Sexting, Snapchat & Social Norms: Because *everybody* is doing it?

Investigating the Social Norms Icelandic Youth
Develop and Apply to Sexting via Snapchat

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Abstract

This research aims to uncover what social norms Icelandic youth are developing and applying to sexting via Snapchat; the factors that influence the norm development; and how the norms coincide or differ across age, gender, and relational contexts. It is one of the first qualitative studies to explore sexting from youth's perspectives. The focus on Icelandic youth provides an excellent opportunity to yield insights into the relative influence of the socio-cultural context due to Iceland's small population and the ensuing lack of anonymity among inhabitants.

The social norms theory (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986; 1987) is used to acquire an understanding of the influence of social norms on engagement in sexting. It is the guiding theory of the research because it recognizes the important role of peers in influencing youth's behaviours. It posits that peer influence is indirect because it is based on youth's subjective perceptions about social norms, especially regarding its prevalence among peers (Berkowitz, 2005).

A total of 33 participants between 16-25 years old participated in eight focus groups that took place in Iceland in the summer of 2015. Focus groups were considered the best means of exploring sexting norms because they simulate the everyday conversations in which social norms develop. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, each focus group was composed of participants that are close friends with one another. Moreover, the discussion took place from a third-person perspective that did not require the participants to reveal any personal experiences of sexting.

The results of the thematic analysis revealed that sexting is undeniably prevalent, yet sexting outside relationships is more stigmatized among Icelandic youth than commonly thought. The stigma suggests that youth do not blindly sext because 'everybody is doing it'. Rather, their decision to engage in sexting is subject to the influence of more complex factors than merely commonness. The argument, based on the findings, is that the predominant peer influence is more direct than the social norms theory posits, with social pressure being an overriding factor. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and policy implications of the findings, as well as reflection of the limitations and suggestions for future research.

KEYWORDS: *Sexting, Social Norms, Social Pressure, Snapchat, Icelandic Youth*

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Acknowledgements

I am someone who believes that everything happens for a reason. When my personal life interfered with my initial progress leading to the extension of my master thesis, I did not anticipate that it would have so significant impact on my research findings. Had my data collection occurred three months earlier, I would stand here today with completely different findings. This shows how fluid our social world is, and how important it is for academic scholars to keep track of the changes.

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This master thesis is the first step in my aspiring career as a media and communication scholar focusing on the mutual shaping of media and the social world.

1. Introduction

This research investigates the social norms Icelandic youth are developing and applying to sexting via the popular messaging application Snapchat. Sexting, a portmanteau term composed of the words 'sex' and 'texting' refers to the act of sending self-generated, sexually implicit or explicit content in the form of text messages, photos, or videos via digital communication technologies (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Walrave, Heirman, & Hallam, 2014).

Although the exchange of sexual content is a longstanding practice that precedes the digital age, sexting became a youth trend at the end of last decade when smartphones became commonplace. That is because the advent of smartphones proliferated the opportunities to sext 'under the radar' with features such as in-built camera and a range of new applications offering free messaging, for example Facebook Messenger, Snapchat, and WhatsApp. This meant that intimate exchanges were no longer confined to handwritten love letters or printed photos that needed to be stored in hidden places (Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013). Instead, they could be shared instantly and without material traces. The term 'sexting' is thus commonly used to refer to the exchange of sexual content after the advent of smartphones for they transformed the opportunities to engage in sexting.

1.1 Background on Sexting

Since sexting became a trend at the dawn of the decade, its prevalence has only accelerated. For example, in 2009, 33% of young adults (18-26 years old) reported sexting semi-nude or nude photos of themselves and 59% reported sexting text messages (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy & CosmoGirl.com, 2009). Four years later, the percentages had risen to around 45% for photos (Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013) and up to 78% for text messages (Drouin et al., 2013).

This upward trend in youth sexting is among other things traced to increased cell phone ownership and use. A study conducted by the National Parent Association in Iceland showed that in 2013, nearly every Icelandic 10-16-year-old (96%) had their own cell phones, over half being smartphones. The study also showed that cell phone ownership increases with age, suggesting that it is nearly if not complete for young adults (SAFT, 2013). Similar numbers are observed elsewhere in Europe, which is the

continent with the highest overall percentage (78.2%) of mobile broadband subscriptions (International Telecommunication Union, 2015).

With increased cell phone penetration, today's youth have more opportunities for mobile-mediated communication than before, especially after the convergence of cell phones and the Internet into smartphones. Consequently, their face-to-face communication has increasingly been supplemented, rather than replaced, by mobile-mediated communication. A study by Statistics Iceland (2014) on computer-mediated communication among the Icelandic population between 2003-2013 showed that 97.1% of youth aged between 16-24 had used the Internet for social media (e.g. Facebook) in the past three months, an increase of 5.5% since 2010. Similarly, the study by SAFT (2013) showed that 90% of youth aged between 15-16 (10th grade) uses the Internet daily for social media, an increase of 3% from 2009. Moreover, 42% of them reported using the Internet daily for instant messaging (including Facebook Messenger and Snapchat) and additional 19% used it 1-2 times a week. The results of these studies suggest that youth primarily use the Internet for social media, which only increases with age and accelerates between the years (SAFT, 2013; Statistics Iceland, 2014). Similar trends are observed in other western countries. For example, in a recent study on the digital lifestyle of American teenagers (Refuel Agency, 2015), 684 respondents aged between 16-19 ranked cell phones as the top product they cannot live without, ahead of basic necessities such as food and water. They also reported spending far more hours (6.3 on average per day) using their cell phones than any other device. It is thus safe to say that cell phones are one of youth's most important communication modes (Benotsch et al., 2013; Drouin et al., 2013; Jansz, Slot, Tol, & Verstraeten, 2015).

1.2 The Use of Technology for Sexting

One could say that the process of cell phones making its way into youth's lives has lived up to the literal meaning of the word 'penetration'. However, it should be acknowledged that people mutually shape technologies by appropriating them to satisfy their own needs, thereby shaping their future developments and their place in the social world (Bijker, 2010). Snapchat is perhaps one of the best examples of a technology that youth appropriated "...in ways not intended by its creators" (Poltash, 2013, p. 13). In general, youth are particularly adept in adapting technologies to their lives because they have a propensity for experimenting with new and exciting things

due to the natural developments in adolescence (Baumgartner, 2013). Today's youth often referred to as millennial teens even have further inclination for new technologies because they grew up with major technological changes such as smartphones and the Internet. As technology has been a defining feature of their lives, they tend to be adaptable and open-minded about adopting new technologies and appropriating them to their needs (Refuel Agency, 2015).

It is worth noting that in the popular press (e.g. Martin, 2015), it is rumoured that sexting is now quickly emerging as a normative dating practice among middle-aged single people in the United States, long after it became commonplace among youth. Although Martin (2015) based her observation on personal experiences, which has no reliability as an empirical fact, it is a good indication of how far ahead youth are in appropriating new technologies in novel ways. The way in which Snapchat was appropriated for sexting is discussed next.

1.3 The Use of Snapchat for Sexting

Since its launch in September 2011, Snapchat has been on a rapid rise to prominence in the media ecology. According to the GlobalWebIndex (2014), it was the fastest growing social media application in 2014 (see Table 1). It is also the messaging application with the youngest user base, with 57% of their users being under 25 years old. It is particularly popular among 16-19 years olds in North America and European countries, with more than third of teenagers in Ireland, Sweden, the U.K. and the U.S. using it (GlobalWebIndex, 2014).

Table 1: Comparison between Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram

Social Media Platform	Growth in 2014 (in %)	Estimated number of monthly active users (in million)	Estimated use per day (in million)
Snapchat	57	200	400 snaps
Facebook	50	140	12 statuses
Instagram	43	180	70 photos/videos

Snapchat's popularity is arguably attributed to its delete-by-default function, which distinguishes it from other social media platforms. What the application does is that it self-destructs the content, whether it is photos/videos or chats, from its domain

after a certain time interval set by the sender (ranging from 1-10 seconds). The recipients are able to take a screenshot of the photos/videos, but Snapchat notifies the senders about it. According to co-founder Evan Spiegel, this delete-by-default function was created with the intention to bring back spontaneity to social media by relieving users from having to manage their online image like on other social media where all users' actions are accumulated on individual profiles (Colao, 2012).

This study focuses on Snapchat because the delete-by-default function makes it an ideal sexting medium, at least in theory. In addition to deleting the content from the domain itself, Snapchat claims that the content is not stored automatically on Snapchat's corporate servers, which is the case on some other social media platforms such as Facebook. Therefore, youth perceive Snapchat to be a less risky (albeit not risk-free) way of engaging in sexting, which is allegedly the reason for its popularity as a sexting medium, if not the mother app for sexting.

However, the delete-by-default function is merely a false sense of security because numerous ways of saving or retrieving the content without the sender's knowledge have surfaced over the past years, including applications that serve that sole purpose (Thiek, 2014). Accordingly, it has become increasingly common that recipients save sexting content and disseminate it online without the senders' permission, especially photos/videos that have exchange value as sexual commodities. Such unauthorized disseminations of sexting content can have adverse outcomes (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012). For example, when sexual photos/videos are exposed to unintended audiences, such as friends, family, peers, teachers, and employees, it can have negative social consequences for the victim. Apart from the shame of having intimate photos/videos shared publicly, it often leads to (cyber) bullying with subsequent emotional distress. Dissemination of photos/videos can also lead to legal sanctions when it concerns minors due to violations of child pornography laws, even if it was a consensual exchange between two teenagers (Poltash, 2013). For these reasons, Snapchat is not as sext-friendly in practice.

1.4 From Media to Academia

Due to its potential for negative social and legal consequences, sexting has prompted extensive media coverage in recent years that has focused on the issue in its extremity. Examples include suicides attributed to intense and relentless bullying and emotional

distress following unauthorized disseminations of sexting photos/videos. This has given rise to serious concerns among parents, public health and educational institutions, as well as legal authorities (Drouin et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2012). For example, Margrét Kristín Magnúsdóttir, an Icelandic psychologist and researcher at the child protective institution *Barnahús* [Children's House], recently raised sexting as a pressing societal issue in a conference on child protection (Sigurþórsdóttir, 2014).

Research on sexting grew out of concerns in the public discourse. Over the past six years, researchers have tried with numerous efforts to relief some of the concerns by showing prevalence rates that suggest it is not a mass phenomenon, albeit with varying findings (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Baumgartner, 2013; Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Drouin et al., 2013; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2012; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy & CosmoGirl.com, 2009). Besides prevalence rates, researchers have been preoccupied with investigating whether sexting leads to other risky behaviours, negative online experiences, and adverse health outcomes, again with mixed results (Baumgartner, 2013; Benotch et al., 2013; Dake et al., 2012; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Rice, Rhoades, Winetrobe, Sanchez, Montoya, Plant, & Kordic, 2012; Temple, Paul, van den Berg, Le, McElhany, & Temple, 2012). Even when there are correlations, researchers have not been able to confirm whether sexting is a causing factor or whether there are shared underlying variables such as personality factors (e.g. sensation seeking) that are potentially confounding the relationships (Benotch et al., 2013; Dake et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2012). Nevertheless, researchers have been near universally concerned with negative risk associations in research on sexting.

Recently, scholars (e.g. Levine, 2013; Lippman & Campbell, 2014) have started to doubt the usefulness of employing a risk frame in research on sexting. As Lippman and Campbell (2014) argued, "...employing a risk frame may obscure some of the more normative – and even beneficial – motives for and outcomes of adolescent sexting" (p. 373). Sexting does indeed fit well with youth, perhaps better than with any other age group due to their developments in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Baumgartner, 2013). For example, sexting can fulfil youth's needs to explore their sexuality that can facilitate a healthy development of their sexual identity (Baumgartner, 2013). For older youth who have developed their sexual identity, sexting can be a healthy form of sexual expression that helps them to form emotional bonds with desired partners or sustain intimacy with established ones,

especially in long-distance relationships (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). This is not to say that sexting should not be considered risky as it may indeed lead to negative outcomes. Rather that its developmental functions for youth, some of which can be beneficial, should also be acknowledged if not only in passing. Therefore, in this study sexting is considered a risky behaviour while simultaneously acknowledging its potential benefits. With this more neutral standpoint, this study opens up to the possibility of a new discourse that balances the existing discourse on sexting that so far has largely been negative in tone.

1.5 From Quantitative to Qualitative

Due to the academic focus on prevalence rates and associations to negative outcomes, research on sexting has largely been quantitative in nature. However, given the recent nature of the phenomenon, there have also been calls in academia for an in-depth understanding of it (Chalfen, 2010; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013). This is one of few qualitative studies to date (Lippmann & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013) that explores sexting openly from the perspective of those engaging in it. Particularly, this research focuses on the important influence of the normative landscape because quantitative studies have supported the strong and consistent influence of social norms on engagement in sexting (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011; Sasson & Mesch, 2014). Furthermore, Lippman and Campbell (2014) found that "the normative climate and desire for approval motivated some to sext regardless of fears of reputational damage" (p. 371). As it appears that social norms are one of the key explaining factors for sexting, an investigation of youth's sexting norms may lead to enhanced understanding of their engagement in it. Yet, no published study to date has examined explicitly what these social norms are, which is the aim of this study.

Existing qualitative studies had similar research focus albeit not with primary focus on social norms. They looked into the nature and origin of sexting, its meaning for youth, and the motivations for sexting from a normative perspective (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013). Specifically, they have focused on the gender dynamics involved in sexting. They found that a sexual double standard prevails both in the way that youth experience pressure to sext as well as the reputation they incur for it, making it interesting to explore sexting norms from a gender perspective. Moreover, existing studies (e.g. Lippman & Campbell, 2014)

have found that the motivations for sexting and the prevalence rates differ between age groups and relationship contexts, but it is unclear whether it translates into differing social norms. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions through focus groups:

- ***RQ***: *What social norms are Icelandic youth (16-25 years old) developing and applying to their own and/or their peers' engagement in sexting via Snapchat?*
    - ***SQ1:*** *What factors influence the development of sexting norms?*
    - ***SQ2:*** *How do sexting norms coincide or differ across age, gender, and relational contexts?*

1.6 Scientific & Social Relevance

The scientific relevance of this study is to bring youth's perspectives into the academic debate on sexting to enhance understanding of it. This is important seeing that discussions on sexting are often dominated by people that do not engage in sexting first-hand. The social relevance is to provide an account of sexting that can inform effective prevention strategies that address the concerns of those engaging in it. Previously, prevention strategies have been based on quantitative studies that have addressed parental and institutional concerns rather than youth's concerns. For example, the legal risks have garnered the spotlight on the issue whereas the scarce qualitative accounts reveal that youth are more concerned about social consequences (Lippman & Campbell, 2014, Ringrose et al., 2013). This is not to say that parental and institutional concerns should be downgraded in relation to sexting, but rather that the focus should be shifted to other aspects of it that seem to weight more in importance for youth.

