positive emotional energy.

### *Keeping him interested*

A significant portion of the women in my sample explained that they sent images because they wanted to keep their boyfriends interested and prevent them searching new girlfriends who would satisfy their sexual desires. There were several variations of this explanation mentioned including “I didn’t want him to lose interest” (Monica, 18-year-old woman) and “I need to keep this relationship going” (Miranda, 19-year-old woman). Unlike women who reported that their romantic partners explicitly demanded photos, these women’s explanations suggested that these motivations were internal, and many reassured me that their partners never pressured them to send photos.

However, these motivations also align with the traditional gender beliefs that men are sexually adventurous and women need to fulfill men’s needs to preserve their relationship or prevent them from cheating. When women shared images to maintain their relationships, they often felt little excitement about sending photos. Charlotte, an 18-year-old woman, explains why she sent images of herself to a boy she liked in the eighth grade:

Charlotte: The first time I was in 8th grade and it was just the bra pictures because I was too scared to send anything else. So, that’s all I did with that and that was the first time with the kid I was talking to.

Intvr: Why did you send him photos?

Charlotte: Just to get him to like me, that's what I was thinking. I want him to like me because I like him. So, maybe this will help him like me. So, that's what I did.

Intvr: How did you feel?

Resp: In the moment of it, I was fine with it. I didn't think much about it, I was in 8th grade. I thought that's what people were doing because I went to an all-girls school. So, that's what you hear all time. So, I thought it was normal, everyone is doing it, that's fine. But now just looking back on it, I feel like I should have never done that, it just makes me uncomfortable.

Although the image recipient didn't pressure Charlotte to share images of herself with him, a sense of obligation motivated her sharing. Similar to other women who wanted to keep their boyfriends interested, she felt like sharing photos would make this boy like her more. While there may have been a mutual focus on the images she shared and the recipient experienced feelings of sexual arousal, young Charlotte just "didn't want to seem weird saying no" and was not experiencing any sexual pleasure of her own during these interactions. Many women described similar experiences when recollecting romantic heterosexual relationships that took place during middle and high school. By relying on their perceptions of men's sexual desires and having little understanding of their own, girls and women who engaged in these types of "shows" did not share their partners' feelings of sexual arousal and ended up feeling alienated from the interaction.

### *Receiving Unwanted Images*

The third way that traditional gender beliefs may hinder online interaction rituals is when men share photos and choose to do so with a photo of their erect penis (known colloquially as a dick pic). While men may be trying to communicate their sexual arousal to their partner, many of the women in my sample found these images to be more of a turn off than a turn on. This was especially true if this exchange occurred during the early stages of their relationship and their partner's image was significantly less explicit. Women who find themselves in this situation may

experience a range of negative emotions. Margaret, a 19-year-old woman, recalls how she felt when a new boyfriend responded to a photo of her in a bra with an explicit video during winter break:

I sent him that because I was feeling flirty. And I liked doing that. I was like, “I’m going to give him a little taste.” And so I sent that and then he sent me back a video of him jerking off and that was a little strange. I was like that went from 10 to 100... I was not expecting that, nobody’s ever sent me a video like that.

While Margaret was enjoying the conversation they were having about their sexual desires and giving him a “taste” by sharing a sexy photo, when she received his video in response, she was shocked. When men send content that they perceive as appealing, but their partners find too explicit, the shared mood collapses. Instead of feeling sexually aroused, women feel turned off. This was not uncommon as Liz, a 21-year-old woman, describes how men tend to “just come guns blazing, just talking about things that and it’s like – that’s not sexy”. While this behavior does match the traditional gender beliefs that young men are sexually adventurous, it clashes with women’s desire for a more nuanced intimate experience. While some women may decide not to respond to these images, others try to fake a positive response which aligns with previous research on women faking orgasms (Fahs 2014).

By hiding their true feeling and responding positively to images from male sexual partners that they did not find sexually arousing, women were not able to engage in satisfying synchronized sexual interaction rituals because they didn’t let their partners know what does and does not turn them on. When reflecting on how she would respond to a casual partner’s photos in high school, Monica, an 18-year-old from Washington DC replied:

I think I was like “omg” and then like heart eyes maybe. I never actually showed my disgust... Because, I don’t know. I felt like I should have wanted them. And also, I feel like that would hurt his feelings. I mean, I would never send someone an unsolicited picture of me, but if I did and then they were like “eew”. I think that would ruin my life a little bit.

Because Monica responded positively to her partner's photos and never discouraged him from sending them, their interactions often involved her pretending to enjoy the content she received. As a result, instead of feeling sexually aroused, she felt "uncomfortable", "weirded out", and "amused [since] it's just so funny how guys think that you really want to see it". Many women interviewees echoed Monica's dislike for dick pics and it was not uncommon for them to pretend that they were impressed rather than asking for different types of images. The traditional gender beliefs that men's sexual desires take priority over women's desires motivates this decision. Concerns about "saving face" and not hurting their partner's feelings also prevented women from replying honestly. As a result, women may feel alienated from these interactions which prevents a shared mood of sexual arousal and the generation of positive emotional energy.

Women rarely described feeling sexually arousal when traditional gender beliefs constrained their sexting behaviors. Instead, they may be afraid that their partners will share their photos, frustrated that they are expected to share photos on their partner's command, or potentially disinterested in the entire experience. When this occurs, instead of the interaction serving as a bridge that connects two individuals, it becomes a wedge formed through the uneasiness and heightened awareness of their performance and surroundings (Goffman 1967).

When women interviewees obeyed traditional gender beliefs when sexting, there was a high likelihood that they would feel that their participation was obligatory and unsatisfying. While some interviewees described interactions in which their partners pressured them to share intimate content (which aligns with Collins' selfish penis model), others described situations in which they felt an internal pressure to share images which likely comes from broader cultural norms. Finally, men's "overly explicit" content and women's indifferent acceptance of these images adds to their feelings of disinterest rather than sexual arousal. When women described

unsynchronized sexting interactions that occurred in heterosexual relationships, traditional gender beliefs often played a role.<sup>4</sup>

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Collins' (2005) interaction ritual theory provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding how social actors develop social solidarity in many different contexts including sexually intimate ones. However, his conceptualization of interaction ritual chains has several limitations that stand out when analyzing the case of sexting as well as other increasingly prevalent virtual interactions. First, it assumes that interaction rituals involve physical co-presence. Second, it fails to address how traditional gender beliefs may influence women's and men's engagement in sexual interactions. Without the presence of physical contact, can romantic partners preserve their sexual bond via online interactions? Can this theory be adapted to accommodate the complex gender dynamics that frequently influence how individuals behave during sexual interactions? Based on interviews I conducted with 89 college students, the answer to both of these questions is yes.

I find that it is not uncommon for women and men to engage in digital intimacy to bond with their romantic partners. While these online interactions break Collins' first condition of physical co-presence, they abide by the following three conditions. For instance, interviewees reported experiencing mutual focus and active engagement when they participate in synchronized sexting interactions. They also reported experiencing a shared mood of sexual excitement and suggested that this sense of excitement must be honest and spontaneous for a satisfying interaction to occur. In line with IRT, these interactions generated a sense of solidarity

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<sup>4</sup> While men also reported experiencing unsynchronized and unsatisfying interaction rituals, traditional gender beliefs rarely constrained their engagement in sexting. Instead, their unsynchronized interactions typically resulted from breaking one of Collins' conditions: lacking barriers to outsiders, mutual focus, or shared mood.

between romantic partners and positive emotional energy including feelings of trust, sexual arousal, and confidence. Due to the unique nature of online interaction rituals, it is necessary to specify that boundaries to outsiders must be separated into physical and psychological boundaries. When participants feel that both of these boundaries are secure, they feel more comfortable engaging in intimate online interactions, knowing that outsiders could not intervene during the interaction and the content that they shared would remain private after the interaction ended.

I also find that traditional gender beliefs constrain women's engagement in sexting and play an influential role in their participation in unsynchronized and unsatisfying interaction rituals. These beliefs often motivated women to put men's desires above their own and appeared most frequently when women interviewees described their first sexual experiences in middle and high school. Women interviewees were more likely than men interviewees to experience internal and external pressures to share nude images of themselves with their romantic partners. Women interviewees were also more likely to report unsatisfying interactions that involved receiving unsolicited images from men which were often more of a turn off than a turn on. While some women ignored this content, others pretended to enjoy it to protect their partner's feelings. When women engage in any one of these types of unsynchronized interactions, it is highly likely that they ended up feeling emotions of frustration and resentment rather than trust and arousal.

Based on the findings presented in this article, there are several questions that future studies should pursue. First, how do other dimensions of gender and sexual identity influence individuals' engagement in online sexual interaction rituals? While a substantial number of women interviewees in this study discussed sexting with other women, future research must study populations not adequately represented by my sample and how intersectional identities

may shape individuals' sexting practices. This study provides provisional evidence that sexting within LGBTQ relationships may be more synchronized than sexting in heterosexual relationships. However, there are too few accounts of these interactions for me to make any definitive conclusions about this finding. For instance, only three men in this study provided accounts of engaging in romantic sexting with other men. Investigating how traditional gender beliefs influence romantic sexting interactions involving individuals with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations would be a valuable contribution to this literature.

Second, how do traditional gender beliefs influence other types of online interaction rituals? While this study focused on young people's engagement in sexting, gender beliefs may play an influential role in the diverse interactions that individuals of all ages now engage in online. Scholars may study how traditional gender beliefs influence individuals' satisfaction, sense of solidarity, and experience of online harassment when they connect on dating applications, participate in virtual events, and communicate with colleagues while working from home. Extending this research to other spheres of online life will provide useful insights into our increasingly digitally mediated world.

Finally, how do beliefs and prejudices related to other demographic characteristics influence online interaction rituals? In addition to studying how traditional gender beliefs influence individuals' online interactions, it is vital to examine the potential effects of beliefs related to race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and religion. How do deeply engrained prejudices influence the generation of solidarity during online interaction rituals and what are the short-term and long-term consequences? Exploring how prejudice impacts online interaction rituals will contribute to scholars' ongoing efforts to understand how social inequalities emerge in and shape digital spaces.

In conclusion, studying the case of sexting between romantic partners contributes to scholars' theorization of how satisfying and unsatisfying interaction rituals occur online and how they may be gendered. While previous research suggested that individuals could replicate some interaction rituals online (although mediated communication may produce lower quality interactions), studying sexting highlights how romantic partners can engage in satisfying online interaction rituals when they are physically separated. I find that partners who feel secure in their relationship and have an open line of communication are able to engage in mutually arousing sexting conversations that generate feelings of trust and intimacy. However, as previous research would suggest, not all sexting interactions are satisfying. I also find that when traditional gender beliefs constrain young women's behaviors, and privilege men's sexual arousal over their own, these interactions fail to synchronize or produce a sense of solidarity. While IRT provides a valuable framework for studying online interaction rituals, scholars must continue to advance traditional sociological theory by sensitizing it to previously ignored social inequalities and our continuously evolving technological social world.

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## APPENDIX B: ARTICLE TWO

### **Friends + Sexting = Frexting: How Gendered Bodies Shape Online Bonding Rituals**

#### ABSTRACT

While sexting, a portmanteau of sex and texting, may appear to be an inherently sexual phenomenon, I find that it is not uncommon for young women and men to exchange nude or semi-nude images online with platonic friends. However, when they do, they often engage in two distinct bonding rituals. Drawing on 68 in-depth interviews with college students, this article examines how women and men attach gendered meanings to nude images shared within the context of platonic relationships. More specifically, I show how women perceive nude images shared between women as symbols of positive affirmation, while men perceive nude images shared among men as symbols of gross-out humor. These findings show how the desire to bond through body positivity and humor is gender-specific. These findings lay the theoretical groundwork for future research on online bonding rituals and meaning making.

