



ISSN:1991-8178

Australian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences

Journal home page: www.ajbasweb.com



Identifying the Definitions of Sexting Phenomenon described by Adolescents

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 October 2015

Accepted 30 November 2015

Available online 31 December 2015

Keywords:

Sexting, Adolescents, Definitions, Grounded Theory

ABSTRACT

Background: This study proposes a qualitative research for conceptualizing the practice of sexting among high school students in order to help explain sexting phenomenon. **Objective:** The elaboration about this study is to determine the definitions of sexting phenomenon described by students. **Results:** In depth interview with 32 high school students describes sexting as routine, dangerous, harmful and unavoidable. **Conclusion:** Sexting is in relation to sexual behavior able to create potential emotional, behavioral, social, psychological and legal impact.

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To Cite This Article: Nor Syafini Mohd Muhaiyuddin, Hanif Suhairi Abu Bakar and Huzili Hussin., Identifying the Definitions of Sexting Phenomenon described by Adolescents. *Aust. J. Basic & Appl. Sci.*, 9(37): 346-350, 2015

INTRODUCTION

Sexting is defined as words joining of sex and texting, the transmission of sexually explicit images or messages electronically from individual to another (Temple, Paul, Berg, Le, McElhany, & Temple, 2012). According to Lounsbury, Mitchell & Finkelhor (2011), 20% of adolescents, ages 13 to 19, 22% of females had published or shared their own nude or semi-nude photos or videos through social networking. They shared the photos or videos to individual they intent to date with, or to person they only knew online. A great deal of adolescents reported they sent sexually explicit images to boyfriends or girlfriends. The teenage girl who had sent nude images of herself to her boyfriend and had those same pictures distributed to others by him after they broke up (Celizic, 2009).

Sexting has garnered notable media attention, particularly when involved in by adolescents (e.g., Hoffman, 2011; Reavy, 2008). In Malaysia, the media has reported a number of examples from around the states of such potentially serious emotional, behavioural, social, psychological and legal consequences. These consequences are not only for receivers but senders as well. For example, local media reports, in Raub, Pahang, where 19 years old male teenager threaten to spread nude photo of his ex-girlfriend in social networking after ex-girlfriend asked for break ups. The male teenager also over react by hanged the nude photo on young girl's house fence. The victim was embarrassed, trauma and worried if her family know about it. A police report has been lodged and police advised public not to

easily take or keep nude photos even for personal collection because of the concern being abused by specific parties (Harian Metro, 2014, p 53).

The definitions of sexting phenomenon describe by high school students able to help explain this phenomenon. Their feelings, experiences and observations give readers clear pictures what is the concept of sexting.

Method:

Data were collected and analyzed utilizing grounded theory technique. Each informant's transcript has been read constantly to identify codes. The data was saturated among 32 informants. Meaning, the same codes have been received. A standard grounded theory research will comprehend 20-30 interviews that mutually saturate the categories that develop during data analysis (Creswell, 1998). The data were analyzed word by word to ensure authentic. Strauss and Corbin (1990) explicit that theories can't be developed from raw data such as actual cases or reported activities, but raw data are analyzed to be possible indicators of phenomena which are accorded conceptual labels. The method will be used in the current study is purposeful sampling as mentioned by Creswell (1998) where the researchers recognize who are the informants and where are the places to collect data. Interviews or observations are able to assist researchers to understand central phenomenon.

Informants were students from various high schools which located in the state of Perlis. A total of 32 students (15 males, 17 females) elected to participate. Among participants, six were age 13,

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four were age 14, eight were age 15, three were age 16, six were age 17, three were age 18 and two were age 19. After obtaining approval from each school principal, schools' counselors suggested the right informants that suit for topic discussion. Students were interviewed individually. All informants were advised not to mention their names or their friends' names during interviews as all the session were recorded. Smith and Bailey (1997) suggested that to unearth the facet of feelings, perceptions, values, morals and experiences the researchers must utilize interviewing methodology, which is concurrent with current study. Darlington and Scott (2002) also added that the method of interviewing allows the researcher to comprehend the thoughts and feelings of the respondents. In this interview sessions, all the feelings, perceptions and comments from informants were thoroughly observed.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the adolescents' perception towards sexting phenomenon. Their observations and experiences help readers to understand the phenomenon.