Lastly, the reasoning for focusing on Icelandic youth is to examine the influence of the socio-cultural context on sexting norms. As Baumgartner, Sumter, Peter, Valkenburg, and Livingstone (2014) argue, researchers need to consider both individual factors and contextual socio-cultural factors to get a comprehensive picture of sexting. This is consistent with many developmental theories, which posit that the socio-cultural context during upbringing has a significant influence on youth's behaviour (Igra & Irwin, 1996). Iceland provides an excellent opportunity to yield insights into the influence of the broader socio-context due to the small population (N = 329,100; Statistics Iceland, 2015) and the ensuing lack of anonymity among

inhabitants, which leads to increased risks of negative social outcomes if sexting goes viral. The influence of socio-cultural contextual factors can be insightful as to whether findings on sexting can be generalized across countries.

1.7 Thesis Outline

The remainder of the thesis, which is divided into four additional chapters, is structured as follows. The next chapter presents the theoretical framework. It is structured along the lines of the key concepts. It starts with conceptualization of social norms where the social norms theory put forth by Berkowitz and Perkins (1986; 1987) is used to understand the influence of social norms on engagement in sexting. This is followed by a literature review of existing studies on prevalence rates to give the reader idea of the current state of sexting among youth, as well as findings on differences in sexting across age, gender and relational contexts, which are insights that inform the second sub-question.

The theoretical framework is followed by a methodology chapter, which accounts for all decisions concerning the research design. First, it provides lines of argumentations for utilizing qualitative research, focus groups and thematic analysis. Then it explains the rationale behind the sampling criteria and the use of snowball sampling to recruit participants. This is followed by description of the participants, and an operationalization of the key concepts including an account of the relations among the research questions, and the goals of the focus groups. The chapter concludes with an outline of the analysis process based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps to thematic analysis.

The next chapter thereafter presents the results of the analysis. It is structured along the lines of the eight themes that the researcher extracted from the data. The argumentation is that the synergy between these eight themes explains Icelandic youth's engagement in sexting. Each theme presents the participants' accounts along with the researcher's interpretations of their latent meanings in relation to the theoretical insights.

In the conclusion, clear answers to the main research question and the two sub-questions are formulated and linked to broader theoretical discussions, including the applicability of the social norms theory to explain engagement in sexting and the policy implications. The chapter concludes with a reflection of the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Theory & Previous Research

This chapter is divided into two parts. It starts by conceptualizing social norms and explaining how they might influence engagement in sexting by employing relevant theory. In the second part, existing research on sexting is reviewed in terms of prevalence rates as well as differences across age, gender, and relational contexts. Collectively, the theoretical insights gathered through this literature review form the backbone of this study.

2.1 The Influence of Social Norms

Since to date academia has had limited insights as to what youth's sexting norms are, it is unclear whether youth engage in sexting in order to conform to social norms (i.e. the social norms prescribe that one should sext) or in contrast, if youth are actually breaching social norms by engaging in it (i.e. sexting goes against social norms). If the latter is the case, it could be that youth are rebelling against establish social norms (i.e. we are young and so we sext as we like) and/or that there are other, perhaps stronger, influential factors on engagement in sexting. Quantitative studies (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Sasson & Mesch, 2014) support the former notion based on relevant theories, including notions about compliance to social norms (Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2014; Burchell, Rettie, & Patel, 2013; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004) as well as the social norms theory (Berkowitz and Perkins, 1986; 1987), both of which are reviewed below.

2.2 Compliance to Social Norms

Social norms play a key role in explaining social behaviours (Dubois, 2004). They refer to the ideal or socially desirable behaviours that are typical or expected of members of a social group in given situational contexts (Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2014). Conformity to social norms is explained by the fundamental human need of belonging, but people need to behave in ways that comply with the behaviours of others within their social groups to be part of the group (Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2014; Burchell et al., 2013; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). During adolescence, the need for group affiliations is even stronger hence youth try to fit in at all costs (Delfos, 2013; Sasson & Mesch, 2014). Compliance to social norms is also explained by the fear of sanctions for deviating from the normative, especially when the sanctions have dire

social consequences such as exclusion from the social group (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Chandler & Munday, 2011).

Given that several studies have found sexting to be fairly common among youth (e.g. up to 78% in Gordon-Messer et al.'s study from 2013), one could argue that engagement in sexting is attributable to youth trying to conform to social norms. However, this notion is contradicted with the findings of other studies that suggest that sexting is not a mass phenomenon (e.g. 9.6% in Mitchell et al.'s study from 2012). If only a small minority of youth are engaging in it, it is arguably more likely that sexting goes against social norms. The social norms theory described below provides an explanation for these conflicting notions by showing how social norms are often based on wrongful perceptions of a behaviour's prevalence.

2.3 The Social Norms Theory

In short, the social norms theory posits that problematic and risky behaviours, particularly among adolescents, often stem from misperceptions concerning social norms, which underlines the importance of looking at social norms when trying to understand engagement in sexting. It has been widely adopted in prevention campaigns aimed at youth in relation to risky behaviours that typically take place within the social context of peers such as alcohol or substance use (Berkowitz, 2005). More recently, the applicability of the theory in explaining risky online behaviours, including sexting, has been confirmed (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Sasson & Mesch, 2014), which increases the theory's validity and supports its relevance.

The main rationale for this choice of theory is that it recognizes the important role of peers in influencing youth's behaviours (Berkowitz, 2005). Peer influence can both be direct and indirect (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010; 2011) but when it comes to social norms it is indirect because it "is based on adolescents' [subjective] *beliefs* about the norms that are prevalent among their peers" (Baumgartner et al., 2011, p. 753; emphasis added). One of the reasons for such misperceptions is that the risky behaviours of the few are more salient than the responsible behaviour of the many, making the former often wrongly assumed to be normative (Berkowitz, 2005). Thus, the majority is silent about their behaviour because it believes it is a minority, whereas the minority speaks out because it thinks that their behaviour is in majority. This social psychological phenomenon is termed pluralistic ignorance (Berkowitz, 2005). Moreover, the people engaging in risky behaviours tend to wrongfully claim

that their behaviour is normative (e.g. by saying that everyone is doing it) in order to downplay the plausible negative consequences of their own conducts and hence avoid cognitive dissonance when engaging in them. This phenomenon is termed false consensus (Berkowitz, 2005). In both cases, the subjective beliefs about peer norms are based on overestimations. Such misperceptions are especially likely with sensitive issues such as sexting where the ability to gain insights into others' conducts is limited. Moreover, overestimations increase with social distance (Berkowitz, 2005), which means that the participants in this study are likely to perceive sexting to be more prevalent among Icelandic youth overall than among their closest friends.

2.3.1 Descriptive and Injunctive Norms

Within the social norms theory, social norms are commonly classified as descriptive and injunctive norms (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). In the context of sexting, descriptive norms are adolescents' beliefs about the commonness of sexting within their social group, i.e. whether and how often they engage in it. Injunctive peer norms are adolescents' beliefs about the extent to which members of their social group approve or disapprove of sexting (Baumgartner et al., 2011). Descriptive norms have been found to have stronger and more consistent influence on the willingness to engage in risky sexual online behaviours. Thus, if youth believe that sexting is common among their peers, they are prompted to engage in it as well (Sasson & Mesch, 2014). However, injunctive norms are also found to have significant influence (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Heirman & Walrave, 2012; Sasson & Mesch, 2014). Some scholars (e.g. Schwartz, 1968) distinguish injunctive norms further by categorizing them as social injunctive norms and adding personal injunctive or moral norms, which refers to the internalized beliefs one holds individually about the acceptability of a given behaviour (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). A recent U.S.-based study by Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaíta, and Rullo (2013) showed that 28.7% of high school students who believed sexting was acceptable had sexted before, compared to only 4.9% who believed it was always wrong. Interestingly though, 14.9% of those who believed sexting was wrong sexted anyway, which suggests that in some cases, social norms override personal norms.

As perceptions of peer norms are found to influence youth's engagement in sexting, and because prevention campaigns aim to correct misperceptions of descriptive norms (i.e. demolish the 'everybody is doing it' attitude), research on

sexting has primarily focused on providing descriptive accounts of its prevalence
(Baumgartner, 2013; Lippmann & Campbell, 2014). The following sections present a
literature review of these studies.

2.4 Previous Research on Prevalence Rates

The American 'Digital Abuse Study' (Associated Press & MTV, 2009) and the 'Sex
and Tech' study (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy
and CosmoGirl.com, 2009) were among the first studies to provide prevalence
accounts of sexting. As such these statistics showing relatively high percentages
became frequently cited (Mitchell et al, 2012). Shortly after, sexting gained
momentum in academia albeit still focused on American youth (Drouin & Landgraff,
2012; Drouin et al., 2013; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2012; Lenhart,
2009; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011). The findings of these studies vary considerably.
For example, Mitchell et al. (2012) found that only 1% of youth aged between 10-17
had sexted sexually explicit (i.e. naked) photos/videos of themselves whereas in the
study by Associated Press and MTV (2009) the percentage was 10% for 14-17 years
olds. When semi-nude photos/videos were included, e.g. in the 'Sex and Tech' study
(The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy &
CosmoGirl.com, 2009) the percentages went up to 20% for teens (13-19 years old)
and 33% for young adults (20-26 years old). With the exception of Mitchell et al.
(2012), the more recent studies show considerably higher rates, especially among
young adults. Depending on the relational context, Drouin et al. (2013) found that
between 55-78% of youth aged between 18-26 had sexted in the form of text
messages and between 45-49% in the form of photos or videos. Similarly, Benotch et
al. (2013) found that 44% of young adults (18-25 years old) had sexted photos of
themselves and Gordon-Messer et al. (2013) found that 43% of young adults had
engaged in sexting, whether in the form of photos/videos or text messages. Overall,
despite varying findings, these studies show that sexting is not an epidemic yet it is
not uncommon, especially on the receiving end.

It was a consistent finding across the studies that more youth receive than send
sexts (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Lenhart, 2009;
Lippmann & Campbell, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; The National Campaign to
Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy & CosmoGirl.com, 2009). This suggests that
sexting is not entirely a reciprocal activity among youth, which can be attributed to

the commonness of sexts being forwarded, especially among males (Associated Press & MTV, 2009).

2.4.1 Critique on Previous Prevalence Studies

The varying estimates observed in previous studies are due, at least in part, to inconsistent definitions and lack of validated measures of sexting largely stemming from the novelty of the phenomenon (Baumgartner, 2013; Drouin et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2012; Walrave et al., 2014). First, there are inconsistencies in terms of what the definitions encompass, such as the form of the sexting content (photos, videos, or text messages) as well as the type of content, i.e. sexually implicit or explicit (Benotch et al., 2013; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Drouin et al., 2013). Mitchell et al. (2012) were the first ones to distinguish between a restricted category of sexually explicit photos/videos where youth show their sexual body parts in complete nudity; and a more expansive category of sexually implicit photos/videos where youth are clothed (e.g. wearing underwear or swimwear) but posing suggestively with focus on their sexual body parts. Mitchell et al. (2012) attributed some of the high percentages found in other studies to the lack of differentiation between the two categories, and highlighted the importance of differentiating them as only the former category potentially violates child pornography laws. However, the latter category of clothed but sexually suggestive photos/videos is found to be more common among youth (Mitchell et al., 2012; Drouin et al., 2013). Thus, even if the low percentages of sexually explicit photos/videos are reassuring, they do not tell the full story of engagement in sexting. For example, only one in ten youth has shared a naked image of themselves compared to three in ten who have been involved in sexting in more general terms (Associated Press & MTV, 2009). Therefore, the prevalence rates must always be interpreted according to what the definitions encompass.

Secondly, there are inconsistencies in terms of whether the measures of sexting are confined to transmission through cellular networks (SMS) or over the Internet, which can also be done via other digital devices than cell phones (Drouin et al., 2013; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Some studies were limited to text messages through cell phones (Lenhart, 2009; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011) whereas others also included the Internet without measuring what device or medium was used (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned

Pregnancy & CosmoGirl.com, 2009). The rest did not specify any transmitting medium or device (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Ferguson, 2011). It should be noted that youth most commonly use cell phones for sexting (Drouin et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2012). However, with an increasing array of applications, including Facebook Messenger, Snapchat, and Whatsapp, it is no longer adequate to talk about sexting via cell phones because every medium has its own features that can influence engagement in sexting. For example, SMSs are saved on the cellular network's corporate servers and Facebook has rights to the content transmitted through its Messenger, whereas Snapchat does not copy, keep or archive the messages transmitted through their app (Poltash, 2013). For privacy reasons, this is likely to influence the choice of medium for sexting, which highlights the importance of specifying the transmitting mediums and devices that are included in definitions and measures of sexting.

Lastly, the time when the studies were conducted must be considered to ensure comparability. Many of the studies on sexting were conducted when sexting was taking off as a youth trend, and it can be expected that the prevalence rates have increased over the past six years if not only for technological advances leading to increased cell phone use. For example, between 2010 and 2011 the amount of images sent through cell phones increased by nearly 20% (from 36% to 54%; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013).

Overall, the inconsistences in terms of definitions, the transmitting mediums included in the measures, and the time of conduction, make comparability between previous studies difficult, evident by the varying statistics on sexting. Research on sexting is thus far from being saturated and remains in an explorative stage. Yet, existing studies have made important contributions, among other things by establishing some predictors of engagement in sexting, which are discussed next.

2.5 Influential Factors on Engagement in Sexting

In addition to social norms, which are found to influence engagement in sexting, there are several other factors such as age and personality traits (e.g. sensation seeking) that correlate positively to sexting (Baumgartner, 2013) and are consistent across Europe and the U.S. (Baumgartner et al., 2014). Unsurprisingly, age and gender are the most-frequently studied demographical factors in research on sexting (Baumgartner, 2013). In addition, the relationship context is which sexting occurs has been receiving increased academic interest (Drouin et al., 2013). The differences in sexting across

age, gender, and relational contexts are discussed in detail next from both quantitative and qualitative perspective to show how important it is to explore the social norms of sexting from these perspectives. This is, however, not to suggest that there are not other factors that influence engagement in sexting. Rather, the choice of focusing on these three factors is based on previous quantitative studies that have supported their statistically significant causal relationships to engagement in sexting. One of the aims of this study (see SQ1) is to uncover other influential factors, which can be tested for statistical significance in future quantitative research.

