Digital communication between pleasure and danger: a feminist reading of youth sexting

Comunicación digital entre el placer y el peligro: una lectura feminista del sexting juvenil

Martha Erika
Pérez Domínguez[1]

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6809-0143

This paper explores a form of digital communication among young people that arises with the cheapening of digital technologies and the emergence of the Internet: *sexting*. Based on a qualitative methodology and a gender theoretical approach, it explores the forms of experience and significance of this practice in young people aged 15 to 19, from two Mexican cities. It is concluded that sexting must be understood as a collective practice, not individual, inserted in a framework of gender relations and, therefore, power relations. It seeks to contribute to the understanding of a new and scarcely studied communicative phenomenon in Mexico.

KEYWORDS: Sexuality, gender, youth, digital culture, sexting.

Este artículo explora una forma de comunicación digital entre jóvenes que surge con el abaratamiento de las tecnologías digitales y la emergencia de Internet: el sexting. *A partir de una metodología cualitativa y un enfoque teórico de género, explora las formas de vivencia y significación de esta práctica en jóvenes de 15 a 19 años, de dos ciudades mexicanas. Se concluye que el sexting debe entenderse como una práctica colectiva, no individual, inserta en un entramado de relaciones de género y, por tanto, de poder. Busca contribuir a la comprensión de un fenómeno comunicativo nuevo y poco estudiado en México.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Sexualidad, género, jóvenes, cultura digital, sexting.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the practices that has recently emerged with the cheapening of and access to mobile digital technology is *sexting*, which has been defined as the exchange of images or text with sexual content (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011), as well as the practice of creating, sharing and forwarding sexually suggestive, nude or semi-nude images via mobile phones and/or the Internet (Lenhart, 2009). In Mexico, sexting has generated interest and concern from the government and civil society organizations, from which campaigns have been launched to curb this practice, as well as to raise awareness among young people about the risks it entails. For example, a government official said in 2016: "sexting is a latent threat because it starts as fun but can end up in a serious situation that gets out of control and produces social, physical, psychological, but also legal consequences" (Meraz, 2016). On the other hand, voices have emerged from activism that sees sexting as an opportunity to explore sexuality and the self-construction of subjects, "for the first time in history we have in our hands the possibility of representing ourselves from our own point of view, not being an object but a subject" (Ruiz Navarro, 2016). These tensions around sexting are reflected in social research on the subject; while some authors conceive of it as an expression of freedom and sexual agency (Hasinoff, 2013; Karaian, 2012) others understand it as another form of oppression and objectification of young women's bodies (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015).

In this paper I propose to understand sexting as a practice that combines learning, pleasure, regulations and codes that are lived differently being a man or a woman. I present and analyze some narratives that give an account of how young people between the ages of 15 and 19 live and think about sexting, what are their motivations for doing it, and what possibilities for agency and change in sexual and gender regulations this practice entails.

Understanding how young people experience and give a sense to digital forms of sexual communication requires a qualitative research approach that focuses on the meaningful experiences that subjects construct in interaction.

METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

The work presented here is the outcome of a broader investigation which purpose was to explore the sexual and gender experiences and meanings of young Mexicans. To do so, a methodological strategy was developed based on discussion groups, interviews, and online behavior observations among young male and female students in private and public high schools in Morelia and Mexico City. The combination of these techniques allowed me to construct different types of data: from the discussion groups it is possible to access to collective patterns of meaning (Bohnsack, 2004), the notions of common sense shared by young people.

The interviews reveal the actors' universe of meanings (Guber, 2008) through verbal narratives, but also the elements that can be observed in the interaction with the interviewee. Finally, the observation of online behavior (Hine, 2013) allowed me to complement the information by accessing the digital social world in which they interact and present themselves.

A total of six focus groups were held in Mexico City and seven in Morelia; 21 interviews were conducted in Morelia and 13 in Mexico City. In addition, 65 young people were contacted via Facebook.[2] Following the logic of grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), the information collected in the field was systematized and codified to be analyzed according to the categories of theoretical analysis, but

---

[2]　The field work was done in Morelia from August to December, 2016, and in Mexico City in two stages: from February to June, 2017 and during January, 2018. Participants were contacted through their high schools, with permission from the authorities to work with their students. First, discussion groups were held with young people who were invited by the teaching staff, and their participation was voluntary and consensual. The groups ranged from 8 to 12 participants. Of those who formed the groups and agreed to participate in the individual interviews, a selection was made to be interviewed, seeking a balance between men and women, and between people who defined themselves as heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals. Digital contact was established with those who agreed to connect in this way.

also with those constructed in the field and the subjects participating in the study.

