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'Have you seen queer people? We are so hot': Understanding the Experiences of LGBTQ+ People Who Engage in Sexting, Re-Negotiating Identity & Examining Nudes as Digital Phenomena

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Experiences and Outcomes of LGBTQ+ People Who Engage in Sexting Online: A Qualitative Study

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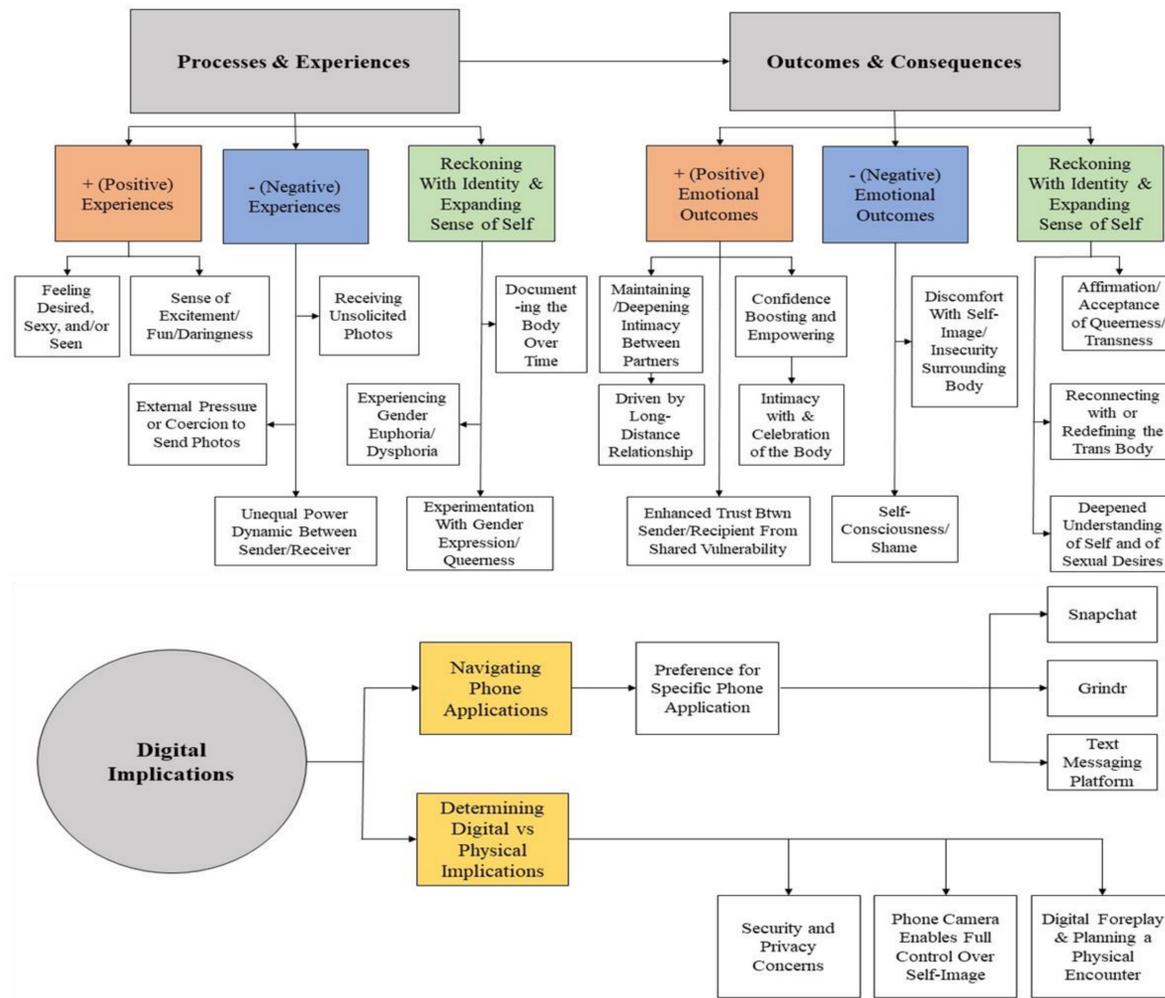