2.5.1   Age Differences in Sexting

Despite varying prevalence rates, quantitative studies on sexting show similar trends in terms of age. It appears that sexting becomes more common in the course of mid-adolescence and young adulthood (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Baumgartner, 2013; Benotsch et al., 2013; Dake et al., 2012; Lenhart, 2009; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy & CosmoGirl.com, 2009). For example, Mitchell et al. (2012) surveyed adolescents as young as 10-12 who are 66% less likely than 16-17 years olds to sext and the gap is even wider when young adolescents are compared to young adults. The increase in sexting with age is perhaps best explained by placing it within the broader context of youth's sexual development in the transition from childhood to adulthood (Baumgartner, 2013). That is because in the course of puberty, youth experience increased sexual interest due to hormonal changes. Consequently, they start exploring their sexuality, which eventually leads to the initiation of sexual activities. As the development of sexual identity occurs gradually, direct sexual experiences are most commonly initiated in the mid to late adolescence (Baumgartner, 2013). Therefore, at the onset of puberty, which Lippman and Campbell (2014) call a 'pre-sexting' phase, youth who sext are more likely to be testing the waters of their sexuality by sending sexually implicit sexts to platonic friends for fun and to joke around. In contrast, older youth are more likely to place sexting in a romantic or sexual context (Baumgartner, 2013; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). On a side note, this might explain why young adults are more likely to be reciprocal sexters (Benotch et al., 2013; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013). Another plausible explanation for the increase in sexting with age is that cell phone use is highest among older adolescents and young adults (Benotch et al., 2013; Drouin et al., 2013), which correlates positively to engagement in sexting

(Baumgartner, 2013). The increase can also be traced to older youth having increased autonomy from parents, which gives them more opportunities to engage in sexting. These are only few of the possible explanations for the increase in sexting with age but in any case, age is found to be a strong predictor of sexting among youth (Baumgartner, 2013).

What makes age interesting to explore from a qualitative perspective is whether the age groups attribute different meanings to sexting, e.g. whether age influences what is considered socially acceptable. However, as will be explained in the methodology chapter, all participants in this study are older than 16 so the differences are likely to be less distinct than in Lippman and Campbell's (2014) study.

2.5.2 Gender Differences in Sexting

In contrast to the strong predictive ability of age on engagement in sexting, there are mixed findings on the influence of gender in previous quantitative studies. Some studies reported the same prevalence rates for males and females (Baumgartner, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Dake et al., 2012; Lenhart 2009; Lippmann & Campbell, 2014), whereas others reported that females are slightly more likely to be senders and males to be receivers (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Benotch et al., 2013; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2012; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy & CosmoGirl.com, 2009). One plausible explanation is that females are more likely to experience pressure to sext from males than vice versa, a finding which is prominent in qualitative studies (Lippman and Campbell, 2014; Walker et al., 2013) and supported in some quantitative studies (e.g. Lenhart, 2009; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy & CosmoGirl.com, 2009). Another plausible explanation is that it is more common among males to forward sexts to other males to gain status among peers or in exchange for other sexts, which makes them more likely to be unintended recipients (Ringrose et al., 2013). When sexts are forwarded to unintended recipients, there is no reciprocity involved, which explains the unequal number of received and sent sexts (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy & CosmoGirl.com, 2009).

Moreover, the previous qualitative studies (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013) have argued that gender holds an explanatory power in terms of engagement in sexting. According to them, there is a

sexual double standard in sexting as in other sexual behaviours, i.e. that males are socially rewarded for highly sexual behaviour, evident by the commonness of using sexts as a social currency to show off to peers, whereas for females that same behaviour is socially proscribed and results in penalties such as slut shaming and reputational damage (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013). Previous qualitative studies have found that even if females engage in sexting in response to direct pressure from males, they incur negative judgments for it. Both genders describe girls who sext as crazy, insecure, attention-seeking, slutty, skanky, and idiots who lack self-respect (Lippmann & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013). Females who opt out from sexting are also judged as being stuck up and prude (Walker et al., 2013). Whether to sext or not is thus a lose-lose situation for girls (Lippman & Campbell, 2014).

Lastly, the influence of the broader socio-cultural context is interesting in terms of gender differences. In their cross-cultural research on sexting in 20 European countries, Baumgartner et al. (2014) found that country-specific cultural values such as traditionalism had significant effect on gender differences, with less pronounced gender differences in sexual permissive countries that have more liberal views concerning female-appropriate sexual behaviour. For example, they found that Scandinavian girls are more likely than boys to engage in sexting whereas in other European countries it is reversed or equal. Although this finding is hardly surprising seeing that gender-appropriate behaviours are highly culturally determined, it highlights the importance of taking the cultural context into consideration (Baumgartner et al., 2014).

2.5.3   Differences Across Relational Contexts

Drouin and Landgraff (2012) found the relational context in which sexting occurs to be influential on the way youth engage in it. The nature of the relationship is found to influence both the prevalence and motivations for sexting as well as perceived and actual risks (Drouin et al., 2013). For example, partners in a committed relationship sext to sustain attachment and intimacy, especially in long-distance relationships, whereas casual sexting partners outside relationships sext to show interest and flirt (Drouin et al., 2013). In terms of risks, what sets committed partners apart from other types of relational contexts is trust and intimacy. Due to the lack of these features in other types of relationships, the risks of sexts being forwarded to unintended

recipients are higher. Drouin and colleagues (2013) found that young adults perceive the risk to be twice as high outside committed relationships. Compared to sexts from committed partners, sexts from casual sexting partners are five times more likely to be forwarded. For these reasons, Drouin et al. (2013) urged researchers to ask respondents to specify the relational context in which they are sexting, and keep it at the forefront of focus group discussions on sexting, especially in relation to the risks. Similarly, Benotsch and colleagues (2013) talked about the importance of looking at the risks from different relational contexts and Gordon-Messer and colleagues (2013) suggested qualitative research focusing on the motivations for sexting in different relational contexts. It is also extremely important to consider the differences between the relational contexts in relation to the social norms because they always refer to a prescribed behaviour in a given context. For example, what is considered socially acceptable behaviour in relationships may be inappropriate when people are flirting (Ito et al., 2010). Therefore, if there are profound differences in sexting behaviour depending on the relational context in which it occurs, the social norms are likely to differ accordingly.

2.6 Summary of Theory & Previous Research

In sum, this chapter's review of theory and previous research has informed this study in several ways. First, by suggesting that engagement in sexting is explained by the need to comply to social norms for peer approval and that youth's perceptions of sexting being a social norm are based on misperceptions of its prevalence especially seeing its sensitive nature, which leads to limited insights of others' conducts.

Secondly, by showing that engagement in sexting, including the prevalence and the motivations for doing it, are determined by age, which relates to youth's sexual development. The older youth become, the more likely they are to engage in sexting and to place it in the context of sexual or romantic relationships.

Thirdly, by showing that there is a double standard prominent in sexting in the way females experience pressure to engage in sexting and the judgments they incur for it. Moreover, by pointing out the important influence of the socio-cultural context, e.g. the country-specific views towards women's sexuality, on gender differences.

Lastly, by showing that the prevalence of sexting, the motivations for doing it, and perceptions of risks are highly dependent on the relationship context in which it occurs, which is likely to translate into differing norms for each relational context.

With these theoretical insights as a backbone, this thesis now moves on to methodology, which is at the heart of this study as a proper research design is the prerequisite for the generation of the best possible data to answer the research questions.

3. Methodology

In the summer of 2015, the researcher moderated eight focus groups (N=33), each lasting approximately one hour, in Reykjavík and Akureyri, Iceland. The following chapter accounts for the research design. It starts with the researcher's lines of argumentations for utilizing qualitative research, focus groups, and thematic analysis as well as a discussion of the methodological considerations used to mitigate the disadvantages of using focus groups for sensitive topics. This is followed by a discussion of the rationale behind the sampling criteria, the sampling strategy as well as description of the research units. Operationalization of the key concepts follows, including accounts of the relations between the research questions and the goals of the focus groups. The chapter concludes with an outline of the steps taken during the analysis process.

3.1 Choice of Method

3.1.1 Qualitative Research

There were two main reasons for the choice of doing a qualitative research. First, the aim of this study was to explore sexting from youth's perspectives. In contrast to the majority of existing quantitative studies, this study did not want to set out with preconceived notions about its nature but rather approach the topic inductively, thereby allowing the participants to guide the direction of the findings. By utilizing qualitative research, the participants were given a great deal of freedom and spontaneity to voice their meanings, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and experiences using their own vocabulary and frameworks (Flick, 2009).

Secondly, social norms are hardly ever written in stone like other societal codes of conducts but rather implied through social interactions, which makes it difficult if not impossible to uncover them at the manifest level, e.g. by asking individuals explicitly about their social norms (Chandler & Munday, 2011). Sexting norms are better uncovered by observing the ways social groups come to a shared meaning formation of sexting (Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2014). Such insights are only obtainable via qualitative means, and more specifically by using a group-based method.

3.1.2 Focus Groups

Focus groups were considered the most suitable method for identifying social norms because they simulate the everyday, ordinary group-based conversations in which norms develop (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2014). Due to their interactive nature, the focus groups did not only generate valuable insights into social norms but also into their developments, i.e. how members of a social group come to an implicit agreement of them (De Oliveira, 2011). Moreover, their interactive nature made the identification of social norms more apparent (Flick, 2009; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Rodriguez, Schwartz, Lahman, & Geist, 2011). Wellings, Branigan, and Mitchell (2000) gave the example of participants using apologies, disclaimers, humour or projecting personal views onto a third person in order to pre-empt disapproval by other group members, which indicates that their views are considered to deviate from the normative.

Although focus groups are arguably the most effective method of uncovering social norms, they might not at first glance seem ideal for a sensitive topic like sexting (Wellings et al., 2000). Indeed, scholars have long doubted the method's appropriateness for generating intimate data with the central argument being that participants can experience vulnerability when asked to discuss sensitive topics openly in a group (Antoft & Petersen, 2014). Sexting was regarded as a sensitive topic because "...it requires disclosure of behaviours or attitudes which would normally be kept private and personal, which might result in offence or lead to social censure or disapproval, and/or which might cause the respondent discomfort to express" (Wellings et al., 2000, p. 256). In certain cultural contexts and situations sex-related topics are even taboo (Antoft & Petersen, 2014). Therefore, it might seem paradoxical that some scholars (e.g. Antoft & Petersen, 2014; De Oliveira, 2011; Wellings et al., 2000) have argued that focus groups are particularly useful when dealing with sensitive topics. The argument for using focus groups for sensitive topics is that when used right, the group format has the potential to make participants feel at ease, which has several valid points. First, because the aim of focus groups is to simulate ordinary conversations, the structure is set out to be informal and relaxed (Acocella, 2011). Secondly, since focus groups open up the research process to the participants, there are less power dynamics involved between the researcher and the participants (De Oliveira, 2011). Thirdly, because the data gathering occurs in a group,

each participant is put less on the spot to answer all of the questions. This lowers the pressure for participants and gives them time to think about their answers and manage their impressions while others talk, which is particularly important when the topic is sensitive (Wellings et al., 2000). In these ways, the focus group format has the potential to facilitate discussions on sensitive topics.

Yet, with certain research topics, especially ones that are sensitive, participants might feel inhibited to disclose personal experiences in a group setting due to fear of disapproval by other group members (De Oliveira, 2011). This is particularly the case with youth for whom social approval is of utmost importance. Therefore, to minimize fear of disapproval, the focus groups were composed of participants that are close friends with one another. Several scholars have observed that focus groups generally run better when the participants know each other beforehand, share interests, and are equals in terms of status and hierarchy (Acocella, 2011; Jansz et al., 2015; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leeck & Zoran, 2009). De Oliveira (2011) argues that it is particularly effective to compose focus groups of friends when the research units are adolescent girls and the topic under discussion is related to sex. It was the researcher's belief that in this study, it would create the confidentiality and intimacy needed to facilitate open discussions because friends are most likely to share thoughts and experiences on sexual experiences with each other in real life. Using participants from the same closely knitted friend group was also particularly relevant for studying norms due to norm variations and discernable patterns of group behaviour across social groups (Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2014).

Another important consideration when using focus groups on sensitive topics is the expectation of participants to disclose personal experiences, which is ethically problematic in group settings (De Oliveira, 2011). Therefore, the decision was made to base the discussions from a third-person perspective (e.g. sexting among peers in general), which did not require the participant to share personal experiences. If participants shared personal experiences, it came from their own initiative. That way the participants were able to express their thoughts on sexting without experiencing discomfort and feeling pressured, threatened or invaded. By employing these two methodological considerations to mitigate vulnerability and ethical problems, focus groups were arguably the most suitable method for carrying out this study.

3.1.3 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the method of analysis because it allows the researcher to uncover the social norms by detecting patterns of shared meanings across the data set (Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010). The steps of thematic analysis resemble the grounded theory approach to analysis. However, it was the researcher's preferred choice because in thematic analysis, the conceptual coding is not a precursor to theorizing like in grounded theory, but an end in itself. For that reason, Braun and Clarke (2006) described thematic analysis as some sort of grounded theory 'lite' albeit a method in its own right. Thematic analysis was considered to better fit the research aims of providing a rich thematic description of sexting norms rather than providing a theory that explains the relationships among the themes (Floersch et al., 2010).

The analysis was conducted in accordance with the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) because it is provides a detailed account of its application and techniques to avoid validity issues. The steps of the analysis are discussed later.

3.2 Sampling

3.2.1 Sampling Criteria

Besides being Icelandic and residing there, the main criteria used to select the focus groups participants was age and gender due to the comparison of social norms across these contexts. The rationale for focusing only on youth between 16-25 was twofold. First, due to the increased prevalence of sexting during late adolescence and young adulthood (Walrave et al., 2014) and in Iceland, the age of sixteen unofficially marks the late adolescence[1]. Secondly, because from that age youth have the cognitive maturity needed to reflect on their sexuality (Russel, Van Campen, & Muraco, 2012).

Engagement in sexting, cell phone ownership, and use of Snapchat were not included in sampling criteria. First, personal experiences of sexting were not needed for participation because the participants were not required to share them in the discussion. Moreover, the researcher was unable to include engagement in sexting as

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[1]Sixteen unofficially marks the late adolescence in Iceland because it is the age when youth complete ten years of compulsory education and enter gymnasium, either grammar or vocational schools.

a criterion for participation due to ethical reasons since this would require the researcher to ask them about intimate sexting experiences (De Oliveira, 2011). Secondly, it was considered unnecessary to include cell phone ownership as a criterion due to the high cell phone penetration among Icelandic youth. Thirdly, given the popularity of Snapchat among youth, it was assumed that the participants would have at least awareness of it, which was considered enough for the aforementioned reason that the discussion did not involve personal experiences of sexting via Snapchat.

3.2.2 Informed Consent

To be eligible to participate in the study, the participants, or guardians in the case of minors, needed to agree to the terms of the study. By signing an informed consent form, the participants (or guardians) showed an understanding of, and gave an agreement to the following information that had been presented to them, including:

- Explanation of the study purposes, i.e. data for a master thesis.
- Assurance of confidentiality in all written reports, including the use of pseudonyms.
- Acknowledgement of the expectations of participants, including that they were not required to share any personal experiences of sexting and that they had the right to refuse to answer any question and/or withdraw from the study any time.
- Agreement to rules, including the prohibition to share anything that is discussed during the focus group discussion with external partners; and the prohibition to mention names in any real-life examples or stories of sexting.
- Agreement to the focus groups being video-recorded for transcription purposes.