SEXTING STUDIES

Sexting is a recent practice, so there is relatively little research on it, and it is mainly done in the United States and Europe. In these contexts, research has been mostly quantitative, guided by interests such as measuring the prevalence of this practice (Klettke, Hallford & Mellor, 2014; Strohmaier, Dematteo & Murphy, 2014), the demographic characteristics of those involved in it (Associated Press & MTV, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Lenhart, 2009) or the risk factors associated with sexting (Dir & Cyders, 2015). These studies are based on closed questionnaires which, while they allow the dimensioning of the phenomenon, they do not take into account the shades and contexts of the experiences. On the other hand, they often overlook the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the subjects' actions. Moreover, they do not take into account the network of relationships in which young people are embedded.

Qualitative research seeks to address these weaknesses and contribute to a deeper and more complex understanding of sexting. However, it is even less widespread. Little is known about the specific ways in which young people engage in this practice, the meanings they attach to it, and the different experiences, contexts and relationships that shape it. In the United States, some European Union countries and Australia, qualitative research has been conducted to explore young people's perceptions and experiences of sexting. Some studies have concluded that for young people this practice is experienced as "fun", "pleasurable" (Burkett, 2015; Lippman & Campbell, 2014), as an experimental phase in sexuality, prior to physical relations (Burkett, 2015; Lenhart, 2009); it is perceived as safer because there is no risk of infection or pregnancy (Stanley, Barter, Wood, Aghtaie, Larkins, Lanau & Överlien, 2016; Yeung, Horyniak, Vella, Hellard & Lim, 2014).

In Mexico, the only effort to address this phenomenon at national level is the "Cyberbullying Module 2015", which is part of the National Survey on the Availability and Use of ICTs in Households (National

Institute of Statistics and Geography [INEGI], 2017). Although it is not a study on sexting per se, it does include information on two types of online aggression that were defined as: 1) harm from posting embarrassing, false or intimate information, reported by 3.2% of respondents; and 2) receipt of videos or images with sexual or aggressive content, which affected 9.7%.

In addition, the report *La violencia en línea contra las mujeres en México* (Online Violence Against Women in Mexico), prepared by some NGOs (Luchadoras, 2017), provides a typology of thirteen attacks on women online. One of them is the dissemination of personal or intimate information without consent. This report calls for a distinction to be made between sexting, which is defined as "the taking of photographs and/or videos of erotic or sexual content and their exchange through mobile phones in a consensual and free way among the persons involved" (Luchadoras, 2017, p. 31) and child pornography or sexual extortion. This distinction is important from an activist point of view because it allows for the delimitation of responsibilities and avoids the stigmatization of those who participate in sexting. However, for social research it is necessary to understand it as a complex practice in which multiple actions (such as asking, creating, sharing, forwarding, etc.) are linked in a framework of power and gender relations, as well as to problematize the idea that sexual content is shared in a consensual and free manner.

SEXTING FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

The emergence of the Internet and digital media has shifted the feminist discussions that marked the second wave[3] around the objectification and sexualization of women's bodies. For some authors such as Bosch (2011), the sexy images that young women share also express a stage of

---

[3] I refer to the second wave according to the American classification, because while the American authors place the first wave in the suffragette movement, some Iberian authors place it in the Enlightenment. Vindications were related to sexuality, health, reproduction and criticism of stereotypes of femininity.

agency in which they resist hegemonic discourses of femininity and the image considered socially acceptable.

For his part, Hasinoff (2013) proposes to understand sexting as a form of media production through which young women produce their sexuality. She suggests to explore the possibilities that the Internet and digital devices offer to young women and to ask, for example, if mobile phones can help them be more assertive and safe in expressing their sexual needs and desires, or if producing their own pornography can challenge the sexism of the commercial media industry. In the same vein, Karaian (2012) states that the culture of porn, among which she identifies sexting, is here to stay. She calls for recognition of a new generation of young people and adolescents who have embraced sexual images, and their right to digital sexual expression and agency.

These approaches refer to a practice of sexting in which ideally the sexual content that young women produce and share is kept in a closed circuit and within the framework of consensus, freedom and mutual respect. However, other authors (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015) demonstrate through empirical research among young people that this is not always the case. They point out that the forms of interaction in digital environments are an extension of the meanings, experiences and interactions of young people in non-digital space:

> Young women face the same problems in online and offline spaces. Online practices often reproduce the dominant discourses of sex, race and gender found in offline spaces (Fraser, 2009, p. 63).

In this sense, digital practices such as sexting are framed in the same context of gender inequality as other non-digital sexual practices.