#### KEYWORDS

Gender, Sexuality, Technology, Culture, Qualitative Methods

#### INTRODUCTION

There is a growing literature on sexting that aims to understand how intimate online interactions perpetuate gender inequalities in the digital sphere (Choi and Temple 2016; Englander and McCoy 2018; Houck et al. 2014). Sexting is broadly defined here as the digital sharing of nude or semi-nude images and the written communication that accompanies them. Scholars have found that women face greater pressure to share images of themselves than men, higher risks of having their images shared without their consent, and more serious consequences when their images are exposed (Salter 2016; Semenzin and Bainotti 2020; Thomas 2018). While these

findings suggest that sexting is a harmful component of contemporary dating practices, especially for women, there is also an emerging literature which suggests that women may also benefit from participating in certain sexting practices.

Several studies have documented women sharing nude or semi-nude images online, outside of romantic relationships, in an attempt to regain a sense of control over their bodies and challenge oppressive body standards (Caldeira and De Ridder 2017; Lee and Crofts 2015; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz 2015). In popular culture, terms like “fretting” have attracted attention and mixed opinions on the costs and benefits of sharing nude images with platonic friends (Allen 2015; Levinson 2015). However, sociological research has paid little attention to what actually motivates young people to engage in fretting (or platonic sexting) and how this practice may be gendered.

An examination of the gendered meanings that women and men attach to nude images shared within same-sex platonic relationships and the durable patterns of behavior and outcomes that result from these bonding rituals is necessary to understand online gendered bonding practices. Previous literature suggests that gender plays a significant role in how individuals connect with one another (Lewis 1978). Scholars studying how women bond with other women have identified “body talk” as a key element of women’s bonding rituals (Nichter 2001), while research on male bonding suggests that humor continues to play a central role in how men connect with one another (Crowhurst and Eldridge 2018; Flood 2008). These studies have focused predominately on offline bonding rituals. As online interactions become increasingly prevalent in the formation and maintenance of social relationships, this analysis must be extended to digital spaces. Analyzing how young people engage in platonic sexting is useful for

theorizing how individuals attach meanings to digital objects such as nude images and how meaning making is both gendered and mutable.

In this article, I use data from 68 in-depth interviews with women and men college students to answer two primary questions. What meanings do young people attach to nude images shared between friends? And how do these meanings shape their bonding rituals? I find that these rituals are highly gendered. Women are more likely to perceive nude images shared between women as symbols of positive affirmation, and men are more likely to perceive nude images shared between men as symbols of gross-out humor. Based on these findings, I challenge previous assumptions related to women and men's engagement in sexting and propose a new theoretical understanding of how cultural meanings shape online bonding rituals.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### **Social Bonding Rituals and Meaning Making**

How individuals form social bonds with one another is an important question in sociological research. While much of this literature has focused on how individuals' characteristics influence the bonds they form (Becker 1993; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), scholars have also highlighted the relationship between social bonds and actions (McFarland, Jurafsky, and Rawlings 2013; Wiltermuth and Heath 2009). This second line of research builds on classical and contemporary sociological theory. Durkheim (1912) theorized how religious rituals contribute to social solidarity via mutual coordination, totems, and collective effervescence. Goffman (1967) extended this theory to everyday interaction rituals such as greetings, table manners, and dancing. Collins' (2005) interaction ritual theory posits that positive emotional energy is at the heart of interaction rituals that generate social solidarity.

Alexander (2004) draws our attention to the fact that it is participants' shared understanding of the interaction and audience members' attentive displays of approval that make rituals effective.

Scholars have begun to extend the study of interaction ritual and social bonding to online spheres. They have studied the successful and unsuccessful transfer of religious rituals to online chat rooms and forums (Becker 2011), the limitations of corporate online interactions like internal emails chains (DiMaggio et al. 2018), and how mutual interest in diverse topics, from anorexia (Maloney 2013) to right-wing political violence (Wahlström and Törnberg 2019), can stimulate group solidarity online. What is missing from this literature is an analysis of how online bonding rituals are shaped by the different meanings participants attach to digital objects.

Cultural sociologists have made important strides in determining how meaning shapes how individuals interpret and interact with various material and immaterial objects. Goffman (1967) points out how objects may have multiple symbolic meanings attached to them and that these meanings may influence the form of the ritual in which they are involved. Tavory and Swidler (2009) explore this concept further, theorizing how social actors navigate semiotic spaces in which multiple contested meanings exist. Cerulo (2018) explores how individuals make sense of smells, looking specifically at commercially marketed perfumes. She finds that individuals are often able to decode the messages that perfume manufacturers are trying to send and social location influences the meaning people attribute to them. Seguin, Julien, and Zhang (2020) extend this work by examining baby names, pointing out the dynamic and durable nature of these immaterial and gendered cultural objects. This literature suggests that material and immaterial objects may have multiple discordant meanings and participants' social traits may influence their understanding and application of these meaning (Cerulo 2018).

Nude images are a particularly useful case for studying the relationship between the meanings that individuals attach to digital objects and their bonding rituals. While all nude images are digital objects that have some sense of privacy attached to them, they have many different potential meanings, from love and sensuality to humiliation and intimidation, which may result in a wide range of potential rituals. Previous sexting research often has suggested that the meanings society attached to women's nude images are limited because the feminine body is viewed as inherently pornographic (Salter 2016) and a symbol of sexual promiscuity and victimhood when exposed (Lippman and Campbell 2014; Ringrose et al. 2013). In contrast, men's nude images are not stigmatized and may be viewed as symbols of humor or sexual harassment, especially when they are shared without the consent of the recipient through what some scholars call, "cyber-flashing" (Mandau 2019; Thompson 2016). Identifying the diverse meanings that individuals attach to women and men's nude bodies and analyzing how these meanings shape their engagement in platonic sexting rituals will be a valuable contribution to the growing literature on online interaction rituals.

#### *Men's Humor-Centered Bonding Rituals*

Gender scholars have contributed to substantial literatures documenting men and women's unique bonding rituals. Much of the research on male bonding suggests that humor and joking are central elements of the bonding rituals that take place between boys and men (Flood 2008; Kehily and Nayak 1997; Lyman 1987; Pascoe 2012). Men's reliance on humor is likely related to the finding that men's relationships are less intimate than women's relationships due to a variety of barriers including norms related to heteronormative masculinity (Diefendorf and Bridges 2020; Lewis 1978).

The social construction of masculinity constrains how men express intimacy with other men (Korobov 2005; Renold 2004). Its enactment often involves the display of learned characteristics that signal one's manhood and conflict with expressions of intimacy and vulnerability such as physical strength, confidence, and power (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987). Because masculinity is inherently precarious, men must strategically reaffirm it within their peer groups (Martin 2016; O'Neill 2018). While some research does suggest that men are developing more intimate connections today due to the decline in homophobic beliefs (Robinson, Anderson, and White 2018), scholars have also found evidence that beliefs about masculinity continue to limit expressions of intimacy among men (Diefendorf and Bridges 2020).

Men's reliance on pranks and humor as a bonding strategy relates to the meanings they attach to their bodies and society attaches to the male body more broadly. Men's bodies are often perceived as subjects or doers of action and may have a variety of meanings (Berger 1992). While images of men's naked bodies may be perceived as sexual, they may also be viewed as symbols of "gross out" humor, daring antics, entertainment, or intimidation (Salter 2016; Mandau 2019). Recent sexting studies support this claim and suggest that men continue to rely on humor-related bonding rituals.

Although previous studies provide limited data, it appears as though sharing nude images as a joke or prank is more common among men than women. Albury and Crawford (2012) found that sexting may occur within friendships "as a joke or during a moment of bonding" (p. 467). They suggest that young people share images as a joke between friends of the same gender and provide two examples of men sharing images of their genitals with men who were friends and co-workers. Although the authors do not explicitly state that only men participate in this type of

sharing, there is no evidence provided of women engaging in similar behavior. Similarly, Burkett (2015) finds that men send images of themselves to other men as a prank which she characterizes as “locker room humor”. While she notes that women may also engage in this type of sharing, men are the most prevalent participants based on her findings. Salter (2016) also found that the men in his study shared nude or semi-nude photos of grotesque behavior as a form of ‘gross out’ humor and male bonding. He argues that this type of sharing is not available to women because even if women create an outrageous display of nudity, “it retained an inherently sexual and pornographic quality” (Salter 2016: 2728).

#### *Women’s Appearance-Centered Bonding Rituals*

Less work has been done on women’s bonding rituals. Previous research has found that talking about appearance norms and pressures is a common bonding ritual among women (Dellinger and Williams 1997). Nichter (2001) found that women engage in “fat talk” which she defines as ritualistic speech used to express one’s feelings, worries, and vulnerabilities to their peers and ask for support and reassurance. Through these interactions, “girls bond around shared problems and increase one another’s self-esteem by providing positive feedback and support” (Nichter 2001: 48). In addition to taking place between peers, these conversations may also occur between mothers and daughters (Arroyo and Andersen 2016). Although women engage in these rituals to receive positive reassurance, this interaction ritual may have harmful effects on body satisfaction (Salk and Engeln-Maddox 2011).

Women and girls’ concerns about their physical appearance are related to Western society’s very narrow and deeply racialized social construction of feminine beauty and the symbolic meanings that society attaches to women’s bodies (Affula and Ricciardelli 2015; Strings 2019; Trautner 2005). While no woman can meet the ideal of feminine beauty (e.g.,

eternal youthfulness, thinness, large breasts, blemish-free hairless skin, and silky-smooth hair), many feel pressured to strive for it because of the widely held gender belief that women's value is attached to their sexual desirability and physical appearance (Anthony, Okorie, and Norman 2016; Sischo and Yancey Martin 2015; Smirnova 2018). Self-objectification is much more common among women and girls than boys or men due to a mix of life experiences, media representations, and socialization that teaches women and girls that they are objects that others will view and judge based on their appearance (Berger 1992; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Karsay et al. 2020). Recent studies on women's engagement in platonic sexting suggest that physical appearance remains at the center of women's bonding rituals.

In her study of sexting, Burkett (2015) found that some of her women interviewees share images of themselves to get feedback on their appearance from other women. A small but growing field of research has begun to document how women post nude and semi-nude images online as an act of empowerment. For instance, Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz (2015) found that women post nude or semi-nude images on NSFW (Not Safe for Work) Tumblr blogs as a "practice of freedom" to challenge society's ideas about women's bodies and sexualities. Caldeira and De Ridder (2017) explore how women use social media to challenge beauty standards while also perpetuating ideas related to traditional gender norms. Although these studies analyze sharing images via social media platforms, rather than with specific individuals, they suggest that women are using nude images as a communal tool for overcoming body insecurities. The observation that women appear to be the predominant participants in sharing images for feedback and overcoming insecurities aligns with research on women's in-person bonding rituals (Wilkins 2004). Because these are the only known articles that analyze this

phenomenon and they focus exclusively on women's experiences, determining if men engage in similar practices is a question I will address.

While sharing images in platonic relationships is not completely absent from the sexting literature, researchers often mention it as an aside while examining romantic sexting practices and the potentially harmful repercussions of this behavior. In the present study, I analyze platonic sexting practices to identify the symbolic meanings young people attach to nude images shared between friends and understand how these meanings shape their bonding rituals. I find that while there are similarities among women and men's engagement in platonic sexting, they often engage in two distinct bonding rituals. While women frequently exchange nudes with other women to promote body admiration, heteronormative masculinity largely limits men's exchanges with other men to pranks and gross-out humor.