Interviews were based on open ended responses; open-ended interviews gaining detailed information about individual views and actions that give more comprehensive story of what had happened (Turner, 2010). Informants were asked about the word of sexting and how they describe sexting. Probe questions were added to attain more information. Adolescents were enquired about their dating relationship and peers' attitude concerning sexting activities.

Results:

All interviewed informants never heard or uncertain about the word sexting. They begin to explain after they know the legal definitions of sexting. They started to define by their own words. List of codes have been identified as the definitions of sexting by adolescents. As far as concern, their definitions are not thoroughly discussed and mention in the legal definitions. The adolescents define for what they have perceived.

Table 1: Percentage of definitions of sexting phenomenon by students – Coding by Age.

Definitions	Age 13	Age 14	Age 15	Age 16	Age 17	Age 18	Age 19
Routine	0%	18%	0%	0%	82%	0%	0%
Trend	4%	0%	0%	0%	48%	48%	0%
Addiction	0%	0%	0%	18%	0%	0%	82%
Quickly spread	0%	0%	20%	30%	10%	15%	25%
Sexual stimulation	0%	0%	0%	36%	21%	11%	32%
Unhealthy	3%	30%	0%	20%	15%	32%	0%
Unavoidable	0%	0%	16%	30%	20%	15%	19%
Anxiety	30%	44%	16%	0%	10%	0%	0%
Need to stop	0%	25%	0%	0%	25%	30%	20%
Uncomfortable	20%	55%	5%	20%	0%	0%	0%
Too exposed	0%	25%	20%	0%	55%	0%	0%
Dangerous	5%	25%	30%	15%	0%	25%	0%
Harmful	10%	0%	20%	30%	25%	15%	0%
Influence by social media	0%	0%	0%	64%	0%	0%	36%
Leads to sexual activities	0%	0%	0%	0%	60%	20%	20%
Satisfy lust	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	83%	17%
Satisfy online sexual activities	0%	0%	0%	0%	30%	60%	10%

Table 1 lists the coding percentages of definitions of sexting phenomenon by students. The findings of 17 codes are reported by age. There are routine, trend, addiction, quickly spread, sexual stimulation, unhealthy, unavoidable, anxiety, need to stop, uncomfortable, too exposed, dangerous, harmful, influence by social media, leads to sexual activities, satisfy lust and satisfy online sexual activities. High schools students are divided into lower secondary students and upper secondary students. Lower secondary students age from 13 to 15 while upper secondary students age from 16 to 19.

As per first code of definitions by students, 82% of age 17 and 18% of age 14 reported that sexting phenomenon as a routine for teenagers nowadays. Findings shows that exchange sexually explicit messages or images become a routine to adolescents. Most of adolescents have their own hand phone and it is easier for them to involve in this sexting activities. Informant 5 (age 17) stated:

“This thing (sexting) has become a routine among teenagers, almost every day I receive those pictures (sexually explicit images) in my hand phone”.

Upper secondary students (96%) reported that sexting as a trend among teenagers and lower secondary students only reported 4%. Lower secondary students not reported sexting as an addiction but all upper secondary students offered opinion sexting as an addiction for teenagers. Adolescents not shy to ask for sexually explicit images for examples pictures or videos from their peers in social networking. It seems that there are supply and demand situation. They are not bother how people say about them because they have their own group who can supply them at any time. Informant 6 (age 16) stated:

“Most of my male friends addicted to this (sexting), they will ask others to send them if they not receive those things for a long time. Then they will exchange among them. Sometimes I did the same”.

Next code is students believed that the definitions of sexting are related to technology. Technology is significant to ensure that messages and images are quickly spread among teenagers. The characteristics of online communication support the sexting activities. Most upper secondary students reported that sexting stimulate their sexual desire, the percentage refers age 16 (36%), age 17 (21%), age 18 (11%) and age 19 (32%). Most of high school students expressed their feeling that sexting activities are unhealthy. Table 1 indicated the percentage, age 13 (3%), age 14 (30%), age 16 (20%), age 17 (15%) and age 18 (32%). Among the informants, age 16 (30%) is the highest percentage reported that sexting is an unavoidable matter. Adolescents are invited to join group in social networking and some of the time the group member will post the images or videos. Informant 16 (age 15) stated:

“I can’t avoid receiving porno pictures, they always post in the group (WeChat). I never angry with them, I never say anything, in return I don’t want them to say something bad to me”.