Following McRobbie's (2009) and Gill's (2007) approaches to the post-feminist context in which young women's and girls' self-cosification is presented as an expression of sexual freedom, value and pleasure, Ringrose, Harvey, Gill & Livingstone (2013) see sexting as a tool for regulating young women's bodies and sexuality. As a practice that intensifies a network of relationships in which female body parts are understood as the collective property of others, to be inspected and

regulated; "images of young women's bodies play a role in a system of peer review, in which males can be more highly valued the more images of girls they possess" (p. 312). For young women, on the other hand, sexting occurs in an area of ambiguity, while being asked for a photo or video is read as a sign of desirability, sending it carries the risk of being morally judged. These investigations challenge the assumption that sexting is an expression of sexual agency, which is exercised in a free and consensual manner.

However, in order to understand what sexting is like for the young people who participated in the research, it is first necessary to define it. The definition of this practice is different according to the objective of the research or the interests of those who study it. For example, while quantitative studies have developed narrower definitions of sexting to enable measurement, activist groups distinguish sexting from pornography, and some legislation defines it as a crime.[4] In general, these definitions leave out the multiple forms that the practice takes, as well as the complex web of relationships, experiences and meanings in which it is embedded.

> From a qualitative research approach, rather than a specific practice, sexting can be understood as a wide range of practices that may include boys asking for pictures of girls in bra, bikini or naked breasts, etc. The practice of sexting includes the following: boys claiming to have such pictures on their phones; girls and boys sending sexually explicit messages through phones or the Internet; negotiating sexual advances on digital devices; accessing and circulating pornography on phones; and using sexually explicit pictures on Facebook (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012, p. 24)

This definition, which is the one adopted for this study, allows us to understand sexting in a broader way, as a series of practices inserted into a network of gender and power relations, involving different actors and motivations, as well as types of content and circulation paths.

---

4   Article 180 Bis of the Criminal Code of the State of Chihuahua, http://www. congresochihuahua2.gob.mx/biblioteca/codigos/archivosCodigos/64.pdf

Among young people, however, *sexting* is not a term used. During the field work, I noticed that it is more an adult discourse that comes from the educational campaigns of government and school organizations and instances.

Asking them about sexting caused initial confusion. Sometimes they corrected it with the term used by them: pack,[5] nudes[6] or simply "photos", because the context is what defines what kind of content they are referring to: "Nobody says sexting, it's more how they say it, like 'send me a picture of you' or so, you know what they are talking about" (W, 1st, private high school, Mexico City)[7].

The fact that young people do not use the term *sexting* is relevant, as it speaks of at least two different views of a phenomenon. Adult concern for a youthful experience that is often unknown leads to discourses that make little sense to the actors themselves. For the purposes of this research, this practice is named as sexting, but recognizing that young people do not name it this way.

On the other hand, it is not the same to create and send a photo as to ask for it, exchange it or resend it. These differences are related to the fact that sexting is not a neutral practice that occurs outside the network of gender and power relations in which young people are inserted. Two key differences in the sexting experience are gender and age. The vast majority of those who ask for photographs or videos are men, while those who receive such requests are women. This is consistent with what has been found in other research on youth sexting around the world (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012; Ringrose & Harvey 2015). Moreover, men generally make these requests of women younger than themselves, since, as we shall see, it is easier to convince them than young people of their age or older.

––––––––––
[5]   *Pack* refers to a package of photographs or videos with sexual content.

[6]   *Nudes* is a term for visual content that includes nudity.

[7]   I will identify the narratives with an M or W to refer to either a man or a woman, as well as 1st, 2nd, 3rd, for the school grade. In Mexico, high school is the upper middle level of education, preceding university studies. Generally, one enters high school at 15 years of age and has a duration of three one-year school cycles.

She was in sixth grade, but it was like that if an older guy talked to her she would fall in love and so on. And one time a 19-year-old guy asked her for pictures and he sent her pictures to convince her and then she sent him a video of herself masturbating. And then he sends it to a friend, but that guy already sent it to that WhatsApp group and in that group are my classmates and the whole school had it. I knew it because a friend named Emilio got it. And he told me that there are, like, groups of guys where they pass on pictures and videos. Like, "I'll pass this picture of this girl and you can pass me another one". And then one day Emilio lent me his cell phone and I checked it out and it had about three hundred photos of girls from all the schools in Morelia, like nudes, videos, in bathing suits, naked, and it was like "what the heck?". I mean, all of them, and he told me: "if you ever get a picture of a naked girl, send it to me because I'll exchange it for others" (W, 1st, private high school, Morelia).

W. In my generation the guys are like the "secunenas"[8], because they are younger and they are more attractive and so on.
M. Yes, high school guys who take advantage of middle school girls, that's very normal nowadays, that literally they laugh about it and say it openly (Discussion group, 3rd grade, private high school, Mexico City).

The first time I was asked for a picture it was by an older boy, he asked me for things I didn't understand, I didn't like it. I didn't even know what a photo like that was, he sent his friends to ask me for the photo, and also the psychological advantage because he was older (W, 2nd grade, private high school, Mexico City).