## DATA AND METHODS

The data consist of 68 in-person semi-structured interviews. The interviews typically lasted between 60-90 minutes, explored interviewees' engagement in sexting from their first to most recent encounter, and often uncovered a wide range of sexting experiences both positive and negative. As part of a larger study, I drew interview participants from a sampling frame of 1,922 respondents to an online survey of university students from seven universities around the United States which included 4 public research universities and 3 private universities. To distribute the survey, I contacted social science (primarily sociology) instructors and requested that they distribute an online survey on sexting in their fall 2018 or spring 2019 classes for course credit. I provided an instruction sheet with a description of my research project, a link to the online survey, and a link to an alternative activity for instructors to distribute. Across the 70 classes in which I distributed my survey, there was a 63% response rate.

The last question on the survey asked students if they would like to participate in a follow-up interview. I contacted willing students from two universities in a mid-size city in the South via email to set up a time and place to meet. I interviewed a total of 101 students and asked each one about their engagement in sexting including whether or not they ever shared nude or semi-nude images with their friends (relationships in which there was no romantic history and neither participant had any romantic or sexual intentions). It is important to note the interactions I refer to in this article occurred between mutually platonic friends. I have excluded interactions that occurred in “ambiguous” relationships which one person perceived as platonic and the other person perceived as romantic or potentially romantic. In this article, I will analyze responses from the 68 interviewees who reported sending and/or receiving images in strictly platonic relationships.

The majority of my interviewees (66 of the  $n = 68$ ) attended a small private religious university. Although this university does have a religious affiliation, it is important to note that the university is accepting of all faiths (including no faith) and students vary widely with respect to religious affiliation and religiosity. Due to the significant variation in my interviewees’ personal religious affiliations and typically low levels of religiosity (religion was rarely mentioned as a deterrent to sexting), I do not believe that the university’s religious affiliation impacted my results. I also met with two interviewees from a private research university. Although I initially planned to interview more students from this university, I was only able to connect with two instructors who were willing to distribute my survey for course credit which limited the number of potential interviewees I was able to contact.

Table 1: Interviewee Demographic Characteristics (n = 68)

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Count (Percentage)</b>
- Women	48 (70.6%)
- Men	20 (29.4%)
<b>Race &amp; Ethnicity</b>	
- Non-Hispanic White	27 (39.7%)
- Black or African American	21 (30.9%)
- Hispanic or Latino	15 (22.0%)
- Asian	3 (4.4%)
- Native American	2 (2.9%)
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	
- Straight	41 (60.3%)
- Bisexual	20 (29.4%)
- Gay	2 (2.9%)
- Pansexual	1 (1.5%)
- Queer	1 (1.5%)
- Not completely straight	1 (1.5%)
- I'm not sure	2 (2.9%)
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	
- Buddhist	1 (1.5%)
- Jewish	2 (2.9%)
- Muslim	3 (4.4%)
- Protestant	5 (7.3%)
- Roman Catholic	9 (13.2%)
- Agnostic	7 (10.3%)
- Atheist	11 (16.2%)
- Nothing in particular	19 (27.9%)
- Other or something else	11 (16.2%)

Interviewees' demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1 above. I oversampled respondents who identified as non-white to make sure I had adequate representation of diverse racial and ethnic groups. Variation also appears in sexual orientation and religious affiliation.<sup>5</sup> The mean age of respondents was 19.6, and all respondents were between 18 and 25 years old at the time of their interview. Although sociology instructors were the main distributors of the survey, only 5 interviewees were sociology majors. The most common majors included

<sup>5</sup> Similar to Article Two, race and ethnicity did not appear to influence interviewees' platonic sexting practices.

psychology (n = 11), music (n = 7), and political science (n = 6). Although I conducted interviews at two universities in the South, respondents came from 20 U.S. States and 6 different countries. These interviewees reported that they had participated in a wide range of sexting practices. While all 68 reported sending and/or receiving nude images within platonic relationships, 61 of these 68 interviewees reported sexting within past, current, and/or potentially romantic relationships, and 40 also reported sharing and/or receiving images of others.

I conducted face-to-face interviews with women and men who recounted many different sexting experiences. As a white woman who students may perceive as non-threatening and college-age when wearing casual clothing, both women and men interviewees appeared relatively comfortable discussing their sexting practices with me. Whether interviewees described funny or distressing experiences, I matched their emotions and gave them the freedom to describe these experiences in as much detail as they felt comfortable. I also gave interviewees a link to resources for sexual assault survivors and their loved ones in case they recounted upsetting experiences. In general, interviewees seemed to appreciate having an impartial space in which they could discuss this “taboo” topic, which appeared to be more of a *motivation* than a *deterrent* for participating (Ryan 2000).

During each interview, I asked interviewees about their personal background, experience in college, sending and receiving nude and semi-nude images, and their plans for the future. To gather detailed information about interviewees’ platonic sexting practices, the interview guide included questions such as “What motivated you to send the image?”, “How did they react when they received it?”, “How did you feel during this experience?”, and “How did you feel after this experience?” I conducted all of the interviews between October 2018 and May 2019. I have

replaced all interviewees' names with pseudonyms and removed all potentially identifying information to protect their identities.

I documented my initial observations about my interviewees and their sexting practices with 24 hours after each interview. After a professional transcription company transcribed all of the interviews verbatim, I proofread them and coded them in Atlas.ti. During the first round of coding, I used an open coding technique. I applied deductive codes which were informed by previous sexting research (Burkett 2015) and inductive codes with a broad focus to capture themes that emerged from the interview data.

During the following rounds of coding, I engaged in more focused coding. I applied additional codes to interactions that involved sending and/or receiving nude or semi-nude images in platonic relationships. I developed a typology of platonic sexting, documented the frequency of each type, and analyzed each type's unique characteristics. More specifically, I identified senders' motivations for sharing these images, the meanings interviewees attached to nude images shared among friends, the feelings that these interactions stimulated, and the characteristics that separated platonic sexting from other types of sharing. In the end, I identified two main types of platonic sexting (positive affirmation and humor) and the key similarities and differences that characterize these two types of sexting, which I will analyze in the findings section below.

## FINDINGS

### **Frexting: An Online Bonding Ritual**

Women and men both share nude images, symbolic objects that may carry a variety of different meanings, with their friends. When they do so, they often engaged in two very distinct bonding rituals. In line with previous research, women are more likely to engage in bonding

rituals that involve positive affirmation while men are more likely to engage in humor-related bonding rituals. These results appear in Table 2 below. I will analyze these gendered bonding rituals and the accounts of men who share images for positive affirmation and women who share images as a joke to highlight the ways in which young people may also engage in *counter*-gender bonding rituals.

Table 2: Participation in Frexting by Participants' Gender

	<b>Positive Affirmation</b>	<b>Joke or Prank</b>	<b>Both Types</b>
Women (n = 48)	45 (94%)	10 (21%)	7 (14%)
Men (n = 20)	5 (25%)	16 (80%)	1 (5%)

The fact that so few interviewees engaged in counter-gender rituals suggests that women and men often attach durable gendered meanings to nude images of themselves and their friends. The fact that the physical and verbal cues that accompany in-person interactions are absent in online interactions may influence this pattern because it may be particularly difficult to develop a shared understanding of the interaction and guarantee audience approval if one engages in counter-gender rituals (Alexander 2004; Ireland et al. 2011). In fact, while all interviewees reported that there was a mutual understanding between the image sender and receiver that these images were not serious, sexual, or malicious, not all platonic sexting interactions met Collins' conditions and generated a sense of social solidarity.

To better understand how cultural meanings shape these platonic sexting bonding rituals, I analyze the meanings, motivations, responses, and outcomes in these four scenarios. I find that when these interactions meet Collins' conditions, they often increase the sense of trust and bonding between participants. Understanding how the symbolic meanings women and men

attach to nude images contributes to rituals of positive affirmation and humor will extend prior research on gendered bonding rituals and meaning making more broadly.

### **Women's Engagement in Positive Affirmation Bonding Rituals**

I interviewed 45 women who engaged in positive affirmation bonding rituals with their friends. This was the most common type of platonic sharing among my interviewees and represents an apparent shift from women bonding over body degradation to body admiration. While sharing for positive affirmation was prevalent among women interviewees, only 5 men reported engaging in this type of sexting. Both of the men who identified as gay in my sample reported engaging in positive affirmation sharing, aligning with previous research which suggests that gay men are more likely to engage in body talk than straight men (McArdle and Hill 2009).

When women share nude or semi-nude photos with their platonic friends as a positive affirmation ritual, they often share images that they perceive as attractive. These images may be nude or semi-nude images that they describe as tasteful, artistic, and/or sexy depictions of their bodies. Tory (19) describes sharing nudes with her platonic friends as a “form of self-expression and more in an artistic way” and distinguishes this bonding ritual from interactions in which she shared nude images with potential romantic partners which made her feel “dirty”.

Women may take these photos for themselves or be considering sending them to romantic partners. When women interviewees engaged in this ritual, image subjects and recipients understood the image as an intimate and symbolic embrace of one's beauty and sexuality. Stephanie (19) describes her experiences sharing photos with her friends one summer on Instagram as fun and flirty:

We all bonded and that's how we did it. I don't know. We did it like over a summer. It's funny, I think we only did it for a month. Maybe we forgot the passwords.

It was fun. It was really fun. I felt free and flirty. Kind of empowered, because it was just me and my girlfriends. It was fun because there was no male aspect to it. So it made it more fun. I think it made it more, a little bit more innocent. A little bit, because it was childish.

While Stephanie also discussed having a “bad boyfriend” who would pressure her into sending him nude photos, she recalls sharing images of herself with her friends positively, describing the experience as empowering and innocent. Many women interviewees echoed Tory and Stephanie’s observations, suggesting that nude images shared with other women, were artistic expressions of beauty and sexuality free of the pressures, dominance, and lasciviousness that may accompany sexual sexting interactions. Sharing with friends was an opportunity to reclaim autonomy over their bodies, which aligns with previous work on women posting nude or semi-nude images online as a “practice of freedom” (Caldeira and De Ridder 2017; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz 2015).

Oftentimes, women’s main motivation for sharing images with their platonic friends was to overcome past or present body insecurities and generate body positivity for themselves and their friends. Women interviewees frequently discussed struggling with their body image, a number of whom specifically mentioned suffering from eating disorders and/or body dysmorphia. These body insecurities came from a wide variety of sources including parents or guardians, peers, and romantic partners. For instance, Kim (18) describes how her mom was “really obsessed with diets” and transferred her weight insecurities onto Kim who “grew up with a lot of dieting and diet books all the time... and this whole thing of like I need to be skinny”. Others talked about toxic romantic partners who actively diminished their feelings of self-worth. For instance, Liz (21) suggested that sharing photos with friends was part of a larger effort to combat body insecurities and promote body positivity after ending a relationship with an abusive college boyfriend:

Sometimes I buy lingerie for myself... maybe it was because I was with someone for so long that didn't really appreciate me and made me feel like I wasn't pretty or that I wasn't wanted and so I started to do things to go out of my way to make myself feel better... I somehow adapted that into like self-love and self-care but it's like I will put on something and I will be like my butt looks real good right now and I will take a picture and I'll send it to my girlfriends and then we all love each other, you know what I mean?

Many women interviewees confirmed Liz's efforts to improve her body image and her desire to help her friends feel good about themselves too. The wide-spread nature of body insecurities among women contributed to their shared understanding of the meanings and motivations that women attach to nude or semi-nude images shared among platonic friends.

As a result, women would often reply to these photos with positive encouragement. Emma (18) always responded positively when her friends shared images with her because she knew they sent them when they needed a "confidence booster" and "little hype person" to build them up. Tory reported that her friends would "just send me praises" saying "Yes queen!" when she shared images to appreciate her body and sexuality. Rachael (20) describes how her friends would typically respond when she sent them nude photos and asked for their advice before sending them to her boyfriend:

They just told me which one to send. But they're never mean about it or like "You look gross". It'd always like, "Oh my God you look so hot bitch, send them all!" And I'm like, "Well, he doesn't deserve them all!"