Introduction

The current qualitative study explores a diverse group of LGBTQ+ adults' experiences with sending and receiving erotic images. This digitally mediated practice of exchanging sexually-charged or revealing images of one's body via messaging platforms or online dating apps is colloquially referred to as sending a 'nude' or 'sext,' and its use within younger, heterosexual populations has been the focus of much research (Hasinoff, 2015; Mandau, 2019; Parker et. al, 2013). Little is known about queer populations who sext, despite these communities often developing unique relationships to their bodies and identities, as well as navigating phone-based social networking applications that target specific subsections of the LGBTQ+ community (Feinstein et. al., 2012).

The present study considers the experiences of 90 queer-identifying adults to understand (a) the common experiences and outcomes of those in the LGBTQ+ community who have sent and/or received explicit images and (b) their perspectives on the phenomenon of explicit message sending and receiving. Of particular interest was investigating the ways in which image-base sexting functions within LGBTQ+ digital spaces as it pertains to one's self-image, body, and sense of place within the queer community. Analysis of sending and receiving of explicit images within queer communities drew on theoretical frameworks provided by Davis' (1983) distinction between erotic and everyday reality, Verbeek's theoretical understanding of the smartphone as a highly personal artifact and an extension of the self, and CPM theory's privacy management system as a dialectical set of rules and expectations for disclosure, boundaries, and protections.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes Visual Flowchart



Negative Experiences

Negative experiences with sexting were less commonly articulated by participants, yet many touched on instances of receiving **unsolicited photos**, **facing external pressure and coercion** to send photos (either from a specific person or from a perceived social expectation), and navigating an **unequal power dynamic** between the sender and the receiver.

- “I feel like you're SUPPOSED to send nudes on apps like Grindr, when that might make some people feel uncomfortable or pressured to do things.” – Max, a 21-year-old white gay man
- “the sending/receiving creates a power dynamic that often leaves the sender of the picture vulnerable... [it] feels to me like a relinquishing of too much personal power” – Annie, a 24-year-old white bisexual woman

Reckoning With Identity & Expanding Sense of Self

Several participants, particularly cis people, expressed that the experience of taking nudes enabled them to **experiment with their gender expression** in ways that were both expansive and limiting. Taking nude photos also allowed some trans participants to document their bodies over time, particularly if they were on hormone therapy or had undergone gender affirmative surgery.

- “if a guy has indicated that he's a top or a bottom on his profile, that definitely affects the types of photos I send... I have photos that make me look more feminine, are in more "bottom" poses, focus on my butt or are me in lingerie. And I have photos that give off that I'm more of a top: dick picks, picks of my chest/abs, flexing my arms.” – Will, a 22-year-old white bisexual man

Outcomes of Sexting

Positive Emotional Outcomes

Many participants in committed relationships ($n = 37$) frequently engaged in sexting because it allowed them to **maintain or deepen a sense of shared intimacy**. Participants also frequently highlighted gaining a sense of confidence and empowerment, allowing them to find new intimacy with and celebrate their body in entirely new ways.

- “Sending and taking explicit photos helps me immensely in embracing my queerness, but also my body. I've been plus size my whole life, and have often thought I wasn't going to be sexually attractive to people, so when I send a picture and someone loves my body (but doesn't fetishize it), I feel genuinely really appreciated and special.” – Austin, a 20-year-old white pansexual nonbinary person

Negative Emotional Outcomes

Experiencing body insecurity and discomfort with self-image was the most commonly shared negative outcome of sexting – participants remarked that the act of taking a photo of the naked body felt almost like a confrontation. Others felt that the process of exchanging photos brought on intense feelings of self-consciousness and shame, largely due to cultural taboos and internalized prejudices.