In these narratives it is possible to observe how the experience of sexting is different according to where one lives, that is, according to the place one occupies in the network of relationships that form the context. In the interviews and discussion groups, the idea of "older people" being more popular often emerged; being older means a better status, because they have knowledge, experience and a wider scope for doing things that younger people do not yet have.

---

8   "Secunenas", word composed of "*secundaria* (middle school)" and "*nenas* (babes)".

W. If you're invited to an older people's party, it's like "wow", because
that's what makes you popular, when the grown-ups talk to you.
W. Or if you talk to everybody, that's kind of cool.
W. Yes, that they talk to you, that they invite you to their parties
(Discussion group, 1st, private high school, Morelia).

It's always that, for example, in elementary school you see the middle
schoolers as "ah, they're more grown up and go to parties with alcohol",
and in middle school you see the high schoolers and it's like "ah, they
already smoke marijuana" and it's like "oh my god, they're doing grown up
things" and girls like that a lot, with men I don't know how it is, because
I'm not a man (W, 2nd grade, private high school, Mexico City).

As the latter story points out, the unequal position between the older
and younger people is reinforced by the gender gap. Women tend to
be attracted to the older youth, who have a more "mature", "more in
control" attitude. This situation is an advantage for boys, as they know
that if they ask a younger girl for an image, they are more likely to
convince her than a girl of their age or older.

So we see that one feature that makes a difference in the sexting
experience is age. Another is gender: men and women have different
motivations for engaging in sexting.

WHY DO WOMEN SEND NUDES?

The vast majority of the experiences around sexting that were known
were from women who, responding to a man's request, sent photographs
or videos. Three main reasons for sending this type of content were
identified from the young women's accounts:

1. In the context of an affective relationship, as a sign of love or
trust:

I don't think it's wrong to send photos, whether sending the photo to your
boyfriend because you love him a lot or to your friend because you love him
a lot, it's fine, it's finally your body and you do it because you love him (W,
3rd grade, private high school, Mexico City).

2. By "lack of self-esteem", the desire and pleasure of being recognized as sexually desirable:

> Is just that someone tells you that you are very pretty, and they want more and "what a beautiful body" and "I love you" and I don't know what else, and you do it, just because of self-esteem, is something that hits you there (W, 3rd grade, private high school, Mexico City).

3. Threats, blackmail, coercion:

> W1. A friend, when she had broken up with her boyfriend, he threatened that he would divulge her naked photos. Now they are married, and she is forced to return to him. [Why did she send him the photos?] Because he asked her for them, and a woman always follows the man's lead.
> W2. Even more when she loves him.
> W3. Sometimes the girl is attached to the guy and he wants to leave her and she does it as a way to attract him and not let him leave her (M, Discussion group, 3rd grade, public high school, Morelia).

Based on the girls' narratives and for the purposes of analysis, these three motivations for sexting were identified: as an expression of a feeling within the framework of an affective relationship, as a form of feeling pleasure and recognition, and by coercion. However, as we can see from the testimonies, there are no pure motivations for doing so. Frequently they are a mixture of this three or of circumstances and emotions that operate in a structure of inequality between the genders, which is reinforced by the idea of romantic love linked to the subordination and submission of women to men. On the other hand, several of the young women interviewed resort to the discourse of "lack of self-esteem" as an explanation for their decision to send photographs. Behind this idea influenced by the psychological discourses of self-help (Illouz, 2007), there is a recognition of the pleasure that supposes to be recognized as attractive, to receive masculine approval and to affirm one's own beauty through the glance of the other.

So the decision to send photographs or videos is often in a blurred and ambiguous space between pleasure and coercion in an indirect or subtle way. As Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone and Harvey (2012) point out,

few young people wish to be excluded from the forms of flirtation and games of sexual exploration that are typical of youth culture; many girls send photos or videos "under pressure, but voluntarily; they choose to participate, but because they cannot choose to say no" (p. 7).

WHY DO MEN ASK FOR, FORWARD AND COLLECT NUDES?

Regarding men, the reasons that stood out for asking, receiving, collecting or forwarding this content, were: fun, morbidity, curiosity and ego.

> I'm not going to lie to you, but I've done it before, like, not me, but they've sent me packs. But I do not do so as to see it live and in full color, like it is not the same. It has happened to me with friends only, with whom there is some confidence. More than anything, for her to share some pictures with you is the worn-out talk, as a teacher said in middle school, it's the way you start treating her and saying things. First you start saying "you are very pretty" and then you start saying "you have a great body" and that's how the vibe starts and you get to a point where you say "send me a pack" and she says "no, get out of here!" and then you start stirring up things so that she sends you a pack and in the end she does (M, 3rd grade, public high school, Morelia).