Across the women interviewees who described engaging in positive affirmation bonding rituals, it was evident that image recipients do their best to build up subjects' feelings of beauty, pride, and confidence. Body degradation or "fat talk" appears to be absent from this interaction.

Sharing this intimate content among friends contributed to a sense of trust between participants. When they described these interactions, interviewees often reported being "happy that she trusted me so much" (Sofia, 19). Jennifer (18) remarked on receiving and sending images to a friend from high school and the benefits of trust in their relationship:

I was very happy because she thought she can trust them with me. Which made me feel good like our friendship is very strong, you know, because I trusted her, and she trusts me. So, trust makes people feel good.

Sharing nude images generated a sense of trust and friendship for image recipients and senders who felt that their nude photos were safe in their friends' hands. This feeling aligns with sociological literature on sharing intimate content such as secrets and how it contributes to a greater sense of trust and friendship for recipients (Simmel 1950).

The prevalence of sending of nude or semi-nude images to friends among women interviewees suggests that this collective bonding ritual plays an important role in young women's journey towards body acceptance today. While these interactions align with the literature on women's body talk, demonstrating how women may discuss their insecurities to bond with and support one another, it also adds to previous literature by showing how women seem to have replaced body degradation with body admiration when they engage in this ritual (Nichter 2001).

### **Men's Engagement in Positive Affirmation Bonding Rituals**

Only five men reported engaging in positive affirmation bonding rituals with their friends. Although engaging in positive affirmation bonding rituals was very common among women, very few men engaged in this practice and most dismissed it. For instance, Eric (21) explained why he would never send a nude photo to his friends saying:

The roasting I would get just if they saw a picture of my dick, it would be painful... I've heard of girls showing their friends pictures, like 'is this good?' But I've never heard of guys [doing it] unless they are gay.

Many other men interviewees echoed Eric's reasoning, suggesting that sharing images with platonic friends was something that women and gay men do. This response aligns with previous research which suggests that men avoid "feminized" activities that others may perceive as a threat to their masculinity and heterosexuality (Eck 2003; Mize and Manago 2018)

When men did exchange images with their platonic friends as a positive affirmation ritual, they often shared shirtless photos that depicted areas of their bodies they were actively trying to improve through exercise such as their torsos, arms, and legs (Elliot 2019). They did not share nude or sexually explicit images during these interactions. For instance, Jaden (20) describes the types of photos he sends as “very safe photos, just me with my shirt off with shorts or jeans on... standing in a mirror flexing” and explains that he sends them for “scientific comparison” and feels confident knowing that he’s “going to look a lot better because I just spent an hour at the gym”.

For the few men who did engage in this bonding ritual, there was a common understanding that these images were symbols of their journey towards maximum physical strength and dominance. While searching for unconditional body acceptance may lead their friends to tease them for being feminine, weak, or gay, showing off muscular development and physical dominance aligns with hegemonic masculine ideals typically associated with the ultimate male body (Del Rosso 2011; Goffman 1979; Messner 2002).

The main motivation for sharing these types of images was to search for positive encouragement. Nick (19) explains why he shares semi-nude photos with other men:

I haven't sent pictures in a while. Now I just do it for progress [for] myself. Oh, I send it to the guys too. Like, guys that I work out with. Just to show off like, “Hey, I'm bigger than you.”

They say, “Good job.” It’s like a mirror, we motivate each other. It's not like, a bragging thing. I mean, sometimes it is. It can be. Subliminally it's a bragging thing but for the most part, it’s like “Hey, keep at it, keep working.” When they're feeling big and confident, they will send a picture and I'll say, “Good job man. Keep on working.”

Nick and his friends share photos with one another to give and receive positive encouragement. Instead of looking into a “mirror” to inspire oneself, they looked to their friends for external words of support. This collaborative effort highlights how men may develop a shared

understanding that semi-nude workout photos are not a sexual advance but a request for positive affirmation. Men interviewees who discussed engaging in positive affirmation sexting often mentioned supporting one another as one of their primary motivations for exchanging images.

Interestingly, Nick also mentions that there was an element of bragging involved in this bonding ritual. It appears as though positive motivation was not the only thing that men may be searching for during these interactions. Jordan (18) discusses how he would exchange photos in middle school to support his friends *and* assert his ego:

It will be like “haha, look at me, I’ve got abs” because when you are in middle school it’s really a constant effort to try to assert your egos... it kind of forced us to almost compete with each other to see how well we could get our bodies, and then after that, one person will be able to do one thing that someone else wouldn’t be able to do and asking those questions, how to make those things happen, was really fun.

While Jordan describes the final outcome of these exchanges as supportive and fun, the competitive nature of this interaction distinguishes women and men’s positive affirmation bonding rituals. Additionally, Jordan’s recollections highlight how these interactions exclude friends (intentionally or unintentionally) who did not meet their collective fitness goals and are distinct from image sharing that involves overcoming body insecurities and unconditional acceptance.

Only one man interviewee, Andrew (20), described experiencing an interaction in which another man shared shirtless photos in an effort to assuage his body insecurities. This interaction took place during high school and involved this friend sharing photos because he was worried about being overweight. Andrew recalls how this interaction evolved:

At first, I laughed, honestly, and then I just... First, I just told him “no dude, you’re not looking fat”. And then I guess he started sending [photos] to other people too, so getting their opinions on it. Then he would ask me the same question, over and over again. So, he wasn’t just sending it to me, he was sending it to other friends as well.

They’d tell him he looked fine or some people told him he looked fat. It was a mix of opinions... we had our own opinion about it. And he took them as he wished. I guess he

kind of believed more on other people's side, where they said he was fat instead of our opinions.

In contrast to women's experiences of unconditional support, the subject in these images received mixed comments from image recipients. While this friend may have been satisfied with unanimous positive encouragement, the mixed opinions he received resulted in the perpetual and uncomfortable distribution of images which he framed as "hilarious" and recipients like Andrew considered "aggravating." This situation highlights how reaching out to friends for support may be problematic for men with body insecurities if there is not a shared understanding of their motives or audience approval.

### **Men's Engagement in Humor-Related Bonding Rituals**

I interviewed 16 men who reported engaging in humor-related bonding rituals with their friends. This type of sharing was much more prevalent than positive affirmation rituals among men and builds upon previous research which suggests that men may sext as a joke with platonic friends (Albury and Crawford 2012; Burkett 2015).

While women and men often described men as notoriously uncreative sexters (Mandau 2019), they appear to be highly creative senders of funny nude and semi-nude photos. Images may include carefully displayed butts, genitalia, props, or embellishments using editing tools and capture antics spurred on by drugs or alcohol, pranks, and/or bathroom humor. Men participated in this ritual as senders and receivers understood these images as symbolic jokes or pranks.

Nick recalls receiving an image from a friend which exposed his nude butt and how this was a normal and untroubling occurrence within his friend group. He explains, "They would just think it's funny. We knew it was a joke. We knew it wasn't serious. It wasn't sexual". While he goes on to acknowledge that people may interpret sexts as serious and sexual, Nick maintains that his friends share prank photos with him to be funny, not to be sexual or malicious in any

way. Similarly, Nate (22) is never concerned when he receives nude photos from his friends because, “It's just meant to be a gross-out photo or just like letting me know that they're still weird, and I don't mind it. It's funny... silliness which is exacerbated by the drugs probably and/or alcohol”.

The main motivation for sharing these types of images was to surprise the recipient and provoke a laugh. Interviewees often described it as a modern form of “joking around” (Todd 21), “joshing”, or “jousting” (Jordan) which you do in good humor with your closest friends. Josh (19) explained that he sends nude photos of his butt to his college roommate because they “have a bet going on like who can moon each other the most” and this doesn't stop when they return home during the holidays. He recalls:

Oh man. I know my roommate's going back home and he is going to be four States away. I'm going to send him a picture of my ass just to be like, ‘you can't escape me!’ That sort of thing. But it's all in good fun... There is an understanding there.

Anthony (25) describes exchanging humorous photos with roommates from a past study abroad program and why these photos are a preferred method for staying in touch:

It doesn't require the consistency of, “Hey, how are you? How's it going? How's your day going?” Whatever, because that's interruptive. So, that sort of quick, immediate sort of message is going to still create that bond. But it's not going to take as much time as you would if you were to write a message... and say, “Hey, how are you? How's it going?”

Like many men interviewees, Anthony appreciates how sending funny nude or semi-nude images is a convenient tool for staying connected with his friends. Instead of taking the time to write a long message inquiring into their well-being, he just sends a quick and provocative image, confident that there is a shared understanding that the image is a lighthearted and funny greeting. Because interviewees only send intimate content to their close friends, he reaffirms that these old friends are still in fact close friends.

Given this somewhat frequent pattern of behavior, men are not too shocked when they receive a random nude photo from one of their friends. They generally respond to these images with a laugh and an “lol”. When asked how he replies to his friends’ prank photos, Ramon (20) replied:

How do I react? I'd probably just be like “haha” or “lol.” Or like, make some like snarky remark about their body part you know. In a joking way never mean obviously.

It's kind of fun reminiscing on this because, at least with my friends, we always thought it was just innocent. Because we'd never, ever share it with anyone. We're tight like that, you know.

Like many other men interviewees who received funny nude photos from their friends, Ramon points out that his intention is never to harm the subject by being mean or critical. Instead, he would respond with a laugh and a witty reply that matched the sender’s sense of humor and the subject matter involved.

Similar to women who described building a sense of trust with friends whom they shared positive affirmation photos with, men who shared joke photos also discussed how trust played an important role in these interactions. This sense of trust stemmed from the shared understanding that even joke photos would never leave the groups in which they were shared because participants were “tight like that” (Ramon) or considered their friends as “family” or a “brotherhood” (Nick).

### **Women’s Engagement in Humor-related Bonding Rituals**

Based on the belief that women’s bodies are inherently sexual and held to impossible standards of feminine beauty, it seems unlikely that many women would share humorous photos with their friends (Salter 2016). However, 10 women interviewees also mentioned engaging in this type of sharing with their friends and described these interactions as enjoyable. While there

are differences, it appears as though women and men both engaged in humorous and lighthearted image sharing to strengthen their friendships.

Unlike men who may share funny photos that “cross a line” such as depictions of lewd bathroom humor, women often described images they shared with their platonic friends as silly or goofy but never particularly explicit or offensive. Often times they may involve random displays of partial nudity, making weird faces, or capturing foolish behavior such as dancing while semi-nude. Similar to men interviewees who described exchanging humorous photos with their platonic friends, the women who sent and/or received humorous nude images understood these images as symbolic jokes.

Women understood and appreciated exchanging silly photos with their friends. Martina (19) remarked that, “It’s a joke, it’s not like a sexual thing... it’s funny, you know, and so weird to talk about, but I guess I’ve never really thought about it like that”. She points out several instances of humorous exchanges with friends, saying, “It’s just funny, like when I’m getting out of the shower and I’m playing music. I don’t have anything on. My friends send like ‘send nudes’. It’s just funny”. Nicole (21) explains how she may find an unexpected nude if she and her friends haven’t talked in a while:

Just like jokingly like, “Oh! Here goes my nipple!” Like “Here goes my ass!” We have a group on Snap Chat and like some mornings I’ll just wake up and have a random Snap but that’s about it. With them it’s just funny. It’s just something to laugh at.

Similar to other women and men who shared humorous images with their friends, when Nicole found a nude in her inbox from one of her best friends, she knew that this was meant to make her laugh and provoke a conversation in the group chat.