It is worth noting that all eligible participants agreed to the informed consent, and no participant refused to answer a question or withdrew their participation during the focus group sessions.

3.2.3 Sampling Strategy

In this study, snowball sampling was considered the best sampling strategy because each focus group was supposed to be composed of youth that are close friends. To get

access to friend groups, youth from the researcher's own personal network were contacted, at least one for each focus group. If they were willing to participate, they were asked to refer to other potential participants, all of who had to be relatively close friends of theirs.

3.2.4 Participants

A total of 33 participants aged between 16-25 took part in this study, 18 females (54.5%) and 15 (45.5%) males, across eight focus groups. In addition, an individual interview was conducted with a 16-year-old female to get necessary background information on a particular finding that emerged in the focus groups. The focus group participants ranged in age from 16-25, with an average age of 21 years ($M = 20.73$, $SD = 3.52$). Most participants were 17 and 25 years old (N=8 respectively), and there was nearly an equal amount of participants under the age of 20 (N=16) and over the age of 20 (N=17). In Iceland, twenty is another milestone age because most students graduate from gymnasium at that age and unofficially enter young adulthood whether they start their university education or join the workforce. Therefore, having a roughly equal number of participants under and above the age of twenty was important for comparison purposes. Table 1 lists the number of participants per age and gender.

Table 2: Composition of Focus Groups

Age	Number of participants	Number of females	Number of males
16	4	4	0
17	7	4	3
18	1	0	1
19	4	0	4
22	3	2	1
23	3	1	2
24	3	3	0
25	8	4	4
Total	**33**	**18**	**15**

3.3 Operationalization

Throughout the preceding chapters, the key concepts in this study have been defined and embedded in a theoretical framework. This section takes it one step further by explaining the indicators that were used to observe the key concepts in the focus groups. Before discussing this separately for each key concept, the relation between the research questions is discussed shortly.

3.3.1   Relations between the Research Questions

The main research question relates to the first sub-question because the former is concerned with *what* the sexting norms are whereas the latter is concerned with *why* they are like that. Therefore, the sub-question supplements the main one by adding an interpretive explanation to an otherwise descriptive account of sexting norms.

The main research question relates to the second sub-question because the latter seeks to explore sexting norms more in-depth by considering how they coincide or differ across contexts. Since social norms are often specific to certain contexts, describing sexting norms without acknowledging contextual differences would be a simplification.

3.3.2   Indicators of Key Concepts

Social Norms

Given the intangible nature of social norms, they were observed through the examples that the participants gave of sexting and their opinions of it as well as of the people engaging in it. This included explicit statements of opinions (sometimes prompted by the moderator) such as use of adjectives, with negative adjectives indicating that behaviour is socially unacceptable. Interactional details, such as the use of disclaimers, apologies or humour to recognize deviations from the normative, were also considered indicators of norms. The ease of coming to a shared meaning, i.e. the participants' level of agreement, was used to indicate how developed sexting norms are within the group, with higher level of agreement and less deviations indicating established norms.

Influential Factors on Norm Development

The reasons participants gave (often when prompted by the moderator) for their perceptions of differing norms were used as explicit indicators of the influential

factors on norm development. In addition, there were more latent indicators of this, such as expressions of changed opinions, which indicated the influence of the factors that led to the changed opinions.

Age

The only way to observe whether sexting norms coincide or differ across age groups was at the interpretative level by comparing the shared meanings of the respective age groups with one another. Speculations by participants about differing sexting norms in other age groups were not considered to be valid indicators of age differences in sexting norms unless the concerned age group also shared the same view. However, attributions of differing sexting norms to other age groups was used as an indicator of a socially unacceptable behaviour if it was used as a way of distancing oneself from negative connotations.

Gender

Similarly as with age, gender differences in sexting norms could only be observed at the interpretative level by comparing the shared meanings of each gender with one another. Speculations by participants about differing norms amongst the other gender were not considered valid indicators of gender differences in sexting norms unless they were also shared by the concerned gender.

Relational Contexts

Norm differences across relational contexts could be observed more directly. The examples given by participants (both by their own initiative and when prompted by the moderator) of relational contexts in which sexting occurs and their opinions of it or of the people engaging in it were used as indicators.

3.3.3 Goals of the Focus Groups

The first goal of the focus groups was to create lively group discussions that would reveal a great deal about youth's perceptions and opinions of sexting. This goal was considered to be relatively easy to achieve given that sexting is a current youth trend and a sexual activity, making it an interesting topic for youth to discuss, especially with friends and when they are not required to share personal experiences. However, given its sensitive nature, it was important to carry out the discussions in a comfortable yet seclusive setting that did not restrict the participants from expressing

themselves openly. For that reason, as well as practical reasons such as access, availability and central location, six of the eight focus group discussions were carried out in a small private school in Reykjavík whereas two of the focus groups were conducted at home due to special circumstances[2]. Importantly, because the school focuses on practical office-related computer courses, it was not considered to have the negative connotations of formality, rules, and bureaucracies like formal educational institutions (De Oliveira, 2011). The negative connotations of schools were demolished further by using a lounge area for the discussions and by offering drinks and snacks on the side. Creating this comfortable research setting was considered a prerequisite for lively focus group discussions.

       The second goal of the focus groups, given the inductive nature of the study, was to allow the participants to partially guide the direction of the discussion based on their interests and priorities (De Oliveira, 2011; Walker et al., 2013). To achieve this goal, the researcher, also being the discussion moderator adopted the 'interventionist' style, where she initially introduced the discussion theme but kept her intervention otherwise minimal to let the discussions flow naturally. Based on the recommendations by Wellings and colleagues (2000), the moderator made effort to intervene only when the discussion started wandering off and needed to be refocused or when interesting aspects had only been briefly touched upon but needed to be elaborated on. Another important consideration for the achievement of this goal was to introduce the topic in very general terms to minimize framing of it, which could limit the potential directions of the findings. Therefore, the moderator introduced the research by merely saying that it was about youth's use of cell phones for sexual activities without specifying what this entailed, e.g. what age group, relational contexts or applications it referred to. The moderator then initiated the discussion by asking the participants to define sexting in their own terms. Based on their definitions, the discussion progressed to other discussion themes. The focus group guide with the list of discussion themes is found in Appendix A. It should be noted that the focus group guide was used flexibly to fit with the discussion flow in each focus group.

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[2] One focus group was conducted at a participant's house because one of the participants was sick and could not leave the house. Another focus group took place at a house the researcher had access to because it was conducted in Akureyri, a town with around 18,000 inhabitants that is located in the northeast of Iceland, around 380 km from Reykjavík (Akureyri, 2015).

3.4 Methods of Analysis

In this section, the steps taken in the analysis are outlined. For an even more detailed account, please refer to Braun and Clarke (2000) whose six steps to analysis were followed systematically and rigorously to maximize reliability of the findings.

First, it is worth noting that the moderation of the focus groups and the verbatim transcription of the data was an excellent way for the researcher to get familiarized with the data. Already at this stage, the researcher began to notice recurring patterns. Before initiating the formal coding procedure, the researcher re-read the entire data set to get a holistic sense of it and to note down some initial ideas and potential coding schemes.

The content of the entire data set was coded manually by underlining aspects in the data extracts that seemed interesting and relevant and giving them initial codes, which were written on the paper margins. Some data extracts were uncoded whereas others had one or more codes, depending on their relevance. After working systematically through all of the transcripts, the derived codes were collated into one long Microsoft Word table, which was printed out and cut down to form small 'post-it' notes, one piece per code. Thus, the data was broken down in a literal sense in order to be rebuilt in the subsequent analytical phases.

With hundreds of small coding pieces, the researcher sorted the codes by combining ones with shared relationships into coherent themes. Having the codes on a piece of paper allowed the researcher to play around with the codes and the theme-piles. The use of mind maps was valuable at this point to get a sense of main themes and sub-themes and how they fit into the overall story to be told about the data. To be counted as a main theme, there needed to be a number of instances of the same or similar codes across the data set. Numerous accounts of the same codes within each data item (i.e. each focus group) were also considered to indicate themes, but only if there were also instances of them across the data set (i.e. across the focus groups).

After deciding on the main themes, the researcher reviewed them by going back to the transcripts and seeing if the data extracts supported them. This included looking whether the data extracts within each theme formed a coherent pattern, in other words if they were telling the same story. That does not mean that inconsistences and tensions within the data were ignored. On the contrary, the

transcripts were reviewed in order to see if the data extracts support a thematic pattern despite variations or contradictions. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), the "accounts that depart from the dominant story in the analysis" (p. 89) were maintained and reported in the results. Lastly, the transcripts were used to cross check whether the thematic map adequately represented the overall story about the data.

The fifth step in Braun and Clarke's (2006) analysis process was to name the themes. However, the themes had already been named during the process of classifying codes. Thus, this step involved reviewing whether the names captured the themes' essence. The final step was the write up of the analysis, where an analytic narrative was combined with extracts to illustrate the arguments made about the data. This included going back to the transcripts to look for vivid examples of the arguments, which showed how circular the analysis process is in qualitative research. In the following chapter, the results of this analysis are presented.

4. Results

"For some unknown reasons sexting has become the norm among youth" (Craig, 25).
This remark that sexting has become *the norm* stems from the 'everybody is doing it' perception that people in general tend to have of sexting and was shared by the focus groups participants. Although the commonness of sexting is undeniable, the following results show that sexting is more stigmatized than commonly thought. Saying that sexting is the norm merely due to its perceived commonness is thus considered misleading because even if youth perceive sexting to be common, it does not necessarily translate into sexting being *the norm*. Youth do, however, have some norms or standards of behaviour concerning sexting. The aim of this chapter is to describe, based on the findings, what these norms are and the factors that influence their development.

It is important to note that the accounts of norms and their influences are drawn from recurrent themes in the focus groups discussions that involve the researcher's interpretations. Therefore, it is acknowledged that the findings may not reflect the norms among youth in general. When the word 'youth' is used in this chapter, the intention is not to generalize findings to all youth but to show that viewpoints are recurrent across focus groups rather than the opinion of one individual or of one group. Referrals to norms among youth are thus limited to the research participants in practice but the results nevertheless give valuable insights into norms among youth in general.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. The factors that influence youth's sexting norms are divided into seven themes (see Figure 1). Despite being divided into themes for clarity sakes, it is the synergy between them that explains youth's engagement in sexting. Surely as Aristotle postulated, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The seven themes are navigated clockwise as shown in Figure 1. As technology has afforded new and easier ways of engaging in sexting, it seems only appropriate to start ticking from there.

Figure 1: Themes

36
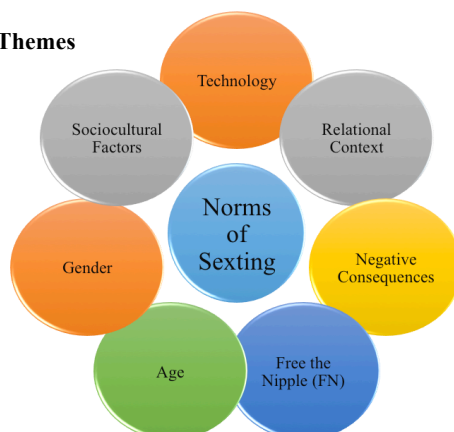
4.1 Technological Advances

Participants across the focus groups found technology, especially image-based communication tools, to be a key influence on sexting. However, the way they reflected upon this differed among the older and younger groups. The older groups (with participants aged between 22-25) reflected on this in terms of technological advances. The 25-years-old females considered themselves to be the first generation of sexting, since they were in their teenage years when MSN Messenger and webcam became popular, which were among the first tools that allowed youth to take and share photos/videos instantly. All of the older groups recalled that sexting existed at the time by referring to a story of a girl who in their teenage years became infamous for a nude photo that she sent through MSN and the receiver disseminated online against her will. After reflecting on this story, the older groups were in agreement that sexting was no different at the time; only that it was less common. They attributed the increase in sexting over the past decade to advances in technology, particularly the advent of smartphones because they afford easier, cheaper, more private and image-based communication. Attributing this kind of power to technology is called technological determinism (Smith & Marx, 1994).

Having grown up with smartphones, the younger groups had a more taken-for-granted view on technology. Therefore, they did not reflect so much on technological advances as they did on the features of Snapchat that make it ideal for sexting. These features are discussed next.

4.1.1 Snapchat

The 17-years-olds explained how they embrace Snapchat for being a more casual, less forced way of engaging. The females talked about it as a new way of engaging:

> **Rachel (17):** *"You do not have to* engage *in heavy conversations."*
> **Sarah (17):** *"Now you can exchange photos and stuff, it does not always have to be the typical: 'Hi, how are you?'"* [The others agree.]

The males also thought it was less intrusive compared to other social media platforms:

> **William (17):** *"You are not always up for talking to someone through Facebook, you know: 'How are you? What are you doing?' Snapchat is more like…you can send to anyone, you know what I mean. If you start talking to someone out of nowhere on*

Facebook then it is like: 'Why are you talking to me?' The person would think you are being intrusive."

Furthermore, these two groups of 17-years-olds mentioned that Snapchat is an open medium where everybody can add everyone, which the older ones did not. As an example, the 17-years-old females said that the whole 1998 birth-cohort in their college, around 300 people, exchanged user names on Snapchat at the beginning of the school year, with some of them adding everyone. For them, Snapchat is thus not only limited to friends, but is also used to get to know new people including prospective romantic partners. Indeed, according to the younger groups, Snapchat is the app that is most commonly used in initial dating phases. Even if contact is initiated through Tinder, the 19-years-old males said, it moves quickly to Snapchat.

The younger groups also mentioned the delete-by-default as a distinguishing feature that makes Snapchat more casual compared to other image-based social media platforms. The 17-years-old females said that youth like being able to send random snapshots of their everyday lives to others without worrying about the number of 'likes' they receive or that the content stays there forever. They said it makes them feel more comfortable and daring. For these reasons, Snapchat is arguably popular for sexting. However, youth's choice of medium for sexting depends on the relational context in which it occurs, which brings us to the second theme.

4.2 Relational Contexts

Sexting norms are highly dependent on the relational context in which it occurs, i.e. how the parties involved relate to each other. At the one end of the spectrum it is completely normal and a positive form of engagement whereas at the other end it is extremely abnormal and perceived negatively by others. Whether sexting falls on the positive or the negative side of the spectrum depends on the risks involved in each context, where trust is the key to low risks and positive perceptions. As mentioned above, the relational context is also influential on the choice of medium for sexting. Only in relationships are mediums other than Snapchat used for sexting. That is because in casual contexts where trust is generally absent, youth consider Snapchat the safest option, albeit not completely save. Therefore, sexting is divided into two types of contexts: Sexting in relationships and casual sexting. Each context is discussed below.