Then followed by age 17 (20%), age 19 (19%), age 15 (16%) and age 18 (15%). Most of lower secondary students shared their feeling by saying that sexting practices create anxiety to them. The highest percentage is among Form Two students with 44%. Other reports were from age 13 (30%), age 15 (16%) and age 17 (10%). Next code percentage reported was sexting need to stop. 75% of upper secondary students revealed that sexting should be stop. Age 18 (30%) stated highest percentage. Other than appealed for sexting to stop, students also disclosed that sexting is uncomfortable. 80% of lower secondary students stated that they were not comfortable with this phenomenon because it disturbing their emotions. Students of age 17 (55%) mentioned that the exchange of sexually explicit images and messages are too exposed among adolescents.

Adolescents describe sexting phenomenon as dangerous matter. 60% (5% of age 13, 25% of age 14, and 30% of age 15) of lower secondary school

students shared their feelings about this. Most of students reported sexting phenomenon is harmful. The table displays the percentage of the students (10% of age 13; 20% of age 15; 30% of age 16; 25% of age 17 and 15% of age 18). New communication technologies play an increasingly important role in the lives of young people, especially adolescents (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Students mentioned that sexting phenomenon is influenced by social media. Age 16 reported highest percentage with 64% then followed by age 19 with 36%. Informant 7 (age 16) stated:

“Sexting happens because of influenced by social media. These things (porn material) are easy to get and fast”.

Most of upper secondary students believed that sexting activities lead to sexual activities. 60% of age 17 reported that sexting among adolescents encourage them, friends and sexters involve in sexual activities. 83 % of age 18 reported that sexting can satisfy lust. Followed by age 19 with 17%. Sexting also can satisfy individual online sexual activities. Most of upper secondary students mentioned about this. Age 18 has highest percentage with 60% while age 17 and age 19 respectively reported as 30% and 10%.

Table 2 indicated the percentages of definitions of sexting phenomenon by male and female students. Most male students reported that sexting activities are routine to them and their peers. Most of male students (75%) also stated that sexting activities are trend for adolescents. They also acknowledged that these activities become addiction for all adolescents. In the table also reported that male students (65%) with higher percentage mentioned that sexting is quickly spread because of the technology. Both gender (male 54%; female 46%) reported that sexting stimulate sexual desire among them. Informant 32 (male) stated:

“Every time after watch that things (porn materials) in my hand phone, I have desire to do sex.”

Most of female students (92%) describe sexting as unhealthy, while only 8% of male students reported the same. Most of male students reported that sexting is unavoidable with 58%. Most of female students reported that sexting activities create anxiety to them and shared feeling that these activities should be stop. Informant 24 (female) stated:

“I’m worried about this, guys are so interested and they sometimes talk about this in class, they are not embarrassed.”

They feel uncomfortable with this behaviour. They said adolescents nowadays are too exposed with these. 80% of female students reported that sexting is dangerous while only 20% of male students reported the same. Female students expressed their feeling by saying sexting is harmful. They can tell what happened based on their experiences and observations. Among students, male

students (62%) reported that sexting occurred because influenced by social media. Porn materials are easy to access from porn websites and internet. Sexting activities lead to sexual activities. These have been reported by both students (male 60%;

female 40%). 62% of male students reported that sexting also can satisfy lust while 38% of female students reported the same. Findings also reported that sexting can satisfy online sexual activities.

Table 2: Percentage of definitions of sexting phenomenon by students – Coding by Gender.

Definitions	Male	Female
Routine	100%	0%
Trend	75%	25%
Addiction	85%	15%
Quickly spread	65%	35%
Sexual stimulation	54%	46%
Unhealthy	8%	92%
Unavoidable	58%	42%
Anxiety	0%	100%
Need to stop	0%	100%
Uncomfortable	0%	100%
Too exposed	0%	100%
Dangerous	20%	80%
Harmful	0%	100%
Influence by social media	62%	38%
Leads to sexual activities	60%	40%
Satisfy lust	62%	38%
Satisfy online sexual activities	45%	55%

Discussion:

The results of this study demonstrate that adolescents perceive sexting as routine activity. They receive and send or exchange the sexually explicit images or messages with their friends using electronic devices in their daily life. Findings shows students will receive the sexually explicit images and messages with or without asking. In this case it is normal for them engaging in this activity. This activity becomes a practice for most of male adolescents. Based on results also, sexting activities become a trend for high school students. Most of the students in various high schools mentioned that they ever experienced sexting. For the past few years they only experience sexting using the laptop but nowadays they can get those materials in the hand phone. Most of students have their own hand phones. Therefore, it is easy for them to involve in this activity. Some of the informants confessed that they feel uneasy if other people look at their hand phone especially parent.