When women sent funny photos with no clear purpose and without context, their main motivation was to be silly. For women who felt like they needed to be sexually desirable in the photos they sent to romantic partners, sending weird photos to their friends was a welcome

disruption to sexting norms. Charlotte (18) discusses how her best friend group is the only group in which she would share funny photos because they accept her no matter what:

I know I can send them whatever because they won't judge me. So, I guess it's just funny because they accept you no matter what. Even if you're just being weird, they're not going to judge you and say, "You look so weird in that" or "You look so fat in that. Like what are you doing?" They're just like, "Okay, whatever."

Like other women interviewees who shared joke photos with their friends, Charlotte uses this feeling of unconditional acceptance to separate sharing with her best friends from sharing with romantic partners who she felt she needed to impress as well as from more distant friends who would be confused by a random nude photo. The process through which Charlotte shares nude or semi-nude photos as a joke involves a shared understanding that these photos are sent to be goofy.

Recipients respond accordingly, and the ritual contributes to greater feelings of trust and acceptance between them. For instance, Rachael (20) explains how one of her friends loves to share funny nude photos and she and her friend group always support her:

Honestly knowing this one specific girl. She's very forward, her sense of humor is very much like shock value you know. So, I think since we know her, we're all just like, "Oh my god! You're insane!" And we think it's funny but no one, even my more shy friends they're not like... Most young college age women in this day and age aren't going to be like, "Oh my god no! Don't do that!" You know, everyone is supportive No one is like, "Oh my god! Go to bed! I'll call your mom!".

Even when friends wouldn't consider sharing photos of their own or may not agree with the sender's behavior, Rachael points out how they never respond to the subject negatively. The majority of interviewees who engaged in platonic sexting made similar observations. It was a common understanding that friends should never make the subject feel badly about themselves after sharing this private content with their friends for support or a laugh.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the case of platonic sexting, a phenomenon which researchers previously treated as tangential to the sexting literature, to understand how the meanings participants attach to digital objects shape online bonding rituals. I find that women and men engage in two distinct types of platonic sexting. On one hand, women perceive nude images shared among friends as symbols of positive affirmation and share them to promote body positivity. On the other hand, men perceive nude images shared among friends as symbols of gross out humor and share these images jokes or pranks. While previous research suggested that online interactions often result in lower quality interactions and sexting contributes to gender inequalities (Brignall and Van Valey 2005; Choi and Temple 2016), studying the case of platonic sexting flips these observations.

Women's engagement in positive affirmation bonding rituals online suggests that women's body talk may actually resist body degradation, an encouraging step for scholars concerned about the prevalence of body insecurities among women and how these may negatively impact their female friendships (Anthony, Okorie, and Norman 2016). In fact, in addition to positively affecting their body image, women interviewees also reported that sharing images with their friends strengthened their friendships. These findings advance previous literature on body talk as a bonding ritual and support current work on online image sharing as a form of self-expression that enables participants to collectively challenge harmful beliefs about beauty and sexuality (Caldeira and De Ridder 2017; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz 2015).

On the other hand, men's positive affirmation image sharing is limited to sharing workout progress, a less intimate form of sharing that often involves asserting one's ego rather than embracing one's imperfections. In fact, sharing humorous photos was much more prevalent

among men interviewees. It is important to note that men's disinterest in sending photos to platonic friends for positive affirmation was not due to the fact that they are free from body insecurities (Carlson Jones 2004; McCabe and Ricciardelli 2004). Many men interviewees discussed experiencing body insecurities including being too thin, being overweight, or having acne. Their avoidance of more vulnerable image sharing practices aligns with previous research which suggests that men's platonic relationships are less intimate than women's because heteronormative masculinity continues to constrain how men express intimacy with one another (Lewis 1978; Ward 2015).

In addition to advancing research that examines variation between women and men's bonding rituals, this research makes valuable theoretical contributions to the sociological literature on culture and digital life. It exposes the processes through which the social beliefs that shape our physical interactions translate to the digital sphere. Individuals who participate in the online bonding rituals explored here frequently attach deeply engrained cultural meanings to digital objects which end up shaping their online rituals. Because these meanings are widespread and easily interpreted, they often contributed to a shared understanding of why the sender shared the image and how the recipient should respond (Alexander 2004). This shared understanding was critical for a successful ritual to occur and may be threatened by images and motives that are difficult to interpret. When this exchange of intimate and potentially ambiguous objects occurs without fear or judgement, it generates a sense of trust and solidarity among participants. While online bonding rituals may be distinct, they largely mirror the constraints and opportunities that shape participant' offline rituals. There are several questions that future research can explore.

First, how do other dimensions of gender and sexual identity influence young people's engagement in platonic sexting and online interaction rituals more broadly? Future research

should investigate populations not adequately represented by my data to determine what additional benefits and/or challenges are encountered. For example, while this study provides provisional evidence that men who identify as gay may be more willing to engage in platonic sexting than men who identify as straight, including sharing images for positive affirmation, there are too few gay men in this sample to make any definitive statements. These are important areas of investigation for future research to explore.

Second, how do other offline bonding rituals and broader cultural beliefs translate to the online sphere? While I found that the gender beliefs that shape women and men's in-person bonding rituals remain highly pertinent in online bonding rituals, it is unclear if the cultural beliefs that shape other in-person rituals are similarly impactful on their online counterparts. For instance, prior research shows that nationality and culture influence young people's consumption of music (Saarikallio et al. 2020). Future research may explore if and how these cultural beliefs remain salient as music listening moves from offline to increasingly interactive online contexts? Moreover, how do cross-cultural music encounters shape young listeners' habits and bonding rituals?

Finally, what other types of digital symbolic objects do individuals share online to generate feelings of solidarity and how do the meanings they attach to these objects vary within and across groups? While this study analyzed platonic sexting to provide new insights into young women and men's bonding patterns, future research may examine other types of digital objects individuals share to build solidarity and trust online. For instance, digital images of the 2021 Capital riot quickly spread across diverse online platforms and stimulated many different reactions from fear to outrage and disgust to righteousness. Understanding these images as symbolic objects and analyzing how they shape online political movements, may provide

valuable insights into the future of online interactions with important social and political implications (Maher and Earl 2019; Oksanen, Hawdon, and Räsänen 2014).

In conclusion, this study contributes to scholars' ongoing theorization of how cultural meanings shape online interactions. When young people engage in platonic sexting, the meanings they attach to nude images exchanged typically align with the gender norms that characterize women and men's in-person bonding rituals and shape their online interactions accordingly. When successful, these bonding rituals increase the sense of trust between participants. Ignoring these elements of online bonding rituals distorts the actual choices that women and men make online. In the case of sexting, it minimizes the benefits reaped by women and the constraints faced by men. These findings lay the theoretical groundwork for future studies on online bonding rituals and meaning making.

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## **APPENDIX C: ARTICLE THREE**

### **Men Find Trophies Where Women Find Insults: Sharing Nude Images of Others as Collective Rituals of Sexual Pursuit and Rejection**

#### **ABSTRACT**

As sexting has become more common, so has the sharing of nude and semi-nude images of others. While women and men may both engage in this practice, they often participate in distinct gendered rituals when they do. Drawing on 55 in-depth interviews with college students, this article examines how the symbolic meanings attached to men and women's nude images in the context of intimate heterosexual interactions shape collective rituals of sexual pursuit and sexual rejection. I find that men share images of women with their peers to demonstrate sexual prowess and receive praise, while women share images of men with their peers to cope with unwelcome sexual advances and receive support. I find that these gendered rituals are linked to the perceived desirability of men and women's nude images. While rituals of domination appear among men and reproduce unequal gender relations, rituals of commiseration appear among women and resist unequal gender relations.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Gender, Sexuality, Technology, Culture, Qualitative Methods

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Digital interactions are an increasingly prominent part of people's romantic lives that may provide new opportunities for intimacy and also perpetuate longstanding gender inequalities (Burkett 2015). Conversations about digital intimacy often focus on sharing electronic images of others without the subject's consent, especially situations where heterosexual men share images

of women to show off or humiliate the subject (Ringrose et al. 2013; Walker, Sanci, and Temple-Smith 2013).

What is missing from this literature is an understanding of the purpose and meaning behind sharing nude images of others. What collective rituals do young adults develop for sharing nude images with their peers? How are these collective rituals gendered? The broader literature on heterosexual masculinity has documented the collective nature of men's sexual pursuit and harassment of women as a method of asserting dominance over their peers and over women (Grazian 2007; Quinn 2002). Scholars have also found that women strategically reject men's advances in face-to-face interactions, although few have examined the collective nature of women's rejection strategies or how women pursue men (Ronen 2010). What happens when technology allows widespread sharing of intimate images? While participants may use common sexual scripts to guide their interactions (Gagnon and Simon 1973), I employ interaction ritual theory (Collins 2005) to analyze the processes through which these interactions take place, the role of the nude image as a symbolic object, and the outcomes of these interactions.

Understanding the collective rituals that women and men develop to share intimate online interactions with their peers will advance interaction ritual theory and scholars' understanding of how digital intimacy influences gender relations.

Drawing from 55 in-depth interviews with college students, I examine how men and women engage in the "same" practice but often participate in different gendered rituals. While the phases of these collective rituals are the same (the intended recipient receives the image, they share it with their friends, and their friends respond), the images have distinct and gendered meanings. I find that men are more likely than women to participate in collective rituals of sexual pursuit in which images of women are saved as trophies and shared to demonstrate sexual

proress to other men. Women are more likely to engage in collective rituals of sexual rejection by sharing nude images of men to cope with unwelcome sexual advances and to commiserate with other women. This analysis contributes to scholars' understanding of how the meanings attached to symbolic objects, including digital objects, shape rituals and how rituals of domination and commiseration among same-gender peers may uphold and resist unequal gender relations respectively.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THEORIZING RITUALS

Sociologists define rituals as interactions that generate social solidarity through coordinated or synchronized actions (Durkheim 1912). While symmetrical performances such as marching or choral singing are the most commonly studied form of rituals, individuals may also engage in asymmetrical performances such as conversing or dancing (Goffman 1967; McFarland et al. 2013). Often, an effective ritual charges a totem or symbolic object with significance that is then passed on to participants.

In this article, I conceptualize sharing nude images of others as a collective ritual involving asymmetrical actions. It is a collective ritual because sharing images of others with one's peers transforms interactions between individuals (e.g., courtship rituals) into cooperative group activities (Grazian 2007). It is asymmetrical because the image sharer and their audience perform complementary and distinct actions (Alexander 2004). The symbolic object is the nude image at the center of the interaction. While sharing nude images of others may seem like one specific ritual, participants can attach a variety of different meanings to these images, and these meanings shape the nature of the ritual (Goffman 1967; Tavory and Swidler 2009).

Collins' (2005) interaction ritual theory posits that there are four conditions necessary for a successful ritual to occur: physical co-presence, mutual focus, shared mood, and boundaries to

outsiders. When participants meet these conditions and strengthen them by synchronizing their actions, they generate group solidarity. I argue that developing a shared mood depends on the meaning(s) participants attach to the symbolic object at the center of the ritual. If participants attach the same or complimentary meanings to the object, it is likely that they will experience a shared mood and group solidarity. If they attach conflicting meanings to the object, it is likely that they will experience dissimilar moods and little or no solidarity. Finally, meanings can also vary across groups and produce distinct moods, actions, and rituals across different types of people. Sharing nude images of others is a valuable case for examining how the meanings individuals attach to objects shape the rituals in which they engage. It captures the distinct meanings that women and men attach to nude bodies, how they vary within and across gender, and how they relate to modern conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

This study also advances prior research on sexual interaction rituals which often focused on intimate courtship rituals, rather than collective group activities that may accompany romantic intimacy, and failed to account for complex gender dynamics. For instance, Collins (2005) devises the “selfish penis model” to explain lack of synchronization during unsuccessful sexual interaction rituals while Goffman’s (1967) analysis of courtship action examines the “cult of masculinity” and sexist stereotypes that portray women as “fields of play” (p. 209-210). These theories are male-centric and lack a nuanced understanding of how women may develop their own rituals of sexual pursuit and rejection inside and outside of intimate courtship rituals.