- “I feel insecure about my own body when I send an explicit photos, because I feel ugly, but I want people to want me” – Maria, a 20-year-old Hispanic lesbian woman
- “There's always a little element of internalized misogyny and homophobia. It's hard to shake the ways we were raised.” – Jenna, a 24-year-old white lesbian woman

Reckoning With Identity & Expanding Sense of Self

Many participants ($n = 27$) expressed that the act of taking and/or sending nudes was an **affirming demonstration of their queerness or gender identity**. Sending nudes provided some with the perfect arena to ‘test-run’ their sexual identities in a relatively safe and anonymous fashion. Several trans participants ($n = 13$) expressed a particularly meaningful reconnection or redefinition of their bodies through the camera lens, using it as a tool of affirmation.

- “Somehow sharing photos and intimate moments with a man via a screen has helped me to accept how and who I am attracted to.” – Amy, a 39-year-old Asian bisexual woman
- “My gender identity has been reaffirmed in sending pictures. Being able to see a bulge in my boxers with my packer is really, really great. It makes me feel at home in myself.” – Leo, a 21-year-old white trans man

Conclusion

Queer people who sext encounter a widely varying degree of experiences which skew towards a generally more positive group perception, with most participants finding sexting an empowering, exciting, trusting, and/or intimate act. The most widely endorsed theme came from the aspect of sexting which made participants feel desired as the target of someone else's attention, suggesting that queer populations are often unable to locate a sense of their own desirability and sex appeal and instead find a meaningful (if temporary) substitute in the attention of another. These findings indicate that queer people are allowing the act of taking a nude to bring new flexibility and possibility into their self-concept. These findings also revealed how much expectation queer people regularly hoist onto their physical bodies. Sexting is inextricably connected to the body and all the complications of identity that accompany it.

References

Method

A total of 90 queer-identifying adults who had previously sexted were included in the sample. These participants were recruited using a combination of snowball sampling, referral, and targeted placement within various online groups. Participants anonymously answered a series of open-ended questions using **Qualtrics**, an online survey platform. **Thematic analysis** of open-ended survey questions was used to examine participants' positive and negative experiences and outcomes with sexting, including experiences which forced participants to reckon with their sense of self.

Description of Sample

Of these participants – who could select multiple labels to describe their identities – 15 (16%) identified as lesbian, 27 (30%) as gay, 35 (39%) as bisexual, 31 (34%) as queer, 14 (15.5%) as pansexual, 2 (2%) as asexual, and 9 (10%) as something else or ‘questioning.’

35 participants (39%) were cisgender men, 29 (32%) were cisgender women, three (3%) were trans women, five (5.5%) were trans men, 12 (13%) were nonbinary or genderqueer, and five (5.5%) identified as something else, noting that they were still “figuring it out,” “questioning,” or simply “queer.” 68 (75%) participants were white, six (7%) were Hispanic, seven (8%) were Black, three (3%) were Latino/a, three (3%) were Asian, and three (3%) were something else (Arabic or Ashkenazi Jewish). 40 (44%) were single, 33 (37%) were dating, 15 (17%) were partnered but not married, six (7%) were married, five (5.5%) were polyamorous, and two (2%) reported that they were something else – relationships they described as “talking to someone” or “monogam-ish.” Participants ranged in age from 18 to 61 years old ($M = 24.5$, $SD = 7.85$), though the sample heavily skewed younger: of the 90 total participants, 70 of them (78%) were fell between the ages of 18 and 24, while the remaining 20 (22%) were spread evenly between the ages of 25 and 61.

Findings

Experiences While Sexting

Positive Experiences

In highlighting their positive experiences with sexting, over half of participants ($n = 53$) agreed that a primary motivating factor for sexting was based in **feeling desired, sexy, and/or seen by someone else**. These participants reframed sexting as a deeply interpersonal act of craving, and subsequently receiving, attention and desire. Many participants also found the taboo and transgressive nature of sexting to be itself an allure that made the experience **exciting, fun, and daring**.

- “getting the feedback from so many people about how ‘sexy I am’ or how much they want me is kinda validating” – Dylan, an 18-year-old Black gay man
- “It made me feel a little scandalous... but that was part of the excitement” – Eli, a 28-year-old white trans man