

SEXTING AND THE FILIPINO YOUTH

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Abstract

In this study, researchers interrogate on the sexting phenomenon as a trend among young individuals in the Philippines. Sexting is defined as “the act of text messaging someone in the hopes of having a sexual encounter with them later; initially casual, transitioning into highly suggestive and even sexually explicit.” Sexting has become a fad nowadays and such practice brought about by technology has led a lot of young individuals to a disadvantaged situation. Just recently, in the Philippines has been shaken by the scandalous sex video by two prominent people in show business and more recently both have been exposed and subjected to public humiliation and condemnation. Thus, this paper looks into sexting, how the Filipino teenagers view it, how such aspect of technology has affected their lives, and how they consider it as a technological phenomenon. A researcher-made questionnaire was specifically made for this purpose and made use of both quantitative and qualitative modes of data interpretation.

(Key Words: Sexting, Filipino Youth, Text Messaging, Communication).

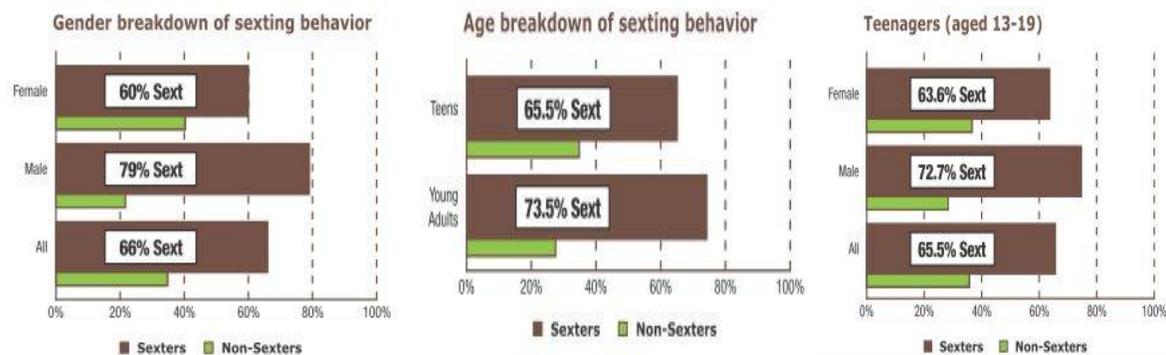
INTRODUCTION

When the cell phone was invented, the purpose was basically for communication. It was a type of wireless communication that is most familiar to mobile phones users. It is called cellular because the system uses many base stations to divide a service area into multiple 'cells'. Cellular calls are then transferred from base station to base station as a user travels from cell to cell (Bellis, 2002:67). An online source reads that the basic concept of cellular phones began in 1947, when researchers looked at crude mobile (car) phones and realized that by using small cells (range of service area) with frequency reuse they could increase the traffic capacity of mobile phones substantially (Wireless Advisor Glossary). Such device integrates the convergence of many forms of communication encompassing voice, e-mail, instant messaging and video telephony.”

However, after almost four decades of people’s enjoyment of the cell phone, a new trend has evolved. This trend is called sexting. Others call it a dangerous preoccupation. Technically, sexting is defined as “the practice of sending nude or seminude pictures via cell phone or posting them online.” It has been observed to have caused alarm these days. Another source defines it as “the act of text messaging someone in the hopes of having a sexual encounter with them later; initially casual, transitioning into highly suggestive and even sexually explicit.”

The researchers find it an important topic because it is a risky behavior that may endanger lives. However, it is also a widespread phenomenon that is prevalent among people between the ages of 13-26; namely those who have grown up with digital technology.

In the Philippines, this phenomenon is also rampant but few studies have been recorded. Much recently, a lot of sexting have been reported especially in show business. The need to look into sexting as a phenomenon has been conceived because of these events. A study of Lipkins has likewise added to our conviction that something has to be done about sexting (Lipkins, Levy, and Jerabkova, 2009:23). Thus, this paper is one attempt to look into the sexting phenomenon in the Philippine context. Further the tables below provide alarming data that provide evidence on the need for this investigation. The young individuals become fragile victims of the sexting trend. Try to consider the tables below.



Source: Susan Lipkins, Ph.D., Jaelyn M. Levy, and Barbara Jerabkova, MSc. (2009). Sexting... Is It All About Power? Real Psychology.

The Sociolinguistics of young people's text-messaging clearly stresses the cultural critic Umberto Eco's opinion that people live in an age where the diminutive, the brief and the simple are highly prized in communication; and that he concludes that if this is the case, then there's little doubt that text-messaging embodies this zeitgeist [tsahyt-gahyst] (Thurlow, 2003:89). Like many earlier communication technologies, however, the mobile phone has come to evoke and/or embody a range of projected fears and hopes (Turkle, 1995:44;Thurlow, 2003:203). Thurlow further adds that the history of the development of communication technologies is one marked by periods of excessive hype and hysteria about the kinds of cultural, social and psychological impacts each new technology is likely to have. That is, few people - professional or lay - could have predicted the extraordinary rise in popularity of the mobile phone in many countries and its sister technology SMS 'short messaging service'. Initially intended for purely commercial purposes (Bellis, 2002:39), text-messaging is in fact yet another example of how the human need for social intercourse - a kind of 'communication imperative' - bends and ultimately co-opts technology to suit its own ends, regardless of any commercial (e.g. the telephone) or military (e.g. the internet) ambition for the technology.