4.2.1 Sexting in Relationships

The participants thought sexting in trusting relationships is, in their own words, 'OK'. They also perceived it as the most common context of sexting, especially among young adults. Only one young adult disagreed, saying that he associated sexting more with single people. The others asserted that people in relationships are very likely to have engaged in sexting to tease their partners. However, in saying so, the participants were actually speculating about its commonness, at least beyond their own experiences, because it is the sexting context that is kept most private. As the participants reported, first hand experiences of sexting are not generally discussed within friend groups, and especially not if it involves relationship partners. Even the 16-years-old girls who stated that they tend to share everything with each other said they do not generally 'sext and tell'. This has to do with trust and respect for the partner that also make it less risky to engage in sexting in relationships. For that reason, other mediums than Snapchat are also used for sexting e.g. Facebook Messenger and SMS. However, the participant acknowledged that sexting in a relationship is not entirely risk-free. The 16-years-old females explained how quickly the situation can change if people break up and the relationship traits that minimized the risk vanish. They used the example of ex-partners who holds grudge and use sexting content to threaten, harass or take revenge on their former partner. Lack of trust and respect are indeed the traits that push perceptions of sexting to the negative end of the spectrum, and these traits are often absent in other contexts of sexting where the risks of negative consequences are consequently higher. Besides fewer risks, what sets the relationship context apart from other sexting contexts is that people are not subject to negative judgments for it. In casual sexting, negative judgments stem from scepticism over peoples' integrity and motives for sexting. This sexting context is discussed next.

4.2.2 Casual Sexting

The participants gave examples of casual sexting occurring between random people, people who are dating, people who are having casual sex and people who are cheating by sexting with someone outside their relationships. Several examples of casual sexting were mentioned across the focus groups, but only sexting between random people and people who are dating are elaborated on here due to repeated mentions of their commonness. It should be noted that most of the examples are based on hearsay,

meaning that none of the participants admitted doing it but based it on stories of people around them.

Random Sexting

The participants referred to two typical scenarios of random sexting depending on the motives. The first scenario is when youth voluntarily sext photos/videos to show off, and/or seek attention and compliments from others. This is normally associated with those who sext frequently and with different people, because according to the 17-years-old females, they thrive on the attention. This includes people who send unsolicited sexts to someone they are not necessarily involved with. For example, four girls across the groups reported having received unsolicited photos of male genitals, which they found shocking and unappealing. The group of 19-years-old males also reported having a mutual friend who repeatedly sends them such photos. Although they said that this behaviour is sometimes a joke among close male friends, they found it to cross the line because it occurs repeatedly, thereby leading to negative judgments.

The second scenario of random sexting is more closely related to abuse. It refers to situations where sexting is initiated with the sole intention of acquiring a photo/video for dissemination. In this regard, the group of 19-years-old males mentioned another friend who has collections of photos in his phone and between 2-3000 girls on Snapchat who he approaches randomly for this purpose. According to the hearsay, it is mostly guys who pursue this, who are often collectors of photos/videos and are likely to be part of closed Facebook groups (often under alias names) where the members share and exchange photos/videos. Barbara (25) gave an example:

> "There were 4-5 guys in 9th grade, 14-years-old, in the school I work at, who had a FB group called "The Fox" or something like that, where they collected screenshots. They enticed girls with the alleged intention to share photos of them within the group. Then someone found out about it and everyone went ballistic. I do not think this is the only school where this has happened."

All of the younger groups mentioned that guys who pursue this tend to be highly disrespectful of girls; referring to them as 'things they are working on' and treating the photos/videos as commodities. However, they as well as other groups reported that this is far from being the norm. Rather there are certain types of people who

pursue this and are consequently subject to negative judgments. Furthermore, participants of both genders and different ages asserted that this type of scenario is gendered, meaning that it would not happen the other way around, which will be discussed later.

4.2.3 Sexting in Early Stages of Dating

Overall, the participants did not perceive sexting to be an acceptable behaviour in early dating stages. According to them, it leads to changed perceptions of the person initiating it and doubts about the relationship getting more serious. If being approached randomly for sexting is a red warning flag concerning the requestor's motives and integrity, being asked to engage in sexting in early stages of dating is a yellow warning flag. The 17-years-old females said that they would immediately block the person because it is obvious what he wants whereas the 17-years-old males said they would wonder why a girl would want to sext without established trust. Moreover, the 25-years-old males said there is a thin line between what is hot and what is damaging at this stage, with innocent flirting being acceptable, e.g. showing cleavage, but sexually explicit sexts disgusting, e.g. masturbation.

Overall, one can see that sexting norms are very dependable on the negative consequences that each social context brings, albeit to a varying extent. The negative consequences of sexting are discussed in further detail next.

4.3 Negative Consequences

Throughout the focus groups, the participants mentioned three types of negative consequences: Abuse, negative judgments and emotional distress.

4.3.1 Abuse

The participants reported that at the most basic level, abuse in relation to sexting is based on unauthorized dissemination of photos/videos whether they were sent voluntarily to the original recipient or taken secretively for example during intercourse, which all of the female groups said is increasingly common.

Unauthorized disseminations of photos/videos are abuse because they are a breach of the spoken or unspoken conditions under which the photos/videos were originally sent. That is, senders of photos/videos give receivers permission to see them, but not to share it with others. In this regard, Adda (16) mentioned how important it is to realize that the sender is a victim. In cases of unauthorized

disseminations, the victim is often wrongly blamed for being stupid to send a photo/video in the first place. By putting the blame on the victim instead of the perpetrator, the victim is subject to further unnecessary negative consequences such as emotional distress and negative judgments. Therefore, there is a need to shift the blame to the perpetrators who are ultimately responsible for the wrongdoings. Surprisingly, the 16-years-old females were the only group who showed awareness of the need to shift the blame from victims to perpetrators of unauthorized disseminations. Perhaps they have direct experiences of such victimhood themselves, and hence they feel that there is a special need for this change. As to the other groups, it seems plausible that when you are not directly experiencing issues like this, you are less likely to reflect upon it.

Other forms of abuse include using sexting content to threaten, harass or take revenge. The 16-years-old females knew several examples of boys threating girls to disseminate photos/videos that they had previously received from the girls, unless they would have intercourse with them. They also mentioned one example where sexting content was used to take revenge, a phenomenon commonly referred to as 'revenge porn' by youth and media. The story was of a boy who knew the password to his ex-girlfriend's Facebook account and used it to change her cover photo to a photo of her performing oral sex before changing her password with the intention to shame her. The participants described such examples of sexting as life ruining for the emotional distress that follows.

4.3.2 Emotional Distress

Youth mentioned fear, shame, and regret as common emotional responses to sexting. Fear stems from the potential for negative consequences. A common thread among older youth who are in relationships was that their fear of sexting is not necessarily about distrusting their partner but everyone else. Craig (25) said that he does not keep photos/videos of his girlfriend in his phone out of fear of losing it and the 25-years-old females said they are afraid that the content is saved on corporate servers thus doubting Snapchat's claims. Therefore, fear is not confined to people who are at the highest risk of negative consequences (i.e. who are engaging in casual sexting). Some participants said that fear influences their decision-making process of whether to engage in sexting. As Christa (22) noted:

"I have always thought: If this goes further, if this goes online…that is why I have never even sent my boyfriend. It is enough prevention for me. I do not know why it is not enough for them [younger youth]. I think they are not mature enough."

Although fear did not seem to prevent the 16-years-old females from sexting, this claim was at least partially contradicted because they asserted that they are more careful as a result, in terms of whom they send and what they show. This speculation about maturity is further touched upon later in terms of age differences.

Regret and shame are emotional responses to sexting that stem from going against the norm that genitals should be private. In this regard, the female participants talked about gender differences, saying that males are less shameful to showcase their genitals publicly. Moreover, the older groups associated regret with age, saying that youth are more likely to regret sexting when they get older because they mature and think differently. Both gender and age differences are discussed later.

Abuse and emotional distress are undoubtedly very serious consequences of sexting. For that reason, it is no surprise that these aspects have largely caught the public attention in relation to sexting, e.g. through sensationalist media coverage of sexting leading to suicides. However, the group of 17-years-old females pointed out that due to the sensationalist coverage of sexting, the standard of what constitutes as bullying is rather high among youth. In other words, youth downgrade the seriousness of the negative consequences of sexting that they experience more commonly, such as negative judgments, because they compare it to the sensationalist stories reported in the media. As Rachel (17) explained:

"Like with bullying…if someone is mean to me, I would not think it is a big deal because I would never commit suicide because of it. Do you know what I mean? Then I think: 'OK it is not bullying, I should just toughen up' because I associate bullying with the extreme stories reported in the news but not the everyday consequences which are also serious because they can still break me down."

In this regard, they mentioned how commonly Twitter is used to harass others for their alleged wrongdoings (e.g. by slut shaming someone for engaging in casual sexting). They asserted repeatedly throughout their discussion that further discussions on such instances of harassment and bullying are needed. A closer look at the negative judgments that youth incur for sexting reveals that it is indeed a serious and a common consequence of sexting among youth.

4.3.3 Negative Judgements

The participants made a sharp distinction between themselves and people they associate with frequent and/or negative sexting, referring to them as 'certain types of people'. For example, the group of 17-years-old females repeatedly claimed that they do not sext because they are not *that* type of girls. This is a way of distancing oneself from the negative connotations of sexting.

The participants perceived people that engage in frequent and/or negative sexting to share common traits. Interestingly, some groups reported that it is sometimes unexpected people who do it, thereby implicitly suggesting that these traits are not inherent characteristics but rather a stamp that youth obtain for being involved in sexting that goes against norms.

Both males and females are subject to these negative judgements, but differently depending on their roles. With sexting roles being rather gendered, i.e. males mostly initiating sexting, females more frequently sending photos/videos, and males disseminating them, males are commonly judged as perpetrators of abuse and females slut-shamed. Figure 2 shows examples of negative judgements as voiced by participants.

Figure 2: Negative Judgements

Type of person	Negative Judgements
Girls who engage in casual sexting:	G1: Stupid.
	G2: Attention/compliment-seeking, showing-off, lacking self-respect (for giving in on pressure), having difficulties in life.
	G3: Attention/compliment-seeking, low self-esteem, seeking peer approval/acceptance, insecurity.
	G4: Attention/compliment-seeking, insecurity, seeking peer approval/acceptance.
Girls who initiate sexting in early dating phase:	G6: Dirty caliber, attention seeking, slutty, not a 'keeper'/girlfriend material, having difficulties in life.
	G7: Slutty, using the sharpest weapon to seduce.
	G8: Weird, not charming, slutty, desperate, seeking compliments, insecure.
Guys who collect	G2: Immature, mean, sad, obsessed.

photos/videos of girls:	G3: Addicted/obsessed.
	G4: Shocking, weird, something is wrong with them.
	G7: Disgusting, distorted, disrespectful.
Guys who brag:	Need to show off, seeking peer approval/acceptance.
Guys who send unsolicited photos of their genitals:	G3: Shocking, unattractive.
	G4: Shocking.
	G5: Abnormal, weird, sick, crazy, give the overall impression that something is wrong with them.

Due to these negative consequences, sexting has gathered rather unfavourable public opinion, often at the cost of the recognition of its neutral or positive aspects. Its increased prevalence, albeit far from being *the norm* has led to discussions over youth's stretched morality, that their norms are blindsided by technology and many, including the participants in this study, are concerned that technology has exceeded us. By attributing the prevalence of sexting to technological changes, the participants advocated the central tenet of technological determinism that technology is driving the development of and adaptions to social structures and norms. As these 25-years-old males asserted:

> *Craig (25): "We did not have the same opportunities as today's youth at the time" [When they were teenagers.]*
> *Moderator (25): "But what if we did have the same opportunities?"*
> *James (25): "I think we would have been the same."*
> *Craig (25): "Yes, exactly the same. We are no different from them. [All agree.] We were no different 13-years-old teenagers than they are today, they just adapted to the changed technological environment."*

By upholding such claims based on technological determinism, the positive influence it can have and the active and involved role of humans in it is easily neglected. However, Free the Nipple, a movement started by a 16-years-old female in the spring of 2015 against double standards in norms and negative sexting, is an ideal example of how the active role of individuals is needed for change in norms to occur.

4.4 Free the Nipple

All of the focus groups brought Free the Nipple up in their discussions by their own initiative for its close relation to sexting. As the moderator was first unaware of this movement, the participants elaborated on the movement's background and aims. Although the groups told a similar story, an interview was conducted with the movement's leader in order to present facts rather than hearsay. The background information is thus based on the interview whereas the experiences of it are drawn from the focus groups.

4.4.1 Background

In March 2015, the 16-years-old feminist Adda Smáradóttir started the Free the Nipple (hereafter FN) movement in Iceland, under the influence of its original American counterpart. She posted a breast photo on Twitter to object that an artistic photo of the female upper body was censored out of a college magazine. She deleted the photo 15 minutes later after her father warned her about the damage it could do to her future prospects of going to Costa Rica as an exchange student, which later became reality[3]. Yet, the 15 minutes were enough to spark controversy on Twitter although she did not anticipate that one guy's comment about her 'ugly' breasts would encourage so many Icelandic women to come in solidarity with her by posting vast amounts of breast photos on social media. For three days, FN was the centre of attention in Iceland, and reached media abroad for remarkable solidarity.

In the interview, Adda stated that the point of FN is not to be a crusade that advocates women to be always topless despite common belief, but rather to change double standards concerning breast exposure, which prevails through norms and is based on the sexualisation of the female upper body. By being topless, the movement is addressing the hypocritical inconsistency that the male upper body can be exposed publicly despite having sexual associations whereas it is a taboo for women. This is enforced through censorship on Facebook and Instagram and in some countries through legal systems. Although FN movements abroad are largely concerned with normalizing and in some cases legalizing breastfeeding in public as well as fighting against censorship, the Icelandic movement was appropriated to fit with local issues,

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[3] Within a week after the FN hype reached its peak, the exchange organisation in Costa Rica declined her application for dubious reasons.

with negative sexting being one but a big part of it. The relation of FN to sexting is explained next.