> My cousin, he thinks he's so gallant and that he can handle anything. On Sunday we made a bet, I told him that I would give him 200 pesos if he got a pack, he said yes, but that I should lend him my Facebook account. In about half an hour he got five. [How did he do that?] He starts talking to them and halfway through the conversation he says, "What, you're not going to send me your pack?" And first they say no. And he says, "why?" –"No, send me yours first" and he sent it, but it wasn't his picture, but one he got off the Internet. And that was it, they sent him pictures. In another one, he made like a challenge of "choose a heart from 1 to 15 and do what it says", and so on. All the hearts were pictures of some part of your body or so, and he came out in his underwear[9] (M, 3rd, public high school, Mexico City).

---

[9] A common practice among those who participated in this research is "challenges", which can be submitted via Facebook or WhatsApp. It is like a game in which someone sends other people a private message setting out

As we see in the stories, a central aspect in men's experience of sexting is that it is a fundamentally collective practice and always in relation to other men. The photos they obtain are shared or shown to their partners with whom they comment on and qualify the young women's bodies. There is a constant circulation of images or videos through the digital media. As one young man points out: "they ask for the photos to show them, nobody asks for photos just to keep them for themselves and to see them alone, it's so that others can see that they have them" (3rd, private high school, Mexico City). Ringrose and Harvey (2015) observed this in their research and state:

> The digital circulation and discussion around images of girls intensifies a form of networked relationship in which female body parts are understood as the collective property of others to be inspected and regulated in complex ways (p. 209).

This way of collectively appropriating their female partners' bodies is a new way of performing masculinity. According to Segato (2016), masculinity is fundamentally collective; men seek validation from their peers through tests of heterosexuality, tests that imply an exercise of appropriation of women's bodies, which should otherwise be public. In sexting, young men appropriate girls' body images and show them to their peers as proof that they are heterosexual, that "they are gallant and can do anything", as one of them pointed out. Furthermore, through the collective exercise of looking at the photographs, qualifying the body parts, "talking about the girls by denigrating them, saying what part of

----

challenges. In the case of this story, the challenge was to choose a number, each number corresponding to an instruction that only the sender knows. Each number corresponded to a challenge: "send me a picture wearing underwear", "send me a picture with my name written on your chest", etc. Some challenges are kept private, while others involve making the response public. The practice of photographing a body part on which someone else's name has been written has been called "zing" on some Internet sites, but it was not called that by the young people with whom it was worked, so the term is not used here.

their body you like" (M, 3rd grade, private high school, Mexico City), the "brotherhood" of masculinity is strengthened. In sum, asking for, forwarding and collecting photographs of girls functions as a means through which young men can affirm their masculinity.

On the other hand, the most valued content among them is the one which comes from women they know in person, where you can see their face or elements that identify them. For example, the challenges that circulate in social media, in which the images of the young women must have the name of the boy who makes the request written somewhere on his body. One young woman explains it this way: "It's like morbid-interest, because they know them, because if it were only to see naked women, it's very easy, you can find porn anywhere" (W, 2nd grade, private high school, Mexico City).

The fact that young men strive to obtain images of their female partners in a context where millions of videos and photographs of naked women can be accessed with a click tells us that for them sexting is not just about the desire to see naked female bodies. There is also a dimension of power in this practice, since, taking up Segato (2016), through the symbolic appropriation of their female partners' bodies, they can prove their power and be validated by their peers. However, the fact that it is a form of power exercise does not mean that it is not pleasant. As Kennedy (2016) points out, in our patriarchal society, there is an "eroticization of male domination" which makes practices that reproduce forms of domination pleasant for both men and women.

On the other hand, this contrasts with the efforts by some civil organizations to raise awareness among young people and educate them to engage in "safe sexting", as one of their recommendations is to hide the face and any identifying marks. If, as we see, that is precisely what is attractive, this recommendation does not have much echo.

Not only the motivations for requesting, sending and forwarding a photograph are different for men and women, but also the consequences of doing so. Institutional or adult discourses often emphasize the more dramatic risks of this practice such as suicide, depression or prison. However, the risks that adults can see in sexting are not necessarily the same as those that young people identify. This is why it is necessary

to listen to them and understand how they live and understand these problems.

In general, those who participated in the research recognize sexting as a practice that involves risks. However, there are also differences by gender. For men, engaging in sexting carries a minimal degree of risk. Whether they ask for, send, display or just receive photos or videos, they often do so without major consequences. This has to do with the collective nature of the practice, which allows responsibility to be diluted and makes it difficult to identify who initiated the circulation of the content.