I extend interaction ritual theory by examining how men *and* women perceive nude images of others and how the meanings they attach to these images shape distinct and gendered rituals. Examining interaction rituals using a gender lens will expose how these interactions may influence (and are influenced by) gender relations between peers, intimate partners, and viewers

and subjects (Berger 1992). In the following sections, I will outline previous research which provides insights into why men and women may share images of others.

### **Collective Sexual Pursuit**

There is a large and growing literature on the social and collective construction of masculinity (Korobov 2005). Neither innate nor natural, scholars have found that the enactment of masculinity involves displaying learned behaviors and characteristics (e.g., physical strength, confidence, and sexual aptitude) to signal one's manhood (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messner 2002; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987). While there are many different forms of masculinity and strategies for demonstrating them, hegemonic masculinity is the culturally dominant version in a given historical context that preserves men's dominant social position and legitimates unequal gender relations (Connell 1995; Messerschmidt 2019). To prevent losing social advantages attached to men's dominant social position, masculinity requires continual validation (Duckworth and Trautner 2019; Mize and Manago 2018; Pascoe 2012).

Numerous studies have documented the strategies men use to demonstrate and reaffirm their masculinity within their peer groups (Martin 2016; O'Neill 2018). For heterosexual men, these strategies often involve the sexual pursuit and objectification of women which reaffirms their heterosexuality and dominance (Cosma and Gurevich 2019; Flood 2008). In addition to demonstrating and validating one's own masculinity, these rituals enable heterosexual men to build group cohesion while reducing feelings of empathy for the women they pursue (Bird 1996).

As digital technology has become more engrained into everyday life, sexual pursuit is increasingly digitally mediated. Today, sexual relationships often involve online interactions through dating applications and social media. While online interactions may appear to provide

little space for collective rituals, scholars have found that some heterosexual men share nude images they receive from current or potential sexual partners with their male friends, as evidence of a successful “pursuit” (Salter 2016). As Grazian (2007) points out in his study on “girl hunting”, for heterosexual men, sexual pursuit is not just about getting the girl, it is also about the enactment of masculinity in front of one’s peers. Sharing images of women is a way for men to boast about their sexual exploits and prove that they are able to access women’s bodies to increase their status (Burkett 2015; Ringrose et al. 2013).

In addition to sharing images of women to gain status within male peer groups, heterosexual men may also share these images to subordinate female subjects and perpetuate the patriarchal dominate-subordinate relationship between men and women (Moloney and Love 2017; Schwalbe et al. 2000). This behavior aligns with the sexual harassment literature which demonstrates how harassment reduces women to sexual objects (Quinn 2002). By objectifying women, men perpetuate ideas that promote men’s dominance and sexual entitlement (McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2012). While few heterosexual men may perform hegemonic masculinity by sharing images of their sexual conquests with other men, the silent majority benefits from the subordination of women in a “context of normative complicity,” which contributes to the reproduction of inequalities among men and between men and women (Connell 1995).

While it is evident that heterosexual men use the sexual pursuit of women to demonstrate dominance over women and their male peers, few have analyzed the role of digital interactions in this process. Additionally, research on how heterosexual women collectively pursue men is largely absent from sociological research. Below, I outline previous research on women’s

rejection of men to provide a framework for how women may develop their own collective rituals of sexual pursuit or rejection.

### **Collective Sexual Rejection**

Several avenues of research examine how women use individual, rather than collective, strategies to reject men's sexual advances. In part, this is due to the fact that much of the early literature focused on workplace harassment in contexts where women had little opportunity for organized resistance (Collinson and Collinson 1996; Kanter 1993). Similarly, research on how women reject sexual advances within intimate relationships focuses on contexts in which other actors are not present or able to intervene (Wright, Norton, and Matusek 2010).

However, there is a longstanding literature on women's strategies for saving face while rejecting men in public spaces. Scholars have used Goffman's (1952) concept of "cooling out" to describe a variety of strategies women use to fend off men's advances while saving face at singles' dances (Berk 1977), singles' bars (Snow et al. 1991), and college parties (Ronen 2010). While many of these strategies are based on interactions between individuals, Ronen (2010) documented collective strategies that women use to discourage or reject men's unwanted advances in her study of grinding at university parties. She finds that women may rely on their friends to help them reject men who try to dance with them by using their friends to create physical distance between themselves and the advancing man.

As sexting has become an increasingly common part of modern dating practices, women have adjusted their sexual rejection strategies to navigate new online interactions. For instance, some men send nude images of themselves to potential romantic partners to demonstrate sexual interest (Ringrose et al. 2013). They may send nude images to individuals they meet online or through school or work, with or without asking for the recipient's consent. Men who engage in

this practice often expose their naked genitals in what are colloquially known as “dick pics” (Paasonen, Light, and Jerrett 2019).

Previous research suggests that most women do not enjoy receiving unsolicited nude images from men (Mandau 2019) but has offered mixed evidence as to whether or not women share these images with others (Amundsen 2020; Bindesbøl Holm Johansen, Pedersen, and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2019). However, researchers have observed women’s collective use of technology to resist men’s online advances and harassment by posting screen-grabbed images of unsolicited dick pics on Instagram accounts like “Bye Felipe” or “Tinder Nightmares” (Thompson 2018). Some scholars suggest that women use these social media accounts to “counter-discipline” expressions of toxic masculinity they encounter online (Hess and Flores 2016). By viewing and mocking the content together, they use humor to undermine the threatening nature of unsolicited nude images and reject the traditional sexual script of women being passive sexual actors (Ringrose and Lawrence 2018; Vitis and Gilmour 2016).

While it is clear that some women have developed collective digital strategies for dealing with unwanted online sexual attention, the majority of this research has focused on women’s engagement in public online spaces and why men send unsolicited images rather than why women engage in collective resistance strategies (Oswald et al. 2019). Little research has explored the processes through which women reject men’s digital pursuits (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019; Amundsen 2020).

This study examines the collective rituals young adults develop for sharing nude images with others and how these rituals are gendered. In doing so, I expose how men and women who engage in the “same” practice, sharing images of others with same-gender peers, often participate in very different rituals. This analysis contributes to scholars’ understanding of how

the gendered meanings that participants attach to symbolic objects produce distinct rituals that reproduce or resist unequal gender relations.

## DATA AND METHODS

In this paper, I use data from 55 in-depth interviews conducted between September 2018 and May 2019. Interviews generally lasted 60-90 minutes, documented interviewees' sexting experiences chronologically, and revealed how their sexting practices evolved over time. I drew interviewees from a sampling frame of 1,922 respondents to an online survey of undergraduates from seven universities across the United States. I contacted instructors (primarily from sociology departments) via email to ask if they could offer a survey on sexting for course credit. Instructors who agreed to participate distributed links to the survey and an alternative activity to their students. I distributed the survey at four public research universities and three private universities. There was a 63% response rate across the 70 classes that distributed my survey.

The survey collects data on respondents' engagement in four types of sexting (sending images of the self, receiving images from someone else, sending images of others, and receiving images of others) and asks detailed questions about the last time respondents engaged in each type. Among survey respondents, 56% reported sending images of themselves and 74% reported receiving images from someone else. When asked about sharing images of others, 7% of respondents (6% of women and 11% of men) reported sharing images of others and 34% (31% of women and 42% of men) reported receiving images of others. For those who reported having their images shared with others, 84% of respondents (97% of women and 50% of men) reported feeling angry, worried, and/or humiliated. The survey results align with the interview data: sending images of others was less common than receiving and having one's image shared was a negative experience.

The last question on the survey asked respondents if they were interested in participating in a follow-up interview. I emailed respondents who answered “yes” from two universities in a mid-size city in the South to arrange in-person interviews. I strategically selected interviewees so my sample was approximately 50% women and 50% men and included interviewees from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. No participants identified as transgender. I interviewed 101 students and 55 of them reported sharing and/or receiving images of others. In this article, I analyze the collective rituals of sexual pursuit and rejection described in these 55 interviews.

Most of my interviewees (n = 53) attended a private religious university with less than 5,000 undergraduate students. Although the university has a religious affiliation and all students take two classes that involve the academic study of religion (one on Christian religion and one on world religion), there are no mandatory religious services and the student body is diverse. Students identify with many different religious affiliations and levels of religiosity.

Additionally, I met with two interviewees (n = 2) from a private research university with 5,000-10,000 undergraduate students. I intended to interview more students from this university, but I could only distribute my survey for course credit in two classes which limited my pool of potential interviewees.

Interviewees’ demographic characteristics appear in Table 1, which shows that my sample is diverse in terms of racial-ethnic background, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. All interviewees were between 18 and 25 years old, with a mean age of 19.7. The most popular majors included psychology (n=12), music (n=10), and criminology (n=10). None of my interviewees were sociology majors. The majority of my interviewees had engaged in sexting: 40 (72.7%) had shared images of themselves and 51 (92.7%) had received images from someone else.

Table 1: Interviewee Demographic Characteristics (n = 55)

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Count (Percentage)</b>
- Women	30 (54.5%)
- Men	25 (45.4%)
<b>Race and Ethnicity</b>	
- Non-Hispanic White	27 (49.1%)
- Black or African American	11 (20.0%)
- Hispanic or Latino	12 (21.8%)
- Asian	3 (5.4%)
- Native American	2 (3.6%)
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	
- Straight	39 (70.9%)
- Bisexual	12 (21.8%)
- Gay	1 (1.8%)
- Pansexual	1 (1.8%)
- Not completely straight	1 (1.8%)
- I'm not sure	1 (1.8%)
<b>First-Generation College Student</b>	
- Yes	18 (32.7%)
- No	37 (67.3%)
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>	
- Buddhist	2 (3.6%)
- Jewish	2 (3.6%)
- Muslim	3 (5.4%)
- Protestant	2 (3.6%)
- Roman Catholic	12 (21.8%)
- Agnostic	7 (12.7%)
- Atheist	6 (10.9%)
- Nothing in particular	14 (25.4%)
- Other or something else	7 (12.7%)

Interviewing college students about their sexting practices provides valuable insights into how digital technology impacts the development of adolescent relationships. Digital technology became widely available during my interviewees' adolescence, a period when young people may develop important platonic and romantic relationships (Twenge, Martin, and Spitzberg 2019). As a result, their experiences are distinctive from previous age cohorts who built their early

relationships offline and from younger generations who will have their own unique relationship with digital technology. It is also beneficial to study college students because they can reflect on their high school and college experiences. Because I only interviewed undergraduate students in the South, the results may not be generalizable to all college students in the United States. Although my interviewees come from 21 states and 4 countries, living in the South may influence their views on gender and sexuality. Young people in this region may hold more conservative views regarding gender and sexuality and be less knowledgeable about best practices for safe physical and digital intimacy (Jozkowski and Crawford 2016).

As a white woman whom interviewees may perceive as nonthreatening and similar to them in age, interviewees seemed comfortable recounting their sexting experiences with me. Interviewees recalled many different experiences, some of which upset them and/or they regretted. In each situation, I attempted to match their emotional state and encouraged them to provide as many or as few details about these experiences as they wanted. I gave each interviewee a link to resources for sexual assault survivors and their loved ones in case the interview brought up difficult memories. Interviewees seemed to provide honest responses and appreciate having an impartial space in which they could talk openly about sexting, a “taboo” topic. Many interviewees concluded that the interview was “fun”. It is possible that interviewees underreported sharing images of others and displayed socially-desirable feelings of regret and guilt because this type of sharing is often done without the subject’s consent. This may be especially likely among young men who shared images of girls and women, since a young female interviewer may be more likely to empathize with the female image subject than the male interviewee.