While young individuals are surely using their mobile phones as a novel and creative means of enhancing and supporting intimate relationships and existing social networks, popular discourses about the linguistic exclusivity and impenetrability of this particular technologically-

mediated discourse appear greatly exaggerated. However, just recently in the add-on features of cellular phones specifically the cameras, the texting phenomenon has been rechanneled to more advanced communicative expressions, the so-called sexting.

The Latest Cellphone Use: Sexting writes that sexting has created a lot of problems in the United States. He says that by using the text messaging service on their cell phones, teenagers engage in sexting by sending flirtatious messages back and forth (Wagner, 2009:66). Although innocent adolescent flirting via cell phones may be harmless enough, he emphasizes, however, over time the text messages may become more sexually explicit in nature, even referring to or requesting specific sexual acts and behaviors. Though sexting is still an early phenomenon and little to no research has been conducted yet, it can be assumed that at least some of these cell phone communications lead to actual physical sexual encounters.

This trend has become according to experts moves well beyond simple text messaging. Teenagers now utilize the digital cameras on their phones and MMS (multimedia messaging service) technology, to take sexually charged photos of themselves and send them to other individuals' phones. To Quote Detective Brian Marvin, a member of the FBI Cyber Crime Task Force, he says, "I've seen everything from your basic striptease to sexual acts being performed." With many cameras now having the capability of recording short videos, both photos and videos are being sent. Sending nude photos and video via cell phones has become so commonplace with teens in the United States.

Thus, this paper looks into sexting, how the Filipino young individuals view it, how such aspect of technology has affected their lives, and how they consider it as a technological phenomenon. The respondents' answers to the open-ended questions are interpreted qualitatively to further reinforce the quantitative data generated for this purpose.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The medium is the message is a phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived. The phrase was introduced in his most widely known book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, published in 1964. McLuhan proposes that media itself, not the content it carries, should be the focus of study. He said that a medium affects the society in which it plays a role not only by the content delivered over the medium, but also by the characteristics of the medium itself.

What is the Meaning of The Medium is the Message has also underscored the significance of this theory by exploring on its utility in different applications (Federman, 2004). Like the researchers, he has also observed that of all the Internet searches that end up at the McLuhan Program website and weblog, the search for the meaning of the famous "McLuhan Equation" is the most frequent. And we share in his contention that the "medium is the message" is most appropriate to explain how sexting can be considered as one of the extensions people derived from technology.

He adds that McLuhan defines medium for us as well. Right at the beginning of *Understanding Media*, he tells us that a medium is "any extension of ourselves." He makes an analogy of a hammer that extends our arm and that the wheel extends our legs and feet. Each enables us to do more than our bodies could do on their own. Similarly, the medium of language extends our thoughts from within our mind out to others (McLuhan, 1964:75). Indeed, since our thoughts are the result of our individual sensory experience, speech is an "outring" of our senses - we could consider it as a form of reversing senses - whereas usually our senses bring the world into our minds, speech takes our sensorially-shaped minds out to the world.

He writes, "it is only too typical that the "content" of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium (McLuhan, 1964:68)." And it is the character of the medium that is its potency or effect - its message. In other words, "This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology."

With this early warning, we can set out to characterize and identify the new medium before it becomes obvious to everyone - a process that often takes years or even decades. And if we discover that the new medium brings along effects that might be detrimental to our society or culture, we have the opportunity to influence the development and evolution of the new innovation before the effects becomes pervasive. As McLuhan reminds us, "Control over change would seem to consist in moving not with it but ahead of it. Anticipation gives the power to deflect and control force (McLuhan, 1964:49)."

THE METHOD

Reading literature on sexting paved the way for the researchers to present this paper to shed some light on the recent issue of sexting. The research is descriptive utilizing both quantitative and qualitative analysis. A random interview and open-ended questions were done among high school students to further qualify the practice of sexting. A questionnaire was specifically designed for this purpose also. Library and internet research were also resorted to to get theoretical discussions about sexting and gather enough literature and observations on sexting specifically in the other parts of the globe.

The participants/respondents were the 30 teenagers of a private non-sectarian university. Eighteen were male and 12 were female. Sixteen out of thirty were 16 years old, two were 14, and 12 were fifteen years old. The respondents were all high school teenagers. In terms of religion, 20 of the respondents were Roman Catholics, 1 was Baptist, 2 were Jehovah's Witnesses, 1 was protestant, 1 was Seventh Day Adventist, 2 were Church of Christ and Latter Day Saints, and 3 were not known.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Educators and prosecutors across the globe say that "sexting" is a national phenomenon for teens. In fact, school administrators are grappling with sexting and other misuse of technology. A lot of cases abound in the United States, teens are charged left and right and even

included sexting as an item in child pornography and other serious felonies. Surprisingly, Filipino teenagers, who were the subjects of this investigation, can proudly hold their head high and tell the whole world that sexting has no place in their lives. Below are the items on sexting and the respondents' views.