> A first grader sent a video in which you could see everything, a friend showed it to me, but they all had it. It was a huge problem, the parents arrived, they said something about the police and that they would expel her. [And the boy who sent it, did they do anything to him?]. No, it's just that they didn't know who she sent it to, they all had it. I don't know if they knew and didn't say anything, I don't know (W, 3rd grade, private high school, Morelia).

On the other hand, there are fewer cases of men sending photos or videos of their own bodies, and those who do it, face some consequences such as being made fun of by their peers, but their masculinity, or their value as a person, is never questioned.

> In my middle school it did happen [that a man sent photos]; some friends opened a profile as a woman, posted photos they found on the Internet and added a friend of mine. And they talk to him so on, and sent him a pack, but it was all fake and he believed it and sent them pictures of him too, of his penis, to be clear. And they sent those via WhatsApp to all our friends. It was a lot of fun, he did get angry, but then he got over it (M, 2nd grade, public high school, Mexico City).

All the people who participated in the research expressed that sexting is riskier for women than for men. The greatest risk they identified was "being burned", that is, being labeled as a "whore". This "reputational risk" (Burns, Fitch & Tolman, 2011) works as a collective sanction to

control female sexuality. To be burned is to be publicly recognized as someone who transgressed gender norms that assume a contained, not visible, female sexuality. In addition, "the figure of the whore" acts as a regulatory horizon for all women, not only for those who violated the norm, since they all learn what is wrong to do at the expense of those who are sanctioned for doing so (Jones, 2010).

To a lesser extent, another risk they pointed out for women who participate in sexting is a sanction by family or school authorities, which may include sending them to a psychologist, suspending them or expelling them from school.

We see then that sexting is a set of practices that involves different actors, motivations, types of content, routes of circulation. It is not a practice that takes place on neutral ground and has the same meaning for all the people involved. It takes place within a network of gender relations, that is, of power relations.

In general, it is men who ask for, forward, comment on and collect photos or videos. For them it is a collective practice through which they can perform their masculinity and obtain validation from their peers. Women, on the other hand, send photographs seeking approval from their male peers, motivated by the desire to feel recognized as attractive and sexually desirable. It is also an individual practice and loaded with moral values. Proof of this is that in the discussion groups no young woman admitted to sending photos, while in the individual interviews they did. The men, on the other hand, admitted having asked for photos both in the discussion groups and in the interviews. Finally, for the girls it is a practice that occurs in an ambiguous terrain, as Vance (1989) states, female sexuality is characterized by a constant tension between pleasure and danger.

Young women face contradictory gender mandates: between the prescription of moderate, restrained sexuality and the mandate of self-objectification, of enjoying an open and active sexuality. At the same time, there is the ever-present risk of "being burned" or sanctioned for failing to comply with these norms. But in this context, is it possible to speak of agency and resistance, of ways to negotiate, reverse or reconfigure the relationships and dynamics that constitute sexting?

EXPRESSIONS OF RESISTANCE

Although sexting is a common practice among young people, not all of them are involved in it. In most of the cases I met, women said they refused to send photos or videos, while others pointed out that they had sent content found on the Internet, thus evading the request of their partners.

> Guys you don't know start talking to you, and everything's fine, they say "hello" and it is ok, and then they say, "how about sending me some pictures?" And I've always said "no, go and ask someone else, I'm not like that". Then, a little while ago I got a message in Snapchat and the guy told me that he was from Mexico City and that I was very pretty and very sexy, that's why he added me and I don't know what else. And the next day he asked me to send him pictures and I said "no, you're very wrong about me" (W, 1st, public high school, Morelia).

> When I have been asked, I look on the Internet for any picture of anything, a meme, anything, and I send it. [And what do they tell you?] Nothing, they stop bothering you (W, 1st, private high school, Morelia).

However, due to the collective character that sexting has for men, it is much more difficult for them to resist or reverse the dynamics that are configured around this practice, since doing so implies being excluded or attacked.

> Well, you do know that it's wrong and that we shouldn't do it, and I, for example, have never asked for pictures and never would, but they do reach me, the truth is that they reach you, in WhatsApp's groups it's constantly about photos or "look, I have this pack" or, even if they are not known, all the time it's about sending photos of naked women. And you can't say "hey, don't send that to me" either, because you don't, I mean, it's like you just let it go (M, 2nd, public high school, Morelia).

> It has happened to me a lot, that in the classroom there is a group watching something like this on the cell phone and I arrive and tell them something, I

tell them that it is wrong and they always say to me like: "hey, pick up your penis", or "oh what a sissy, what a sourpuss" or things like that (M, 3ʳd, private high school, Mexico City).

As shown in the second story, refusing to participate or pointing out that it is wrong is read by others as weakness, lack of masculinity, and so on, yet some do.