While the main goal of the interviews was to discuss interviewees' sexting experiences, I also asked each interviewee about their personal life, college experiences, and plans for the future. To better understand interviewees' experiences sharing images of others, the interview guide included questions like, "How did you share the image?" "What motivated you to share it?" "Who did you share it with?" and "How did they react when you shared it with them?" To preserve confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for all respondents.

Within 24 hours after each interview, I wrote a memo to capture my initial observations about the interviewee and their sexting experiences. After a professional transcription service transcribed the interviews, I coded them using Atlas.ti. During my initial rounds of coding, I used open coding to generate deductive codes, based on previous sexting research and symbolic interaction theory (Burkett 2015; Goffman 1967), and inductive codes with a wide focus to capture themes that emerged organically from the data.

During additional rounds of coding, I used more directed coding strategies to carefully recode all of the interviews, focusing on interactions that involved sending and/or receiving nude or semi-nude images of others. This type of sharing differs from exposing images publicly online or to large groups of people such as an entire high school. I coded the latter phenomenon, which appeared frequently, as "exposed images" and analyzed it as a distinct sexting practice.

In addition to developing a typology of sharing images of others and documenting the number of times each type appeared, I coded qualitative patterns that appeared when interviewees discussed this practice. During these rounds of coding, I identified senders' motivations for sharing images, recipients' responses, characteristics that made images desirable or undesirable, meanings attached to them, and emotions these interactions stimulated. In the end, I identified two distinct types of image sharing.

## FINDINGS

In line with previous literature, I found that men were more likely than women to participate in collective rituals of sexual pursuit, while women were more likely than men to participate in collective rituals of sexual rejection. Table 2 presents these patterns by gender. To prevent reification of men as sexual pursuers and women as sexual gatekeepers, I also analyze the accounts of women who engage in collective rituals of sexual pursuit and men who engage in collective rituals of sexual rejection.

Table 2: Engagement in Collective Rituals of Sexual Pursuit and Rejection by Gender

	Sexual Pursuit	Sexual Rejection
Men (n = 25)	25 (100%)	1 (4%)
Women (n = 30)	9 (30%)	24 (80%)

To understand the collective rituals young men and women develop to share intimate heterosexual online interactions with their peers, I separate this practice into three phases (the intended recipient receives the image, they share it with their friends, and their friends respond) and analyze them chronologically. While the phases are the same for men and women in my sample, most men perceived images of women as desirable, and most women perceived images of men as undesirable. There is no singular feature such as image quality, identifiability, solicitation, or relationship type that explains this difference. While there is variation in how women and men typically produce images, which I will address in the sections that follow, the gendered meanings that young men and women attach to nude images greatly influence their desirability. As a result, men's rituals of pursuit and domination reproduce unequal gender relations and women's rituals of rejection and commiseration resist unequal gender relations.

### **Transforming Online Sexual Pursuit into an Offline Collective Ritual**

I interviewed 25 men who shared nude images of women with their friends. Five of these men reported sharing images and 20 discussed their experiences as audience members. I use their accounts to elaborate *collective rituals of pursuit* below.

### *Phase 1: Receiving the Symbolic Trophy*

The ritual begins online when the intended recipient receives the image from the subject. The subject may be a female stranger, classmate, potential romantic partner, or casual sexual partner. While men also received images from serious romantic partners, they usually considered these images to be private and not for sharing with friends.

These images were often unidentifiable and depicted the subject exposing her breasts and torso, posing in underwear, or strategically displaying her nude body. Interviewees generally agreed that women often put more care and attention into their nudes than men. Female subjects may share images for many different reasons including dispelling feminine stereotypes, expressing their sexual desires, and prompting erotic online interactions. The vast majority of men interviewees enjoyed receiving images from women and used words like “elated”, “very happy”, and even “more masculine” to describe how they felt when this occurred (Jordan, 18). In addition to finding the content sexually stimulating, heterosexual men often said that receiving images boosted their confidence. Chris (19) describes receiving images from a high school girlfriend:

It was somebody exposing themselves to me, basically. And it was like, they trust me with this, or they think I’m worthy of this. It definitely boosted my self-confidence. And of course I wasn’t like, “Oh, don’t send those to me”. I was like, “I like those”.

For many heterosexual men, receiving nude images from women whom they were sexually attracted to gave them a sense of achievement. Since sexual pursuit is a key element of contemporary masculinity, men often viewed nude images as evidence of sexual conquest. Even when men were not actively pursuing female subjects, receiving images made them feel more

masculine, as Jordan notes above, and sexually aroused. Men's desire to view nude women's bodies made these images highly desirable. As a result, men may save these images as trophies they can revisit and/or show off to their friends.

*Phase 2: Sharing Trophies with Friends*

After the original recipient stores the image, they may share it with their friends to brag about their sexual exploits. This interaction generally occurs offline, transforming their individual online interaction into a collective offline ritual. When discussing why he shared images of women with his friends, Paul (18) explained that it was a "pride thing. Like, look what I got!" Interestingly, men also cited "super high testosterone" (Ramon, 20) as an explanation for this behavior. Nate (22), describes why one of his friends frequently shared images of female classmates with him:

He was a stud I guess. So, he had arsenals of photos... I guess he found passion in collecting. It was like trophies from his exploits... [Why do you think he shared them with you?] To brag... It's important to who he is as a person or who he thinks he is, and the persona he needs to maintain. Probably not at this point, because now he's been dating a girl for three years or so. So, now, I don't even know if he would have the photos anymore. Maybe on a hard drive or somewhere.

Nate's language highlights the symbolic meanings that men attach to women's images, a sentiment that many men interviewees echoed. In addition to being "trophies" that celebrate one's sexual aptitude, men may have "arsenals of photos" which suggests that images can also be weaponized against other men or female subjects. In addition to being excited to view young women's nude bodies, these images symbolized power, which contributed to their desirability. Even if they did not intend to publicly expose these images, men were aware that they had an object that other men wanted to see and women wanted to keep private. Nate's observations highlight how some men use images of women as symbols of dominance and heterosexual

masculinity, which aligns with previous research on men's homosocial bonding (Bird 1996; Flood 2008).

*Phase 3: The Audience Responds with Admiration (Usually)*

The final phase of this ritual involves the audience's response. I find that men who view the image generally respond in one of two ways. Many men interviewees enjoy viewing nude images of women which generates a shared mood of excitement. The participants' actions synchronize as the trophy holder receives praise, attention, and congratulations from his audience. For instance, Eric (21) describes the first time one of his friends showed him a nude image he received from a female classmate:

I was either in 9th or 10th grade in high school. I remember me and my friends had just found alcohol. We were drinking and one of our buddies was like, "look at what this girl sent me" and we were just going through the photos [saying] "Oh my god!" ... There was a woman out there that wanted him to see her naked, it was just like, "Look at me guys, look at what I'm doing!" ... I was just stunned because I had never gotten a picture like that before.

Like many other heterosexual men interviewees who found themselves in similar situations, Eric highlights how seeing these images was exciting. Audience members are especially impressed or "stunned" as Eric puts it, if they've never received nude images. They respond with praise like, "Wow! She's really attractive! She's really hot!" (Anthony, 25). Shared feelings of excitement contribute to a sense of solidarity among participants.

Several interviewees disapproved of this behavior and provided muted responses. Instead of developing a shared mood, there was an emotional disconnect between proud image recipients and disinterested audience members. Men often developed concerns about this ritual after they entered serious romantic relationships. For instance, Brad (20) describes his first experience viewing images of young women, and why sharing images bothered him later on:

It was my friend's older brother who had a girlfriend at the time and he was a sophomore. And when you're a sophomore in high school, it's kind of like, "Ah nice! My girlfriend sent me a picture of her boobs! Sick!"

He just showed the picture to me when we were outside playing basketball. This is so dumb, but this is something I remember so vividly. Because I was like, "Awesome! Boobies!" 14-year-old me.

That's the first time that happened. I didn't quite feel like, "why are you betraying her trust like that?" At that time, I was just kind of like, "Oh cool!" Because it was a good picture, it was a nice pair of boobs. But I didn't quite feel that way yet because I didn't really understand how those types of exchanges go down yet. Because I hadn't done anything like that.

Brad highlights how his 14-year-old self was impressed by the image and responded without thinking about how the subject had not consented to having her image shared with others. He attributes his change in attitude to the fact that he "didn't understand how those types of exchanges go down yet." Like several other men who found themselves rethinking this ritual, once he viewed nude images as symbols of trust and intimacy, Brad was bothered when friends shared images of women with him.

However, even when men did not agree with their friend's behavior, they rarely confronted the original recipient. One of the few interviewees who did, Sid (19) only did so after a friend showed him a video of an explicit sex act asking, "Why would you take a video of that and show it around everywhere? If that's your thing, it's cool. But I don't really care about that. I'm not really into that stuff". While Sid enjoyed seeing nude photos of women in the past, this video crossed a line. The interaction ended with his friend apologizing, an unusual occurrence. Most men just responded less enthusiastically when they found themselves in uncomfortable situations. For instance, even after Brad determined that sharing images of others without their consent was wrong, he still complimented image sharers:

I'm just kind of like, "Oh nice," but then it always kind of feels shitty to me. Like a couple of times, that person doesn't even know. You are really breaching their trust showing me that, but it's like, whatever. I'm not going to be upset that you showed me

that picture of a naked woman or anything. But it doesn't quite sit right with me that I'm being shown it.

Even when interviewees view the sharing of images as “shitty” and a “breach of trust”, they rarely share their concerns with their friends or even allow themselves to be upset. The way Brad dismisses this concern is a sign of privilege and aligns with previous research which suggests that men’s bonding rituals desensitize viewers to problematic content (Bird 1996). The fact that Brad specifies that he isn’t going to be upset by a photo of a naked woman also supports research on heteronormative masculinity and expectations related to how men “should” feel and respond to images of women (Eck 2003). While their behaviors may appear synchronized, conflicting moods reduce feelings of solidarity among men in these situations. However, this behavior persists if the “silent majority” rarely challenges it (Connell 1995; Grazian 2007).

#### *Women’s Collective Ritual of Sexual Pursuit*

While the data suggest that men are more likely to participate in collective rituals of sexual pursuit than women, some women also shared images of men whom they were pursuing sexually. However, their engagement was distinct and less frequent. Only 9 women reported engaging in collective rituals of sexual pursuit with their friends: 3 reported sharing images and 6 described their experience as audience members.

Women typically shared images of potential or casual romantic partners that depicted men’s nude torsos and/or genitals. Flora (21) shared a photo of a casual romantic partner with her friends to say, “look at this!” because she was “kind of bragging... [And] honestly, just excited to show him off”. While there is overlap between men and women, women audiences were less likely to view men’s images as exciting symbols of power or offer enthusiastic responses. When asked why her friends shared men’s images with her and how she responds, Mia (19) commented:

I guess they wanted to show me what they're working with. I never really understood that. I guess, to just be proud or kind of show it off. That's pretty much the only thing I can think of..

Most of the time I would be like, "Okay, I didn't really want to see a penis in the middle of lunch, but thanks." Normally I was just like, "Wow. Good for you. That's exciting. I'm happy for you."

Unlike men who often enjoyed viewing women's images, Mia, like other women who found themselves in this situation, was not particularly interested in viewing nude images of men, especially when they involved genitals. While she would offer friends a halfhearted compliment, other women had no interest in participating. For instance, Charlotte (18) explained that when her friends showed her nude images of men she would ask, "What are you looking at? [and] Why do you choose to look at that?" because she felt that sharing images was "disrespectful". While women may synchronize their behaviors by complimenting the proud image recipient, audience members were often disinterested. As a result, these rituals rarely generated a shared mood of sexual excitement or a sense of solidarity among women. Although only a few women in my sample reported sexting with other women romantically, no women reported sharing images of women with others likely because there was a mutual understanding that these images were private.