Thus, the sexting landscape among the teenagers is established by the following data: The discussion proceeds from the items included in the questionnaire. Table 1 shows the teenagers' awareness of the word sexting.

Table 1. Have you heard of the word sexting?		
	f	%
Yes	16	53
No	14	47

When asked if they have heard of the word "sexting," 16 (53%) answered yes and 14 (47%) answered no. The Filipino young individual is updated with the current issue of sexting as shown by this data where more than 50% are aware of such phenomenon.

The next item is a follow-up question, "If your answer is "yes," where have you heard it for the first time?" Table 2 contains the data.

Table 2. Where have you heard it for the first time?		
	f	%
Acquaintance/Classmate	7	23
Reading Materials	9	30
School	5	17
TV Show (Tyra Banks)	4	13
Guidance Counselor	3	10
Internet Blog	2	7

It can be seen from the data in Table 2 that Filipino teenagers got their sexting information basically from the reading materials (Readers' Digest, newspapers, books, magazines) with 9(34%), from an acquaintance/classmate with 7 (23%), 5(17%) from the school, 4 (13%) from a TV show, 3(10%), 2 (4%) from an Internet blog.

The next question asked was "What is your idea about it? Table 3 enumerates the teenagers' idea about sexting.

Table 3. What is your idea about it?		
	f	%
Taking & forwarding of nude pictures of oneself...	10	33
Teenagers' way of sexual arousal...	8	27
No idea	6	20
Worldly and bad for teenagers	3	10
Sex through mms	2	7
Useless and yuckie	1	3

It can be seen from the data in Table 3 that Filipino teenagers' views of sexting are similar to the universal view of sexting as a phenomenon. Their views were: Taking and forwarding of nude pictures of oneself 10 (33%), Teenagers' way of sexual arousal 8(27%), No idea with 6(20%), Worldly and bad for teenagers with 3 (10%), Sex through mms with 2(7%), and Useless and yuckie with 1 (3%). It can be inferred from the results that despite the technological advancement, the Filipino teenager is still inclined to be conservative yet able to be knowledgeable and well informed of the realities that are happening around him/er.

The next questions were "Are you in favor of sexting?" "Are you doing it?" "Do you think it can bring you about something good,?" and "As a technological trend, is sexting beneficial or not? These questions were discussed together because the respondents consistently gave the same loud negative. Table 4 has the data.

Table 4. "Are you in favor of sexting,?" "Are you doing it?" "Do you think it can bring you anything good?" "As a technological trend, is sexting beneficial or not?"		
	f	%
Yes	0	0
No	30	100

Table 5 contains the teenagers' perception whether sexting can bring about something good.

Table 5. Why can't sexting bring you about something good?		
	f	%
It will bring shame to my family.	10	33
It is bad.	9	30
It is satan's work/sin/crime.	5	17
It makes you a maniac/whore.	3	10
Virginity is a virtue.	2	7
It is a waste of my time.	1	3

It can be seen from the data in Table 5 that Filipino teenagers perceive that sexting cannot bring them something good. Their views were: It will bring shame to my family with 10(33%). It is bad with 9(30%), It is satan's work/sin/crime with 5 (17%). It makes you a maniac/whore with 3 (10%). Virginitiy is a virtue with 2(7%). And it is a waste of my time with 1(3%).

Table 6 contains the teenagers' personal view about sexting.

Table 6. What is your personal view about sexting?		
	f	%
It is for perverts and for adults only.	11	37
It is useless and bad.	10	33
It is immoral.	9	30

It can be seen from the data in Table 6 that Filipino teenagers had the following views about sexting. Their views were: it is for perverts and for adults only with 11(37%), it is useless and bad with 10 (33%), it is immoral with 9 (30%).

CONCLUSION

We appreciated the results expressed in this investigation because it reveals some facets of the Filipino values. Although, it talks about something that any society tends to try to ignore and/or deny: the fact that teenagers are sexual beings and it is normal for them to express themselves sexually. On the contrary, this study has proved that Filipino teenagers possess more conservative values despite the technological advancement.

We venture to predict that it is because new technology has the ability to stir up hysteria simply because people have not learned how to respond yet. Yes, there are legitimate fears for the privacy and safety of the teenagers taking pictures of themselves, but let not such technological trend degrade Filipino teenagers and be stripped of their moral fiber.

The thing that that makes Filipino teenagers (respondents of this investigation) different from others is their faith in Christ, a faith that stirs their conscience to go deeper into this issue of sexting. No matter what their religion is, they stand firm that sexting is satan's ploy, it is immoral, it is a criminal act, it is bad and they value their virginitiy. We realized that like what Christiana Zipay had asserted in *What's Wrong With Sexting*, stating that *while the practical consequences of this world may be harsh, the spiritual consequences of sexting have the potential to be even more devastating.*

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