CONCLUSIONS

Concerning to sexting, as with any other youth practice, it is necessary to recognize the way in which people involved understand and name their practices. To avoid, as Reguillo warns (2000), imposing judgements from an adult viewpoint that leads to the analysis of phenomena with categories and concepts that are insufficient to understand such an experience. In this sense, the qualitative perspective is very useful to approach a deeper understanding of sexting, which, based on the voices of those who live it, gives an account of its nuances.

Moreover, it is necessary to understand it as a collective practice, not an individual one, inserted in a network of gender and power relations, and within the framework of a specific social context; to recognize that experiences around sexting are different according to gender, age, resources available to deal with pressures or threats, among others. Thus, for example, sexting will not be the same experience for a man as for a woman, nor for a thirty-year-old woman as for a fifteen-year-old. Thus, we can highlight the diversity of experiences and avoid judging sexting as if it were a homogeneous practice.

Considering these differences and based on what was found in the field, this paper wanted to explain how sexting can be part of the process of erotic body learning for young people (Jones, 2010), through which they incorporate norms, values and regulations around sexuality. It is a recent practice, which arises with the incorporation of digital technologies into everyday life, and which reflects the post-feminist context of which Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2009), among other authors, speak. In other words, in sexting we can see how conservative norms, ideas and values operate around sexuality, as well as the

mandates of sexual freedom, self-objectification and the disposition to pleasure. These contradictory norms fall most heavily on women, who find themselves on an ambiguous terrain between the desire and pleasure of being recognized as sexually attractive and the danger of being sanctioned for doing so. For men, on the other hand, sexting is a new way of performing masculinity. Getting images of their partners is proof of manhood, while forwarding them and commenting on them strengthens their collective character.

In this scenario it is problematic to speak of sexting as an expression of autonomy, freedom, challenge to sexism or sexual agency, as Hasinoff (2013) states. Returning to Mahmood (2001), agency is not only resistance and confrontation to an external power, but the possibility of change, negotiation or arrangements within the same system. Sexting would then be an expression of agency if it were a practice that, inserted in a network of power and gender relations, allowed subjects to experience their sexuality with the always open possibility of change and negotiation. This does not happen, once young women send their images, they lose control over them, the margin of action and negotiation they have over this is minimal and, on the contrary, they are usually socially punished.

Furthermore, there are efforts from some schools and civil organizations that seek to promote "safe sexting". The aim is to instruct young people in the use of digital safety tools and strategies to create and share sexual content in a safe manner. They recommend using applications that send encrypted content, not using public WiFi networks, not sending content that shows faces, etc. Although this knowledge is necessary and very important, it often does not make sense to young people, who often use WiFi in their school or public places, and as we saw, one of the characteristics of sexting among young people is getting photographs or videos of known women.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that many of the experiences narrated refer to the years when they were in middle school. They even pointed out that "in middle school it was more fashionable, now almost nobody does it anymore" (M, 2nd, private high school, Mexico City); so, it is necessary to investigate how these dynamics of power and pleasure operate among the youngest.

Bibliographic references

Associated Press & MTV. (2009). *Digital Abuse Survey, Executive Summary*. http://www.athinline.org/pdfs/MTV-AP_2011_Research_Study-Exec_Summary.pdf

Bohnsack, R. (2004). Group discussion and focus group. In U. Flick, E. Kardof E. & I. Steinke (Eds.), *A Companion to Qualitative Research* (p. 214-221). SAGE.

Bosch, T. (2011). Young women and 'technologies of the self': Social networking and sexualities. *Agenda*, *25*(4), 75-86. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2011.630579

Bryant, A. & Charmaz, K. (2007). Grounded theory in historical perspective: an epistemological account. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* (p. 31-57). Sage Publications. http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781848607941.n1

Burkett, M. (2015). Sex(t) Talk: A Qualitative Analysis of Young Adults' Negotiations of the Pleasures and Perils of Sexting. *Sexuality & Culture*, *19*(4), 835-863. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-015-9295-0

Burns, A., Futch, V. & Tolman, D. (2011). "It's Like Doing Homework" Academic Achievement Discourse in Adolescent Girls' Fellatio Narratives. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *8*, 239-251. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-011-0062-1

Dir, A. L. & Cyders, M. (2015). Risks, Risk Factors, and Outcomes Associated with Phone and Internet Sexting Among University Students in the United States. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *44*(6), 1675-1684. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0370-7

Fraser, V. (2009). Sex, sexuality and cyberspace: Inter-secting queer spaces on and offline. In D. Riha & A. Maj (Eds.), *The Real and the Virtual: Critical Issues in Cybercultures* (pp. 57-66). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848880122

Gill, R. (2007). Post-feminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *10*(2), 147-166. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898

Guber, R. (2008). *El salvaje metropolitano. Reconstrucción del conocimiento social en el trabajo de campo*. Paidós.