These gendered accounts of collective rituals of sexual pursuit reinforce the idea that images of women are sexual objects that symbolize excitement and power for heterosexual men and women lack access to equal power by objectifying men (or other women). Collective rituals of sexual pursuit among men contribute to the continued sexual objectification of women and unequal gender relations between men, their intimate partners, and female subjects. While there are too few gay men in my sample to make definitive claims about their engagement in collective rituals of sexual pursuit, masculinities literature suggests that they may engage in similar behavior because the power to define and control others as sexual objects comes from being a

man. In contrast, cultural ideals of femininity are less explicitly sexual and more relationship oriented. As a result, explicit sexual images are an affront to femininity which relates to women's development of collective rituals of sexual rejection.

### **Transforming Online Sexual Rejection into an Offline Collective Ritual**

I interviewed 24 women who shared nude images of men with other women: 15 shared images and 9 described their experiences as audience members. I use their accounts to elaborate *collective rituals of rejection*.

#### *Phase 1: Receiving the Symbolic Insult*

The ritual begins online when the intended recipient receives the image from the subject. The subject may be a male stranger, classmate, potential romantic partner, or casual sexual partner. Similar to men interviewees, there was a general consensus that images sent by serious romantic partners were private and not shared with friends.

The images that women shared with their friends usually showed the subject's exposed genitals. Interviewees agreed that men often put little effort into their photos which were frequently poorly lit, blurry, and featured an imposing and disembodied penis. Unlike men interviewees who enjoyed receiving images from women (in fact, no man reported being upset by any of the images he received, even when unsolicited), women frequently described receiving images from men as a negative experience although some did report receiving images as positive and sexually arousing.

Women often described receiving images with words like "disrespectful" (Rachael, 20) and "uncomfortable" (Charlotte). Many echoed Marina's (19) complaint that unsolicited photos of men were "gross" and a "breach of comfort" because "It isn't something that I wanted in my space... It made everything feel dirty, even though I didn't participate". While men perceived

women's nude images as highly desirable symbols of power and status, women perceived men's nude images as highly undesirable symbols of masculine vulgarity, dominance, and sexual entitlement (Armstrong, England, Fogarty 2012; Mandau 2019; Mears 2015). In response, women may engage in multiple types of resistance. They may respond to unwanted images with a curt refusal, a critique of the image, or a photo of a small penis. They may simply ignore or deny the message and block the user. They may also reach out to their friends for support.

### *Phase 2: Sharing Sexual Insults with Friends*

After they receive an unwanted nude image, some women share it with their friends as a way to cope with the unwelcome intrusion. By doing this, women transform the individual online interaction into a collective offline ritual. Unlike how men use images of women to demonstrate their sexual dominance, women share these images to resist the image sender's assertion of dominance and sexual entitlement. Alexa (19) articulates this motivation when describing why she shared images of men she received from men with her friends:

It's just to get a laugh out of it, to be honest, because in that sense it's already putting you in an awkward and difficult position in dealing with that. So, I guess to restore some form of balance or some form of control. I need to laugh it off because that's gross and that's not okay. But I have to laugh it off and some of them are just really funny, to be honest.

Instead of sharing images as a way to brag about her sexual prowess, Alexa highlights how receiving images puts her in a difficult position and sharing them with friends enables her to “restore some form of balance” to the situation. Many women interviewees who received unsolicited nude images shared this sentiment. Rather than accepting feelings of discomfort or feeling pressured to comply with the sender's demands, women challenged the assertion of dominance that men's images symbolized by sharing these images with their friends to “laugh it off”. Within the master narrative of male dominance and sexual double standards, these women develop an idiosyncratic repertoire of resistance that draws on humor as one of the resources

they can access. While sharing images may be an act of “shallow resistance” because it is individualized rather than structural, it aligns with research on the formation of strategic acts of resistance in contexts constrained by structural inequalities (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019; Scott 1987).

### *Phase 3: The Audience Commiserates*

After the intended recipient shares the image with her friends, they must respond. Unlike impressed and curious male onlookers, women viewers often experienced feelings of disgust. Instead of viewing the images for their own pleasure, they view them, however briefly, to support the image recipient and confirm that the image is inappropriate. Because there is a shared mood of disgust, their actions synchronize and generate a sense of group solidarity.

Although audience members may respond in several different ways, their responses complement the image recipient’s desire to regain control of the situation. They may use laughter to transform feelings of discomfort into feelings of absurdity. Women interviewees often describe how their friends will “laugh it off with me, we just make fun of it” (Alexa) or “just laugh about it, we find the humor in it” (Paula, 19). They may also respond with outrage to confirm that the recipient’s discomfort is justified. Danielle (20) recollects how her friends exclaimed ““Oh My God! Oh My God!’... It was just, ‘Oh My God! Why did he?! This is weird!’”. They may commiserate by sharing their own stories which often conclude with, “You know, why do they do that? It’s not attractive at all. It’s not!” (Paula). Finally, they may also engage in counter-hegemonic gender objectification by criticizing the subject’s body, making comments like, “It wasn’t very big, so my friends and I laughed at it” (Britney, 20). Audience members’ ability to commiserate with the image recipient helped them disarm the image, transforming it from an unsettling act of domination to an outrageous display of foolishness.

Although women may feel disempowered when they receive nude images from men, through this collective ritual of rejection, they regain a sense of power over the situation by reframing the event as humorous and outrageous. Charlene (19) describes how her friends respond to the images she receives and why their comments make her feel better:

They will usually be like, “Oh my God!” They'll be shocked. Some will laugh at it. They will criticize it, they will be like “That's ugly,” “Terrible lighting,” “Bad photo,” depending on what they know about photography. They'll just do whatever they can to say mean things about it, if they're not too shocked by the fact I got an unsolicited dick pic when I was in public... I feel great when people comment mean things about dick pics. I feel fantastic... Because that guy is messing with me or like that's a bad thing that they're doing to me. But I'm kind of turning it back on them. I'm like, “You can't, and I played you.” They are not getting me, I'm getting them.

Similar to other women interviewees, Charlene's friends may respond in a variety of different ways including outrage, laughter, and insults. What connects these responses is that they transform the image from a symbol of male domination to the butt of the joke, which is powerless. This joint effort generates a sense of group solidarity. By identifying the diverse ways women audience members respond to men's images and their motivation for doing so, this finding extends previous literature on women's collective resistance in public online spaces to rejection rituals in private offline spaces (Hess and Flores 2016; Ringrose and Lawrence 2018; Vitis and Gilmour 2016).

#### *The Deviant Case: Men's Failed Rituals of Sexual Rejection*

While this article focuses on women's collective rejection rituals, men may also share images of women whom they want to reject. However, this is rare. In my sample, only one man reported sharing an image of a woman whom he wanted to reject, not pursue. Based on his account, it appears as though men are less likely than women to view nude images as problematic or commiserate with aggravated image recipients. In fact, they may encourage the recipient to take advantage of the situation. Ricardo (19) explains:

With some of the [images] from that girl who had been crushing on me in high school, she would send flirtatious pics a lot. So if it was ever in the moment with one of my friends, I would just be like, “Oh, it happened again.” And show my friend who was with me, but it was never, “Oh check it out guys!” ... [How did they react?]

A lot of people would tell me, “Dude, you should just do it. You should just hook up with her” just because she's attractive... And there were times where I considered it, but I would always come to that same conclusion. I was just like “no, I really do not like this person at all”. I know that I'd feel bad after doing this, but especially giving her any false sense of hope. That would just make the situation worse.

Unlike women who help the image recipient reject the subject, Ricardo's friends viewed the image as desirable and encouraged him to pursue a physical relationship even though he was not romantically interested. Because Ricardo and his friends attached conflicting meanings to the image, their behavior was unsynchronized and failed to generate feelings of support or solidarity. His friends' reactions highlight the persistent connection between masculinity, heterosexuality, and the meanings men attach to images of women (Eck 2003).

Although sharing lewd images may appear to align more with raunch culture than traditional femininity, public disgust of masculine lasciviousness is related to the cultural ideals of femininity. These findings build upon previous literature (Thompson 2018) in several ways. They illuminate how women's perception of men's nude images as symbols of domination shape rituals of sexual rejection. They also expose how women's collective resistance strategies generate social solidarity in contexts constrained by gender inequalities.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While a large body of literature has documented heterosexual men's collective sexual pursuit and harassment of women offline (Grazian 2007; Quinn 2002), few studies have examined how men and women transform intimate online interactions into collective offline rituals (Salter 2016; Thompson 2018). Examining the sharing of nude images of others exposes how this transformation takes place and how men and women engage in two distinct rituals. This

work contributes to interaction ritual theory by exposing how meaning shapes rituals through the successful or unsuccessful development of shared mood, a key ingredient for generating group solidarity. Variation in meanings and moods appears within and across groups, highlighting how persistent beliefs related to masculinity and femininity shape the purpose and outcomes of bonding rituals.

Most heterosexual men perceive nude images of women as desirable symbols of power they can display as trophies to increase their dominance over female subjects and other men who praise these images (Ringrose et al. 2013). In many instances, this ritual of sexual pursuit stimulates a shared sense of excitement and solidarity among participants. Interestingly, when men attach conflicting meanings to nude images such as trust, they may criticize this ritual but rarely confront image sharers. Instead, they express feelings of indifference and “normative complicity”, perpetuating the objectification and subordination of women (Connell 1995).

In contrast, most women perceive nude images of men as undesirable symbols of male-dominance they share with friends who use humor and outrage to disarm them. This ritual of sexual rejection consistently generates solidarity among women because they attach complimentary meanings to these images. The unsynchronized and rare cases when women show off images and men reject images highlight how shared feelings of admiration and commiseration are gender-specific and greatly influence the outcomes of these rituals.

Based on these findings, there are several questions that future studies should pursue. First, how does sexual orientation influence collective rituals of sexual pursuit and rejection? There are too few instances of same-sex sexting encounters in this interview data to definitively conclude if or how women and men in same-sex relationships engage in these rituals. Provisional evidence suggests that men in same-sex relationships are more likely to engage in collective

rituals of sexual pursuit and rejection than women. Like heterosexual men, gay and bisexual men appear to objectify image subjects for their personal pleasure and share these images with friends. While women generally enjoyed sharing nude images in same-sex relationships, none reported sharing these images with others.

Second, how will these rituals evolve as young adults move through the life course and technologies advance? While conventional wisdom suggests that young people will share sexual images less as they age, future research should monitor how sexting rituals evolve. Individuals may continue to sext and potentially share images with others if they engage in long-distance relationships or digital intimacy to “spice things up.” Additionally, conflicting technological advances may influence online interactions as tech companies strive to improve online security and also create new threats such as AI generated nudes (Clahane 2020).

Third, how do the meanings individuals attach to other objects influence the rituals in which they are involved? Exploring how conflicting meanings are attached to physical and digital objects has significant theoretical and practical value. For instance, scholars interested in health inequalities may find that the gendered meanings individuals attach to wearing protective face masks play an important role in how they use (or do not use) them. Scholars interested in studying digital objects such as memes may analyze how the same content simultaneously inspires rituals that encourage and challenge social inequalities. This work will extend interaction ritual theory in physical and digital spaces.

This analysis exposes how modern conceptions of masculinity and femininity shape men and women’s bonding rituals. It advances interaction ritual theory by revealing how the meaning individuals attach to objects shapes their moods and rituals and the powerful role that gender plays in the development of romantic and platonic bonds. It also opens the door for future

research to explore the intersection of offline and online interaction rituals and how they may threaten or embolden alternative interactional contexts. This study lays the foundation for adapting sociological theory to capture how social actors strategically navigate digital interactions and uphold and challenge persistent gender inequalities.

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