4.4.2   The Influence of the Double Standard on Sexting

FN relates to sexting in terms of harassment/revenge porn[4], which is largely based on double standard in breast exposure. Adda (16) asserted that breasts are fascinating because norms posit that they should be hidden. When making the same point, Hannah (24) used the example of her 4-years-old son:

> *"His dad is always topless and he never pays attention to it but recently he has become very fascinated with female breasts. He thinks they are so remarkable because he is not used to seeing them. If he would be used to seeing me topless, his fascination with breasts would have worn off a long time ago."*

In fact, all of the female groups discussed how this double standard is internalized from young age. Sara (17) gave another example:

> *"Little girls are being dismissed from swimming pools for being topless. 5-years old! Some parents are wondering: Why do I buy a swimsuit for my 5-years-old girl but only swim pants for my little boy? Their bodies are identical but the girl cannot be topless because she will get breasts later."*

The rationale for this double standard (that female breasts should be hidden because they are sexual) falls short in this case. Yet, this double standard has seldom been contested, with generations of children growing up thinking that it is normal because they do not know anything else. Whether the sexualisation of full-grown female breasts is due to nature or norms is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is also beside the point because even if they are, this double standard is still irrational. As stated by the younger male participants, boys most commonly sext photos of their upper bodies because girls find it most sexually stimulating. Yet, unlike the female body, the male body can be exposed publicly without sexual associations. Ultimately, FN is fighting against breasts being sexualized in every context, but it is exactly for that reason that

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[4] Adda prefers to use 'harassment porn' since the word 'revenge' is misleading because it suggests that the victim deserves to be punished. However, 'revenge porn' is most commonly used to refer to the phenomenon of misusing sexting content for violence.

breast photos carry value, which underlies the unauthorized dissemination of sexting photos/videos.

4.4.3 The Fight Against Negative Consequences of Sexting

FN has been fighting against *negative* consequences of sexting in several ways (with emphasis on negative because FN does not condemn sexting per se). First and foremost, by trying to nullify the exchange value of breast photos that are being misused as revenge porn. It is Adda's belief, and the female groups shared her belief, that repeated exposure to breasts makes possession and sharing of breast photos insignificant because it normalizes them. As Adda stated:

> *"If there are thousands of breast photos out there, it is not as remarkable to possess two others."*

Secondly, by encouraging victims of unauthorized disseminations to take control by posting photos under the name of FN that have previously been shared involuntarily. As Adda (16) explained:

> *"By posting photos under the name of FN, women were essentially saying to their violators: "Here is the photo so you cannot continue to use it against me!"*

Thirdly, by trying to take the shame away that stems from the slut shaming. FN advocates that everyone should have the right to sext without being judged and if the content is involuntarily shared, the shame should be on the perpetrator rather than the victim. Sarah I (16) mentioned how this helped her friend to cope with the regret of sending someone a breast photo.

In short, FN is trying to fight against the negative consequences of sexting by advocating changed thinking. The experiences and opinions of the focus group participants are discussed next.

4.4.4 Divergent Responses

All of the focus groups reported that they first thought FN was shocking but said that after becoming familiar with the cause and digesting it, it started to make sense. The focus groups were unanimous that FN is a meaningful and influential cause that was an eye-opener to otherwise taken-for-granted norms. However, it did perhaps have stronger influence on females, for whom FN was also about rejecting beauty ideals. For example, seeing all these photos was a realization for them how different breasts

are and that beauty ideals stemming from porn and celebrities are unnatural. As this group of 17-years-old females explained:

> **Rachel (17):** *"I remember when I saw FN on Twitter, even if I go to swimming pools and see different kinds of breasts…you know…I was still like WOW breasts are really different because I do not realize it even if I am a girl."*
> **Sarah (17):** *"Even if we do not watch porn every day it is still stuck in our heads…"*
> **Rachel (17):** *"…that we should be like this because guys want that. That is why FN was like a realization for us that we cannot be like this without having thousand plastic surgeries".*

For females, FN was also part of the equality battle; that women should have the same *choice* as men without being judged, whether it is about being topless in a swimming pool, having casual sex, or having armpit hairs. In the focus groups, it was obvious that such double standards are being contested after FN, with two examples of changed thinking coming from the youngest female group (16), the first one concerning casual sex:

> **Katherine (16):** *"I think that everyone should be able to sleep with whomever they want without being labelled because it is just sex. If you are careful and protect yourself…why not? I mean it is just about having fun, why does it have to be something you are judged for. It is one of the most basic human needs; you know it is extremely important. It is a physical need, why does it have to be something you are judged for? I use to judge girls myself for sleeping with many guys but now I am conscious about how ridiculous it is. Why is she a whore? She is not selling herself for money she is just sleeping with a guy that she wants to sleep with, what is wrong with that?"*

According to Adda, being conscious about slut shaming and the need to change it, like Katherine expressed in this excerpt, is one of the goals of FN. The 17-years-old females also indicated somewhat changed thinking by admitting that they are often too quick to judge without knowing the background story, which they said they should be careful about since photos are increasingly being taken secretively. Yet, they stated that people who repeatedly sext receive no mercy in their judgments, regardless of the circumstances.

The second example of changed thinking concerned girls having armpit hairs:

> *[Katherine takes off her sweater and Rachel S starts laughing.]*
> **Rachel S (16):** *"I am just laughing because you have hairs under your arms."*

Katherine (16): [In exasperating tone.] "I am fuckin sick! Do you really think I am thinking about shaving?!"
[Rachel S silent, looks down.]
Sarah I (16): [Shakes her head.] Girls should not have to shave in general!

For females, choice was also important in relation to FN; that they could support the cause without posting topless photos themselves. All of the females in the focus groups reported advocating the cause, but only one out of eighteen (a 16-year-old) posted a topless photo during the FN hype. The other seventeen females said they were not ready to make the move despite supporting others who did it. This points to the endurance of internalized norms. As Sofia (25) explained:

"I started wondering, when everyone was posting FN photos, why I was not up for it. I think I am still somewhat shy. It has, of course, been internalized that one's breasts are private and they should not be shown publicly. So I found it positively surprising how many women were willing to do it."

FN also had influence on the male participants, albeit less profoundly. All of the male groups admitted being more open than before about seeing topless women publicly, e.g. in a swimming pool. Moreover, despite asserting that breasts will always be sexual for them, they all agreed that it depends on the context, where attraction, trust and exclusiveness are important factors. This was precisely the changed thinking that FN was advocating, namely that breasts should not *always* be sexualized.

Adda (16): "They can [be sexualized] but it should be your choice as a woman when they are. That is what I think is so important."

However, the male participants were quite sceptical about the measures taken, saying that a lot of young girls misused the opportunity to show off and get attention. According to them, it was obvious who was supporting the cause and who was doing it for the attention by posing sexually. The two older female groups also shared this view, as Barbara (25) stated:

"You saw girls who were obviously posing and took 10-15 photos instead of lifting up their t-shirts saying: 'Here are my breasts!'"

For the male participants, the point also got lost because some photos were deleted when the hype faded, which they thought was counterproductive in the fight against revenge porn. Adda disagreed, saying that girls should have the choice whether to keep the photos online or delete them.

Despite contrasting views on the measures taken, the participants were unanimous that FN had a positive influence on sexting because it initiated awareness and critical thinking of the double standard in breast exposure. However, they also acknowledged that people's susceptibility to change differs. The 23-years-old females said they would need to get used to the change whereas they perceived it to be more seamless for the younger generations. In fact, they as well as the 17-years-old females linked susceptibility to change with age, saying that the younger you are, the more susceptible you are to it. This brings us to the next theme, namely age differences in sexting.

4.5 Age

The participants associated sexting with the teenage years, starting at the age of 13, peaking between 14-16 (the last two years of elementary school and the first year of college) and declining around 18, when youth enter young adulthood. This is an interesting finding, considering that most, if not all quantitative studies on prevalence rates show the opposite (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Baumgartner, 2013; Benotsch et al., 2013; Dake et al., 2012; Lenhart, 2009; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy & CosmoGirl.com, 2009). A plausible reason for this wrongful perception is that sexting is less visible among young adults, who are, according to the groups, more likely to be sexting in relationships. As James (25) stated:

> *"It is more private in our age. It is more common to be sexting with a boyfriend/girlfriend and less common to be sexting…well, I am single and I do not receive a lot of sexting photos on Snapchat."*

Meanwhile, sexting is more visible among younger youth because they are more commonly associated with casual sexting, which due to the higher likelihood of negative consequences tends to garner the public spotlight. The association of casual sexting with younger youth was certainly a tendency across the groups. For example, the older male groups said that guys who collect and exchange photos are younger

than them, mostly 18-years-old or younger, whereas the younger groups (aged between 16-19) associated it with even younger youth (around 13-15 years old). This was contributed to age-related traits such as immaturity. The 17-years-old groups shared the older groups' views that negative sexting declines after 18 because youth get more informed and hence wiser, start respecting themselves and others, start thinking about future prospects and change perceptions of what is 'cool'.

4.5.1 Perceptions of a Generation Gap in Norms

The older groups distinguished between two generations with a clear cut at the 1995 birth-cohort due to different attitudes and different upbringing as a result of technology advances, which according to them leads to differing sexting norms. They perceived the younger generation to be more liberal and daring when it comes to sexting, saying that it is no big deal for them because they are surrounded by it whereas they themselves find it more striking. As the following excerpts show, they repeatedly mentioned how shocking it is for them because it was not like this when they were teenagers:

> **Hannah (24):** *"We did not know what sexting was in 10th grade or first year of college. But among the 95 generation, which is only four years younger, sexting is everywhere. I think it is much more than we think and know. We would probably be shocked if we knew how common it is."*
>
> **Craig (25):** *"The generation after us, the ones born 95 and later…they are sick! You are not one of the team if you have not sent a Snapchat of you having sex [the others laugh]. Without a joke, this is sick!"*
>
> **Hannah (24):** *"I was shocked when I saw little kids on Saurlífi[5], you know, because people were posting photos of their genitals!"*
>
> **Emily (23):** *"…Because then you saw what this generation is willing to do."*
>
> **Phoebe (24):** *"Yes, we are also shocked because it was not like this among our generation. It is younger kids."*

As has been touched upon, the older groups attributed this difference to technological accessibility during upbringing. For them, the distinguishing factor is that the younger generation grow up with smartphones whereas they were already around 18-years-old

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[5] Saurlífi [Foul Life] is a publicly available Snapchat channel where youth posted photos/videos showcasing drugs, nudity, porn, and other licentiousness.

when they got their first smartphones. Their point was that even if smartphones afforded new opportunities for sexting, they were mature enough to know better than to use them in unintended ways for sexting whereas the younger generation got their first smartphones at the onset of their puberty and were consequently more likely to experiment with boundaries. Therefore, the participants considered maturity with age to be a crucial factor in terms of how youth use technology for sexting. This view is not only too technologically deterministic (although it recognizes the role of youth in experimenting with technology), but also problematic because it assumes that all younger youth but no older youth engage in casual sexting. While it may be more common among the younger, it is not necessarily the norm for them. In fact, the sexting norms between the different age groups turned out to be strikingly similar. For example, the 17-years-old females were the group that was perhaps to the greatest extent against casual sexting and the other young groups all had negative judgments of people engaging in it. Furthermore, there were several examples given by the young adults that contradicted the claim that engagement in casual sexting is age-related. Andy (25) talked about some of his soccer teammates having collections of photos; Steven (22) mentioned that some of his friends send brag-photos of the girls they are sleeping with; and Barbara (25) and Sofia (25) shared their experiences of receiving unsolicited photos of genitals from men in their mid-twenties and thirties. Moreover, the most commonly mentioned story of sexting included a 30-years-old man sending a brag-photo taken secretively of the women he was cheating on his wife with. When reflecting on this, the 25-years-old females said that sexting has more to do with personality traits than age, but as previously discussed, the participants commonly positioned people who frequently engage in sexting as being 'certain types of people'.

Overall, there were fewer differences in the sexting norms between the younger and the older groups than perceived by the young adults. Although negative sexting is perhaps more common and more visible among younger youth, it does not mean that they have different sexting norms. Similarly, even if sexting is less visible among young adults it does not mean that sexting is uncommon in that age, as studies on prevalence rates have shown. This shows the power of misperceptions when it comes to social norms.

4.6 Gender Differences

Participants in all groups stated that there are gender differences in terms of sexting roles i.e. who is the sender/receiver, and what is shown in the photos/videos. According to them, boys are more likely to initiate casual sexting, girls to send photos/videos and boys to disseminate them. The female participants asserted that girls do not generally initiate sexting because they do not have the need for it. Carrie (25) said that she does not have the need even though she is in a long-distance relationship. Moreover, Hannah (24) said that sexting is more interesting for guys because it is in their nature. In this regard, she compared sexting with porn. Although it was a shared opinion between the genders that girls normally do not initiate sexting, the male groups said that some girls still encourage sexting indirectly but wait for the boys to initiate it.

Concerning the receiving end, the 19-years-old males said that boys get away with receiving photos/videos without sending back, which the 22-25 years-old males attributing it to boys being pushy, which is touched upon later in terms of pressure. The 17-years-old females said that boys receive photos from girls because some of them feel flattered to be asked and think that sending photos/videos to guys will get them interested in further dating.

When asked why guys share or exchange photos with others, Andy (25) said it is first and foremost of social nature. He gave the example of his soccer team to explain how a certain atmosphere forms, for example in locker rooms, where testosterone is in maximum. He said that this atmosphere draws out different aspects of people, which Craig and Optimus (25) agreed on.

> ***Andy (25):*** *[In a light-hearted, joking way.] "Often there is nothing behind it. I have sometimes had dirty mouth myself in these circumstances, but otherwise I am an angel." [The others laughing.]*

It seems that in circumstances like this, boys are willing to temporarily abandon, at least to some extent, their individual mores to be 'one of the team'. This supports the finding of Strassberg and colleagues (2013) that at least in some cases, social injunctive norms, which seem to differ depending on the context, override individual injunctive norms. This is arguably attributed to social pressure because one must conform to the social injunctive norm in order to be accepted by the group.

In contrast, girls are not known to share photos/videos of guys among themselves. The 23-years-old females said that they do not have the need to show-off their sex life, which for them is something private. The only time the female groups admitted showing their friends photos/videos of boys is when someone sends unsolicited photos of their genitals because they reported feeling shocked and not knowing how to react to it. The 25-years-old females debated whether it was acceptable to show friends such photos. Rose said that it is perhaps acceptable with unsolicited show-off photos whereas Barbara disagreed. Sofia said it depends on whom the sender is, that she would never show photos of her ex-boyfriend but maybe she would do it in the case of boys that are sending unsolicited photos, which in her opinion is done with the intention to show-off. A similar opinion was observed in both of the 17-years-old groups.

It is worth noting that although guys are commonly positioned as the perpetrators of unauthorized disseminations, girls are not entirely innocent. For example, the 25-years-old females mentioned that it has become increasingly common that girls share nude photos of other girls in harassment/revenge purposes. In this regard, they referred to smartphones being forbidden now in locker rooms or around swimming pools after incidences of cyber-bullying. The 19-years-old males also said that girls are sometimes part of closed Facebook groups where photos are shared/exchanged. Yet, the 17-years-old females said it was more common for them to gossip about other girls who sext rather than to look at their photos.