Hasinoff, A. A. (2013). Sexting as Media Production: Rethinking Social Media and Sexuality. *New Media & Society*, *15*(4), 449-465. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812459171

Hinduja S. & Patchin, J. W. (2010). *Sexting. A Brief Guide for Educators and Parents*. Cyberbullying Research Center. https://cyberbullying.org/Sexting-Fact-Sheet.pdf

Hine, C. (2013). *Virtual Research Methods*. SAGE.

Illouz, E. (2007). *Intimidades congeladas. Las emociones en el capitalismo*. Katz Editores.

Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía-INEGI. (2017). *Encuesta Nacional sobre Disponibilidad y Uso de Tecnologías de la Información en los Hogares*. INEGI. https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/dutih/2017/

Jones, D. (2010). *Sexualidades adolescentes. Amor, control y placer en la Argentina contemporánea*. CLACSO, Ediciones Ciccus.

Karaian, L. (2012). Lolita Speaks: "Sexting", Teenage Girls and the Law. *Crime Media Culture*, *8*(1), 57-73. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659011429868

Kennedy, D. (2016). *Abuso sexual y vestimenta sexy*. Siglo XXI.

Klettke, B., Hallford, D. & Mellor, D. (2014). *Sexting prevalence and correlates: A systemic literature review*. *Clinical Psicology Review*, *34*(1), 44-53. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2013.10.007

Lenhart, A. (2009). *Teens and Sexting: How and Why Minor Teens Are Sending Sexually Suggestive Nude or Nearly Nude Images Via Text Messaging*. Pew Research Centre Report. http://www.pewInternet.org/2009/12/15/teens-and-sexting/

Lippman J. & Campbell, S. (2014). Damned if you do, damned if you don't… if you're a girl: Relational and normative contexts of adolescent sexting in the United States. *Journal of Children and Media*, *8*, 371-386. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2014.923009

Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A. & Ólafsson, K. (2011). *Risks and safety on the Internet: the perspective of European children: full findings and policy implications from the EU Kids Online survey of 9-16 year olds and their parents in 25 countries*. EU Kids Online. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/33731/

Luchadoras. (Coord.). (2017). *La violencia en línea contra las mujeres en México*. [Informe para la Relatora sobre Violencia contra las Mujeres Ms. Dubravka Šimonović]. https://justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/informe_violenciaenlinea_mexico_logos.pdf

Mahmood, S. (2001). Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival. *Cultural Anthropology*, *16*(2), 202-236. https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2001.16.2.202

McRobbie, A. (2009). *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. SAGE.

Meraz, A. (July 12th, 2016). México, primer lugar en 'sexting' en AL. *Excelsior*. http://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2016/07/12/1104481

Reguillo, R. (2000). *Emergencia de culturas juveniles. Estrategias del desencanto*. Grupo Editorial Norma.

Ringrose, J. & Harvey, L. (2015). Boobs, back-off, six packs and bits: Mediated body parts, gendered reward, and sexual shame in teens' sexting images. *Continuum, Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, *29*(2) 205-217. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2015.1022952

Ringrose, J., Gill, R., Livingstone, S. & Harvey, L. (2012). *A Qualitative Study of Children, Young People and 'Sexting'*. A report prepared for the NSPCC. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265741962_A_qualitative_study_of_children_young_people_and_'sexting'_a_report_prepared_for_the_NSPCC

Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R. & Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory*, *14*(3), 305-323. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113499853

Ruiz Navarro, C. (August 19th, 2016). Sexting y amores inmediatos: de lo virtual a lo real. Conversatorio en el marco de la *Semana de las Juventudes*, 2016. Ciudad de México.

Segato, R. (2016). *La guerra contra las mujeres*. Traficantes de sueños.

Stanley, N., Barter, C., Wood, M., Aghtaie, N., Larkins, C., Lanau, A. & Överlien, C. (2016). Pornography, Sexual Coercion and Abuse and Sexting in Young People's Intimate Relationships: A European Stu-

dy. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *33*(19), 2919-2944. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516633204

Strohmaier, H., Dematteo, D. & Murphy, M. (2014). Youth Sexting: Prevalence Rates, Driving Motivations, and the Deterrent Effect of Legal Consequences. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *11*(3), 245-255. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-014-0162-9

Vance, C. (1989). *Placer y peligro: explorando la sexualidad femenina*. Revolución.

Yeung, T., Horyniak, D., Vella, A., Hellard, M. & Lim, M. (2014). Prevalence, correlates and attitudes towards sexting among young people in Melbourne, Australia. *Sexual Health*, *11*(4), 332-339. https://doi.org/10.1071/sh14032