As results present, most of upper secondary students stated that sexting is an addiction. They reported that they have been involved in this activity for the past two years when they in lower secondary level. At first it was a shock, after they received most of the time they become interested and addicted. If they do not receive the pictures or videos they ask from their friends or member in the social networking group for instance WeChat and WhatsApp. The upper secondary students revealed that they have more experience as they grow older. The utilization of information communication and technology (ICT) such as the Internet and mobile phones has augmented and keep on amplifying

significantly. Nowadays people globally are using the ever rapidly growing and popular Internet technology as a communication tool (Beran & Li, 2005). Adolescents using social networking as communication tool for contacting their friends and relatives. With the electronic devices, especially smart phones make sexting activities more rapid. The pictures, messages and videos are quickly spread among them.

Sexting as most students reported can stimulate their sexual desire. As findings revealed that they want to do sex with their partner. Sexting may undertake as a preliminary sexual approach or as a method of introducing sex in the relationship (Temple *et al.*, 2012). Most of students said they are encouraged by things (sexually explicit images or messages) they watch and want to practice it. Most students in upper secondary level reported that these activities are unhealthy. It can influence teenagers to practice sex. They also said some teenager intent to do sex without thinking the consequences. Sexting becomes unavoidable matter for adolescents. They reported that they always receive sexually explicit images or messages from friends or strangers. Sometimes they never ask about that but they keep receiving when they are online either from individual or group members in social networking. They said they can't avoid, and they not dare to ask for stop. Some of findings revealed that they were asked for forwarding the sexually explicit pictures.

Most of female students confessed that sexting create anxiety. They said they afraid if they know the individual is involved in sexting. They experienced in the class where male students talked about sex without shame. They said they not only afraid in the

school but sometimes feel worry if they walking outside schools. Most of female students expressed their feeling that sexting activities should be stop. Their fearfulness can be seen through their body language. "Anxiety" and "need to stop" describes by students associates with uncomfortable feeling of sexting activities. Students feel uncomfortable when they receive explicit pictures and feel uncomfortable when people talking about sex especially their peers. The findings indicated that most of female students feel insecure, worry and uncomfortable with this phenomenon, while male students seldom feel the same. Most of female students also revealed that adolescents nowadays are too exposed about this matter. They are so interested and often talk about sex especially male students. But most of male students reported that they can't avoid because most of their peers talking about sex. For them, it is a normal matter.

Most of students feel that sexting is dangerous, the sexually explicit pictures and videos show how to do sex. Adolescents can be easily influenced and want to imitate what they see. Female students perceive sexting as dangerous more than male students. Students also see sexting as harmful. Most of students feel that sexting gives negative impact to adolescents. Most of female students expressed their feeling that sexting is harmful to them and others. Male students are seldom mentioned about harmful of sexting. Social media users have more friends and close friends. It can be a companionship (Kwak, 2012). Adolescents keep more friends in social media. In social media, adolescents are exposed to the sexting activities. This happens because of the characteristics of technology itself, fast and easy. But it is not the technology to blame. As described by adolescents sexting also can lead to sexual activities. Older students expressed their opinion about this because of their observation and experience. The findings revealed that most of older students involve in dating relationship. They hook up with their partner through social networking. Sex chat is normal to most of couple. Students confessed that sexting can satisfy their lust and online sexual activities.

Conclusions:

These findings call attention to the need on how to best communicate with adolescents about sexting. Parents and schools should inform adolescents about sexting and its risks. As findings revealed that most of high school students feel uncomfortable and urged that sexting should be stop. Most of female students feel worried and insecure. Most of female students also feel that sexting is dangerous and harmful. There is a need for in depth research to find the gender perception about sexting.

Sexting is in relation to sexual behavior able to create potential emotional, behavioral, social, psychological and legal impact. Sexting may have a negative mental impact on senders and receivers. Correlates between sexting behavior and mental health should be explored in future studies because

the potential widespread distribution of a sext may have devastating effects on adolescents particularly on early adolescents, as young as age 13 involve in sexting activities. The association with sexting, gender and emotional and mental health are needed to be explored in order to understand more about the phenomenon and consequences. These findings should extent to schools and parent discussions as well.

This study is hoped to benefit all the parties for instances adolescents, parents, teachers and other stakeholders.

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