4.6.1 Gender Differences in Photo Content

Gender differences in terms of what body parts are shown in photos/videos reveals another double standard in sexting norms. Girls most commonly send photos of their breasts, ass, or of their whole bodies sideways in a mirror. They are either fully naked, wearing lingerie, or covering body parts with their hands. Participants of both genders asserted that photos of genitals are very uncommon among girls, with all of the females groups saying they would never do it due to shyness. For boys, it is more common to send photos of genitals because as both genders stated, they are less sensitive to show it. Hannah (24) explained:

> *"For example, if a girl sends a vagina photo when she is drunk, she wakes up the morning after and regrets it. Whereas boys are more like…they do not really care if girls see their penises. They would not think about it for days like girls, they are more*

like: 'What do you mean, it was only my dick!' whereas girls tend to be dramatic about it."

The male groups related it to the need to show-off, especially if one has a big penis. For them it is also more normal to send such photos as jokes to friends but as previously discussed it can easily go over the line. However, even if boys do not care showing their penises, photos of their upper bodies (six-packs) are more common because according to the both genders, they are more appealing to girls.

4.7 Socio-Cultural Context of Iceland

There are several socio-cultural factors in Iceland that arguably have influence on sexting. These include social pressure, small population, liberal views on sexuality and growth in feminism.

4.7.1 Social Pressure

The participants found social pressure to be extremely high in Iceland and very influential on engagement in sexting, especially among younger youth. In this regard, they mentioned pressure from boys, peer pressure, and herd behaviour.

Pressure From Boys

The participants attributed the unequal exchange of sexting photos/videos to boys pressuring girls to send them sexts. While the younger male groups (17-19 years old) recognized that this was the case, the younger female groups had personal experiences of it. As the 17-year-old group explained, some guys do not easily take no for an answer.

> *Sarah (17): "They just say: 'Common, common!' Do not stop asking. 'I promise to not screenshot, please I promise.'"*
> *Rebecca (17): "I will send you back…" [The others agree.]*
> *Rachel (17): "Yes, 'I will send you if you send me.'"*

The 16-years-old females mentioned that some girls give in on the pressure because they think it is something they should do to get the guy interested in further dating, which suggests the influence of social injunctive norms (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). The older females reflected on the same notion:

> *Aria (24): "I think the pressure is high for young girls."*

> *Hannah (24):* "Yes, I remember when I was dating my boyfriend [when she was 15], he was straight away like: 'Send me something more exciting than this!' I think that guys are often like this…"
>
> *Alison (22):* "And that puts pressure on the girl… Then you start thinking to yourself: 'I need to send something more exciting than this because it is obviously not enough.'"
>
> *Hannah (24):* "I know there are many young girls who think to themselves: 'Maybe I send him something like this so he becomes interested in me.'"

Reflecting on their own experiences of adolescence, the 25-years-old group linked this with insecurity, saying that because younger girls have yet to fully develop their self-image and self-respect they are more susceptible to pressure.

Peer Pressure

All of the groups mentioned peer pressure stemming from both genders. The 16-years-old females said that the peer pressure to engage in sexual activities starts already in 8th grade (around the age of 13), and that youth often do it to be respected and considered 'cool' by their peers.

> *Rachel S (16):* "My friend lost her virginity 12-years-old! And there are a lot of girls in Iceland who start this early!"

When reflecting upon the reasons for it, another 16-year-old female said that the pressure starts earlier in Iceland compared to other countries such as the U.S. and Spain, which she based on her personal experiences with peers from these countries.

> *Katherine (16):* "I am not saying that girls in Iceland are more promiscuous, rather that they start having sex earlier than elsewhere due to this high pressure."

As a side note, this pressure in young adolescence might explain the commonness and the early initiation of risky sexual behaviours among Icelandic youth, evident by the higher average number of sexual partners and lower average age of sexual initiation in Iceland as well as higher rates of unplanned teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases compared to other OECD member countries (Friðbjarnardóttir, 2013).

Although the participants commonly associated peer pressure with younger youth, there were also examples of it among the older groups. One of them occurred in the group of 22-24 years old females when some of the girls were sharing sexting experiences in their relationships:

Christa (22): "I have never sent anything sexual, not even to my boyfriend…I'm not joking! I am obviously super lame, I should change that!"

Similarly, all of the male groups mentioned that guys often pressure girls to sext and/or disseminate photos in order to gain status among their peers and be accepted by the group. As one of older males stated:

Steven (23): "You do not want to be the only one who does not receive any sexts from girls."

Several groups also discussed the unintended peer pressure that formed around Free the Nipple. The biggest controversy surrounding it was that young girls were being peer pressured into posting photos, which was the very opposite of what the movement was aiming to achieve. As one of the older females explained:

Barbara (25): "What was missing in relation to FN was to encourage young girls to form their own opinions, so they were not only posting because all of their friends were doing it."

The males aged 17 and 25 also shared this view, saying that a lot of young girls only participated because everyone was doing it rather than for the actual cause. This type of herd behaviour is discussed in further detail next.

Herd Behaviour

Some groups talked about herd behaviour, which refers to people engaging in behaviour because 'everybody is doing it'. They perceived it to be especially prominent in Iceland due to the small population where everyone knows everyone and hearsay spreads fast. As the 25-years-old females mentioned, it was positive in the case of Free the Nipple in the sense that it took minimum effort to create solidarity for the movement nationwide, whereas it can have negative effect in terms of pressure. As Christa (22) explained:

"Sexting has become so common that girls who are too scared to do it are almost forced to do it because someone says to them: 'Oh well, you must have ugly breasts then or no breasts', so girls feel like they need to prove themselves."

In cases like this, the pressure is so strong that it becomes closely related to bullying.

4.7.2 Small Population

Iceland's small population may also have influence on sexting. Even more so than speculated, the participants reported that they know nearly everyone their age. This has to do with the small population as well as the open nature of their social media use, and especially Snapchat, as mentioned earlier.

> *Katherine (16): "OK in Iceland…teenagers know everyone, you know almost always who someone is because it is such a small country."*
> *Sarah (17): "Social media is of course very open for us, everyone has everyone on there. You have like hundreds of people on Snapchat." [The others agree.]*
> *Rebecca (17): "And because of that you also know people in other towns around the country."*

In comparison, the 22-24 years old females said that during their teenage years, MSN was limited to peers in their neighbourhood and maybe the popular kids in the surrounding neighbourhoods.

> *Aria (24): "But today teenagers know almost the whole country."*
> *Hannah (24): "Teenagers today have like 4-5000 friends on Facebook and most of them are people they hardly know."*

Surely, this increases the chances of being approached for casual sexting, but it also means that the word of someone sexting spreads fast, especially if it involves a scandal. This was apparent across the groups, with all of them mentioning the same sexting scandal. Even if it does not involve a scandal, youth tend to know who is engaging in sexting because they hear it from others. As Katherine (16) explained:

> *"What often happens is that a group of people are talking about some girl and then some guy in the group says: 'Hey I have a flashing photo of her!' and then everyone is like: "Can I see?" and then he shows it to everyone. I know at least 20 examples of this at the top of my mind!"*

In sum, it is hard to be secretive about sexting in Iceland, regardless of whether the photos/videos go viral or not. The older female groups said that this is enough to prevent them from engaging in sexting and they did not understand why it does not stop others from doing it. Based on the focus groups, it does not seem that the reason is not lack of awareness since all of them demonstrated knowledge of the negative consequences. Rather, it seems that the pressure to impress someone or be

approved by a social group weights higher. Amongst other things, this pressure stems from liberal views on sexuality in Iceland, which is discussed below.

4.7.3   Liberal Views on Sexuality

Liberal sexual views in Iceland were also mentioned as being influential on engagement in sexting. For example, the 17-years-old females said it is not considered an issue to hook up with someone, especially if alcohol is involved. Other examples, as previously mentioned, include the young age of initiating sexual activities and the right to have sex without being judged. Katherine (16) argued that Icelandic youth are far more liberal in these matters than other countries. The 17-years-old females made a similar comparison to countries where women's sexuality is taboo due to religion, but Iceland is one of the top atheist populations in the world according to the Global Index of Religion and Atheism (WIN-Gallup International, 2012). This may partly explain the liberal views toward sexuality.

Liberal views towards women's sexuality may also be influenced by the prevalence of feminism in Iceland. Many of the groups asserted that women's equality battle is far ahead in Iceland than in other countries, which dates back a century. For example, this year celebrated the 100 years of women's suffrage, with Iceland being one of the first countries that allowed women to vote. Iceland also had the first democratically elected female president in the world that served as a head of state longer than any other female worldwide to date (1980-1996). Lately, feminism has become even more prevalent in Iceland, with FN being a good example. The participants considered it to be a trendy topic, and based on their reactions to FN, they seem to be highly influenced by it. According to the 17-years-old females, it was an eye-opener on feminism, which previously had negative associations for being radical:

> ***Sarah (17):*** *"There was a negative image of feminism. When you were a kid you thought feminists were crazy lesbians with hairs under their arms who wanted to be like guys…"*
> ***Anna (17):*** *"What I find quite interesting is that recently I asked my fellow classmates whether they are feminists. I was curious to see how they would react and it surprised me that almost everyone said yes."*
> ***Rachel (17):*** *"But few years ago they would have said: 'No way!'"*
> ***Sarah (17):*** *"Yes, even two years ago it was different."*

This is in line with Ásta Jóhannsdóttir, a doctoral student in sociology, who presented the findings of her doctoral research recently in a forum on feminism and the impact of FN at Bifröst University. She said that during the two years of her research (2012-2014), she witnessed a turn in young women's position on feminism (Jónsson, 2015). Before, young women separated themselves from the so-called radical feminism, whereas two years later they embraced it and considered it empowering. She attributed this change to increased awareness of, and public discussion on gender equality and gender issues. She also talked about new generation of feminists who are more critical than their predecessors, which she based on the increase in movements such as FN (Jónsson, 2015).

The participants talked about how the increased awareness of the double standard in norms goes hand in hand with the current developments in social media and sexting. Phoebe (24) argued that the only positive outcome of the developments with social media and sexting is that the increased social media use has led to increased transparency and information flow while the negative consequences of sexting have sparked the need for change, as in the case of FN. In turn, movements such as FN can have positive influence on sexting, as Barbara (25) mentioned:

> *"I think that it is definitely having positive influence on sexting, and then negative sexting because sexting does not need to be negative, of course. These two go hand in hand, there is a mutual influence. Definitely, that is what I think."*

The broader theoretical and policy implications of the findings are discussed in the conclusion chapter that follows next.

5. Conclusion

This study has been concerned with explaining Icelandic youth's engagement in sexting by looking at the social norms they apply to sexting. The strong and consistent influence of social norms on engagement in sexting has been supported in quantitative studies (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Sasson & Mesch, 2014). Yet, no study to date has been primarily concerned with investigating through qualitative means what these social norms are and what influences their development. Amongst other things, it has not been certain whether youth are complying to or breaching social norms by engaging in sexting. Furthermore, only a handful of studies have explored the topic from youth's perspectives, which is surprising seeing that sexting is a youth trend and research on sexting is meant to inform prevention strategies targeted at youth. The aim of this study was to address these two gaps in the literature. In doing so, this study focused on Icelandic youth as the country's small population and the ensuing lack of anonymity among inhabitants provides an excellent opportunity to explore the influence of the broader socio-cultural context on sexting norms.

Theories on social norms were used to explain their influence on sexting. First, compliance to norms was explained by the innate need for group belonging and fear of social sanctions for deviating from the normative (Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2014; Burchell et al., 2013; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Secondly, by using the social norms theory (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986; 1987), youth's engagement in sexting was interpreted as being based on misperceptions that 'everybody is doing it'. The participants in study did indeed perceive sexting to be common, particularly among youth that are amidst puberty. However, they also indicated that sexting is more stigmatized than commonly thought. This suggests that youth do not blindly sext because 'everybody is doing it'. Rather, their decision to engage in sexting is subject to considerations of more complex influential factors than merely commonness. These factors are discussed next to form an answer to the first sub-research question, namely: *What factors influence the development of sexting norms?* Thereafter, the differences in sexting norms are discussed to form an answer to the second sub-research question, namely: *How do sexting norms coincide or differ across age, gender, and relational contexts?* Collectively, the answers to these two sub-questions form an overall answer to the main research question.

5.1 Influential Factors on Sexting Norms (SQ1)

The participants in this study considered the main influence on the development of sexting norms to be technology, thus advocating a perspective that could be labelled as technological determinism. This is problematic since this view assumes that technology changes people's lives, almost as if it forced sexting upon youth rather than that youth appropriated the opportunities afforded by technology in unintended ways to satisfy their needs.

Free the Nipple contradicts the technological determinism by showing how the active role of people is needed for changes in norms to occur. It also shows that sexting does not only have detrimental outcomes as among other things, it has initiated awareness and willingness to change the wrongful double standards in gender norms concerning women's breast exposure; beauty standards; and the negative judgments incurred for exploring one's sexuality. Despite contrasting views of the effectiveness of the measures taken, Free the Nipple seems to have influenced sexting norms among Icelandic youth. It may not have put an end to harassment/revenge porn altogether, but it helped at the minimum in taking the victim shame away.

Moreover, Free the Nipple indicates the important influence of the socio-cultural context. Participants explicitly stated that the movement, along with other socio-cultural factors such as increased prominence of feminism in Iceland has influenced their perceptions of what is normative regarding sexting. Although feminism may not be specific to Iceland, the way it plays out in Iceland is quite unique. For example, participants mentioned several times how the remarkable solidarity behind FN would not have been achieved abroad in such a short time. They attributed this to herd behaviour, which is perceived to be more distinctive in Iceland than in other countries due to the small population. However, such a form of social influence can also have negative consequences as it easily leads to heightened pressure to engage in behaviours, whether it is posting topless photos in the name of FN or sexting. The commonness of casual sexting despite that it is stigmatized suggests that social pressure is one of the main influences on Icelandic youth's engagement in sexting. This is discussed next in terms of the applicability of the social norms theory.

5.1.1 The Applicability of the Social Norms Theory

The rationale for employing the social norms theory in this study was that it recognizes the role of peers in influencing youth's behaviours (Berkowitz, 2005). However, it only recognizes indirect peer influence through perceptions of social norms. Based on the findings, the argument goes that peer influence on engagement in sexting is more direct than the social norms theory postulates. That is, youth also engage in sexting in response to pressure rather than merely due to perceptions of its commonality among peers. This finding casts doubt upon the effectiveness of focusing primarily on the social norms theory in prevention campaigns on sexting. Rather than concerning themselves with correcting perceptions about the commonness of sexting, it seems advisable that prevention campaigns direct their attention to diminishing the peer pressure that so often leads to sexting. The policy implications of the findings are discussed further next.

5.1.2 Policy Implications

The social relevance of this study has been to provide a qualitative account of sexting from youth's perspectives that can be used to inform prevention strategies and policies that reflect youth's concerns. This is considered a much-needed input because the existing studies on sexting were, due to their quantitative nature, based on presumptions stemming from the public discourse that did not address youth's primary needs or concerns. For example, along with the previously discussed presumption based on the social norms theory (i.e. that youth engage in sexting due to the misperception that 'everybody is doing it'), there was a presumption that awareness of the legal ramifications of sexting deters engagement in sexting (Leary, 2008; Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013). However, the prevalence of sexting despite apparent awareness of negative consequences (Baumgartner, 2013), a finding that is supported in this study, suggests that the focus on negative outcomes is not very effective as a discouragement. In fact, it has recently been shown to have the forbidden-fruit effect (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker et al., 2013). Moreover, by focusing on the negative outcomes, prevention campaigns have been communicating to youth that sexting in itself is wrong without recognizing the positive aspects of it. This is likely to be ineffective because youth would not engage in sexting without any potential benefits. Instead, prevention campaigns should recognize that there are some positive aspects to it, and make it clear that what needs

to be prevented is only the negative aspects of it, not sexting in itself. Amongst other things, this involves shifting the responsibility for wrongdoings from the victims to the perpetrators, so that youth perceive "…breaches of consent, rather than sexual expression itself, as the problem in need of remedy" (Lippman & Campbell, 2014, p. 383). For that to happen, youth need to make a conscious change to stop blaming and slut-shaming victims of unauthorized disseminations. As the results showed, Free the Nipple was instrumental in creating awareness of the need for this change, and it had arguably more positive influence on sexting than any prevention campaign to date. One could argue that it resonated so well with youth because peers initiated it based on their own concerns rather than those of parents or institutions, which suggests the usefulness of peer education on sexting.

5.2 Differences in Social Norms (SQ2)

The second sub-research question was concerned with how sexting norms coincide or differ across age groups, gender, and relationship contexts. First, the results showed that the sexting norms differ depending on the relational contexts in which it occurs. Sexting in relationships is considered a socially acceptable behaviour whereas casual sexting is stigmatized. The instances of casual sexting that are marked with stigma include sexting with many different people, sending unsolicited photos of genitals, and sexting explicit content in early dating phases. Trust is a key factor for sexting to be acceptable because the lack of it (i.e. in casual sexting) increases the potential for negative outcomes. The relational context also influences the choice of medium for sexting, with Snapchat being considered the safest medium for sexting. Due to trust, relationships are the only context in which other mediums than Snapchat are used for sexting.

Secondly, the results showed gender differences as to what the genders consider normative to show in photos/videos. For example, it is more taboo for girls than boys to show their genitals, which is attributed to internalized double standards in gender norms. The findings also showed gender differences in the way youth engage in sexting. For example, sexting roles are seemingly gendered, with boys being more likely to be perpetrators and girls the victims of abuse. However, it is important to note that it does not translate into differing norms between the genders as to what is socially acceptable sexting behaviour. That is, even if boys are more likely than girls to disseminate sexting photos, they do not necessarily perceive

unauthorized disseminations normative rather than their female counterparts. Instead, differing social norms are limited to a certain group of people.

Similarly, the results showed no profound age differences in sexting norms across the groups. The older participants argued that the younger generation has differing sexting norms because they are more daring and engage more commonly in casual sexting, which they attributed to immaturity and different technological upbringing. However, it did not seem to translate into differing norms as the different age groups were relatively unanimous as to what is socially acceptable sexting behaviour. Furthermore, the older participants' association of casual sexting with younger youth was contradicted by several examples of adults engaging in casual sexting.

Overall, in terms of age and gender differences it is argued that differing social norms, i.e. where negative instances of sexting are considered socially acceptable, are confined to personality traits rather than age or gender. In this study, the participants commonly referred to people who engage in casual sexting as being 'certain types of people'. Along with negative judgments, it was the most obvious indication that casual sexting goes against the grains of sexting norms.

5.3 Limitations

Several limitations of this study require mentioning. First, because the research was based on a qualitative method, the findings cannot – and are not meant to be – generalized to *all* youth. However, this is not problematic seeing that no studies on social norms are generalizable due to norm variance across social groups (Hall, Baym, & Miltner, 2014).

Secondly, there were an unequal number of female and male participants, with 54.5% females and 45.5% males, which may have put limitation on the gender comparability. In general, it is harder to recruit male than female participants to studies on sex-related topics (Walker et al., 2013), and it is acknowledged that the focus group format may have discouraged males even further from participating. Yet, the focus groups are not considered a limitation to the study since participants of both genders were content with the focus groups, describing the discussion as fun and interesting. Some of them also mentioned that they particularly liked doing it with friends because it felt more like they were having an ordinary conversation rather than being interrogated by the researcher. The level of openness in every focus group also

suggested that the participants felt at ease during the discussion despite the sensitive topic. Therefore, the unequal number of males and females is considered a minor disadvantage of using focus groups in comparison to its advantages.

Thirdly, the study did not include youth aged between 14-15, which according to the participants is the most common age of sexting among Icelandic youth. The reason that this age was not included in the sample was that existing studies (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2012) found sexting prevalence to be lower among minors (10-17 years old). This finding was thus rather unexpected. A plausible explanation is that the average age of sexual initiation is lower in Iceland compared to other OECD member countries (Friðbjarnardóttir, 2013), which may also apply to other sexual activities such as sexting. Therefore, the suggestion for future research is to include this age group, at least when the research units are Icelandic youth.

Fourthly, the sampling criteria of including only friend groups in each focus group contributed to an uneven number of participants per focus group and uneven distribution of participants across different ages. First, it was difficult to control for an even number of participants per focus group since the friend groups themselves differ in size. Therefore, the choice had to be made to either keep the size of the friend groups as they were (with one group consisting of three people, five groups consisting of four people respectively, and one group consisting of six people) or add other people outside their closest friend circle to contribute to an even number of participants per focus group. The latter was not considered a good idea since this contradicted the rationale behind including only close friends. Secondly, it was hard to control for an even distribution of participants across ages because in some cases, someone was older than the rest of his/her friend group. This explains, for example, why there was only one 18-year-old participant in this study. However, this is not considered problematic since there was nearly an equal distribution of participants under 20-years-old and over 20-years-old, which is the age where the participants perceived to be a clear generation gap.

Fifthly, given the sensitive topic under discussion, potential social desirability must be acknowledged. Despite the measures that were taken to minimize it (i.e. discussing sexting from a third-person perspective with close friends), the participants may have felt the need to give socially desirable answers for at least three reasons. First, they may have felt shy or ashamed to express their honest opinions because they were afraid how their friends would react to it. Secondly, at least some of the

participants in each group were familiar with the researcher, and may thus have felt uncomfortable sharing their opinions of sexting. Thirdly, they may have been concerned about traceability, especially the participants under 18 whose parents were aware of their participation in the study. For example, since there was only one group of females aged 16, the four girls may have been aware that their parents could easily track down their answers by reading the results.

Sixthly, the potential influence of the discussion moderator must be acknowledged. The moderator made all efforts to allow the participants to guide the direction of the discussion and to intervene only when necessary. This went well in the sense that the moderator managed to limit personal opinions and experiences while still appearing to be part of the discussion rather than merely an observer, which was important in order to keep the ordinary feel of the conversation. However, when looking at the transcripts in retrospective, there were a couple of times where the moderator could have allowed the discussion to continue further without stepping in. The reason for the intervention was that sometimes there were some previously mentioned aspects that the participants had only briefly touched upon before moving on to other aspects. By asking the participants to elaborate more on the previously mentioned aspects, however, the researcher inevitably limited the elaboration of the other aspects that were mentioned right before the interruption. Some of the 'lost aspects' were automatically brought up later on the discussion but others were not because they did not seem relevant to the moderator at the time. This highlights the importance of entering a focus group discussion without preconceived notions about what is relevant.

Lastly, sexting is constantly in flux, both in terms of social circumstances and the technology that supports it, which is likely to have implications for sexting norms (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). The changes in the participants' perceptions of sexting after Free the Nipple are a good example. Therefore, if the data collection would have taken place three months earlier, i.e. before the movement was initiated, the results would have been different. Moreover, as the older groups recalled, the state of sexting was different before the advent of smartphones and new technologies are likely to afford increased opportunities for sexting in the future with subsequent changes to the practice. Therefore, this study should be considered a snapshot of sexting at a certain point in time. Yet, certain factors such as social influence will always remain

influential on sexting so this research still contributes to an understanding of the phenomenon for years to come.

5.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Some suggestions for future research have already been proposed in relation to the limitations of this study. However, there are others suggestions that bear mentioning.

Generally speaking, research on sexting may benefit from further qualitative inquiries from youth's perspectives. It was the younger participants' opinion that older generations still have limited knowledge of sexting, which they based on comparison between their own experiences and the discussions they hear in the public discourse. The older participants, despite being less than ten years older, even considered themselves to be unfamiliar with the state of sexting among younger youth. Based on these observations, it seems that academia has yet a long way to go to a full understanding of this complex phenomenon.

Secondly, it may be beneficial to explore sexting further from perpetrators' perspectives, including their motives for doing it. This could inform effective prevention strategies that aim to discourage unauthorized disseminations. No participants in this study admitted engaging in negative forms of sexting, which may be attributed to the heightened social desirability of being in a group setting. Thus, such inquiries should be conducted through one-on-one interviews or even written questionnaires to minimize social desirability.

Lastly, this was the first qualitative study (to the author's knowledge) to consider the influence of socio-cultural context on sexting norms. Although the influence cannot be confirmed without quantitative measures, it seems that it holds some explanatory power, with Free the Nipple being a good example. At the minimum, its influence is worth further investigation. Particularly, the comparison between two or more socio-cultural contexts could yield interesting insights as to whether the sexting norms coincide or differ across countries.

5.5 Concluding Remarks

Based on the research findings, it is the author's opinion that the picture of sexting has been painted too negatively in the public discourse. There are undeniably some negative aspects of sexting that need to be dealt with through prevention campaigns and even by setting laws that deal specifically with unauthorized disseminations.

However, this investigation of youth's social norms suggests that their morality is no different from the older generations, especially considering that they are initiating movements against wrongful double standards in gender norms. Rather, the reason for these changes in sexting practices is that youth, similarly as adults, are still adapting to the increased opportunities afforded by technology. In this regard, their propensity to experiment with sexual boundaries as a natural part of their sexual development needs to be taken into consideration (Baumgartner, 2013). This is not to justify the developments of the negative aspects of sexting but rather to point out that they are not set in stone as being normative. Therefore, it is the author's belief that negative aspects of sexting can be demolished with peer education prevention policies that focus on the *minority* of youth that go against the grains of sexting norms. This is arguably a better approach than trying to deter youth from sexting because sexting does not have to be negative.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Guide

Time Schedule

Preparation - 15 minutes prior to the focus group session	Moderator sets up the table and chairs (if needed), sets up the camera, puts drinks and snacks on the table, and makes sure there are enough informed consent forms and pens on the table.
Informal Welcoming Session - 10 minutes	After the participants arrive, there is a 10-minute welcoming session with informal chats. The participants are offered drinks and snacks. Once all the participants have arrived and settled in, the moderator moves on to the introduction.
Introduction – 5-7 minutes	The moderator introduces the research in very general terms, as well as the aims, expectations, and rules of the discussion. The participants are asked to show their understanding and agreement of the information presented to them by signing an informed consent form, and to come up with their own pseudonyms.
Discussion - approximately 40-60 minutes	The moderator initiates the discussion by asking the participants to define sexting, using their own vocabulary and frameworks (see Definition Activity), which is used as the basis for the discussion (see Discussion Themes).
De-briefing and farewell – 5 minutes	The moderator summarizes interesting aspects of the discussion, provides clarifications of the research if requested, and adds some personal notes. The participants are also given the opportunity to ask questions and give comments.

Definition Activity

This activity is important to ensure that the moderator and all participants establish a common ground concerning the definition of sexting, which is used throughout the

remainder of the discussion. It is also important that the participants come up with their own meanings of what sexting is and what it entails. This is seen as a nice way to warm up to the discussion as everyone can answer these questions easily.

The moderator poses the main question first and only poses the sub-questions if prompting is needed, that is if the group is quiet or if the whole scope of the definition has not been explored:

- How would you name and describe the phenomenon that in English is called "sexting"? (Walker et al., 2013).
    - What type of content do such messages contain?
    - Through what mediums are such messages sent?
    - Who are exchanging such messages?

Scenario Activity

Several researchers (Benotsch et al., 2013; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Drouin et al., 2013) have highlighted the importance of exploring sexting from different relational contexts as the nature of the relationship influences the prevalence, motivations and risks (Drouin et al., 2013). This activity is based on Drouin et al.'s (2013) argument that relational contexts should be at the forefront of focus group discussions. The participants are asked to give examples of contexts in which sexting occurs and reflect on the differences between them. The value of this activity is that the participants are likely to draw upon existing stories they know, which gives insights into real-life cases of sexting among Icelandic youth.

- Can you give examples of young people sexting? (Walker et al., 2013)
    - Can you explain it in more detail?
        - Who is the sender, who is the receiver, and how do they connect?
        - What are they sending?
        - Through what medium do they send it?
        - What motivates them to do it?
        - Are there any benefits of doing it, and if so, whom do they concern?
        - Are there any risks involved, and if so, whom do they concern?
- Do you think there are any differences in sexting depending on the context in which it occurs?

- For example, depending on how the parties relate to one another?
- Do you think there are more risks in certain cases than others? If the answer is yes: Why?

Discussion Themes

The following list of discussion themes and example questions are used in concurrence with the activities listed above. Their use depends on what has already been covered throughout the two activities.

- The prevalence of sexting among Icelandic youth
  - How common do you think sexting is among Icelandic youth?
  - What do you base your estimations on?
  - Why do you think sexting has become so popular? (Alternatively, if they say that it is not that common: Go to questions about the media hype over sexting.)
- Attitudes towards sexting within the friend group
  - Do you talk about sexting within your friend group? (If yes: what are you discussing?)
  - What are your attitudes towards sexting as a friend group?
  - Do you think that your attitudes are different from other Icelandic friend groups of the same sex and age? What about friend groups of the opposite sex?
- The motivations for sexting
  - Why do you think young people are sexting?
  - Do you think males and females have different motivations?
- Influence (if any) of the socio-cultural context of Iceland on risks
  - Do you think sexting is different for young people in Iceland than in other countries?
  - Are there any societal factors in Iceland that make it more risky to engage in sexting here than elsewhere?
- Sexting in the media
  - Are you aware of media coverage on sexting in Iceland?
    - (If so): What do you think about it?

- - Do you think it represent what is going on/is it a fair representation?
- Adult concerns over sexting
  - o Are adults concerns over sexting legitimate in your opinion? Is sexting something parents need to worry about?
- The gendered nature of sexting (use of these questions depends on whether the participants touch upon it)
  - o When boys ask girls to sext photos of their body, do you think it carries value for them?
  - o When boys receive sexts from girls, do you think it carries value for them?