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Hispanic women's perceptions of teenage sexting: qualitative analyses using a sexual scripting framework

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ABSTRACT

Research on sexting perceptions and practices among high school students is extensive; however, this work has focused on predominately White samples, ignoring Hispanic adolescent young women's experiences and interpretations related to sexting. This study used qualitative methods to examine Hispanic college women's reflections on their engagement in and perceptions of image-based sexting during high school. A total of 56 Hispanic college women participated in individual-interviews about high school sexting. Approximately 20% of participants reported sexting images of themselves during high school. The common perception among participants who did not sext was that girls who sent sexualised images of themselves in high school were attention seekers or responding to a request from a boy. Those who sent sexts reported having sent the images of themselves within the context of a romantic relationship. Teenage girls whose sexualised images were widely circulated were viewed negatively by both sexters and non-sexters and faced negative social repercussions. The results highlight the influence of traditional gendered sexual scripting norms on sexting perceptions irrespective of behavioural intentions.

Introduction

Sexting, defined as sending and/or receiving a sexually explicit image or sexual message (Chalfen 2009), is a common practice among today's high school adolescents in the USA and beyond (Englander and McCoy 2017). These sexual communications are exchanged across a variety of social media platforms, such as Snapchat and Instagram, as well as through phone texts (Frankel et al. 2018). Policy makers, law enforcement, educators and researchers have been increasingly forced to grapple with the issue of adolescent sexting over the past decade (Ngo, Jaishankar and Agustina 2017). Although the media has focused on the negative consequences of sexting, researchers have noted that it is considered a normative part of intimacy among adolescents and young adults (Ferguson 2011; Lippman and Campbell 2014).

Despite increased attention to sexting behaviours in the scientific community, research specially focused on Hispanic samples is limited. Studies find that

approximately 55% of Hispanic young adults engaged in sexting in the past six months (Castañeda 2017), and that 20% of Hispanic women ages 16–25 years reported sexting at least once in their lifetime (Ferguson 2011). However, there is a lack of research on Hispanic[1] youth's perceptions and attitudes towards sexting behaviours (Romo et al. 2017). Given the common-place nature of sexting, paired with the potentially disastrous implications of sexting when sexually explicit images are distributed publicly (Bates 2017; Ruvalcaba and Eaton 2020), diverse young people's understanding of sexting and sexters must be explored.

The interpretation and understanding of sexting can differ by participant age (Abeele et al. 2014), gender (Mitchell et al. 2012), racial/ethnic group (Davis et al. 2016) and other social locations. Therefore, understanding the meanings and values associated with sexting requires using frameworks that are culturally specific and include both gender and ethnic values around sexuality expression and behaviour. Prior research examining sexual attitudes and behaviours among women of colour finds that their sexual health decision making is rooted in their intersecting gender, racial and ethnic identities (Stephens, Boyd and Ruvalcaba 2017). For example, traditional gender role scripts for Hispanic women's sexual expression include both the expectation of modesty, as exemplified by the marianismo framework (Eaton et al. 2016), as well as the exotic and sexually tempting hot blooded Latina framework (Vargas 2010).

The saliency of these various scripts has been found to influence Hispanic women in such areas as sexual identity (Hussain et al. 2015) and sexual health service utilisation (Stephens and Thomas 2011). However, no studies to date have applied a sexual scripts framework to examine Hispanic adolescent girls' sexting attitudes or behaviours. Thus, this study adopted a sexual scripting lens to explore US Hispanic college women's reflections of sending and receiving sexually explicit images during high school, and their perceptions of female peers who sent sexts.

Sexual scripting framework

Sexual scripts are mental blueprints that guide individuals' beliefs, attitudes, self-concepts and actions surrounding sexual interactions and expression (Simon and Gagnon 1986). They are informed by gender structures within a cultural context; as such, there are differential gender role expectancies tied to sexual expression (Masters et al. 2013). Additionally, the scripting process for sexual behaviours operates within tiered levels that interact to produce, convey and uphold standards for sexual behaviours. The cultural level encompasses the overarching social norms related to sexuality expectations, while the interpersonal level relates to the individual's personal application of these sexuality norms (Simon and Gagnon 1986). Interpersonal scripts often follow and reflect the norms and processes of cultural scripts, although they can be more subjective and detailed (Eaton and Rose 2011).

Although there has been a growth in research examining sexual script development and its influence on behavioural outcomes across various racial/ethnic populations (Eaton et al. 2016; Stephens and Phillips 2003), work on sexual scripting among Hispanic women and girls is limited (Raffaelli and Ontai 2001). This is problematic since meanings given to sexuality are transmitted through cultural contexts that, for Hispanic

girls and women, are embedded in unique gender and ethnic belief systems. Therefore, researchers need to consider the association between cultural identity frameworks of gender and ethnicity when examining Hispanic women's or girls' sexual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. Although scarce, existing research supports the application of these frameworks. For example, Hispanic women are often expected to follow traditional, gender-roles congruent sexual scripting frameworks, which differ from the gender role scripts of men (Eaton et al. 2016). Congruently, Hispanic adolescent girls' beliefs about appropriate sexual and romantic practices are also informed by differential gender role expectations (Gubrium and Torres 2013; Raffaelli and Ontai 2001).

It is important to acknowledge that within group cultural differences exist among Hispanics (Hernandez and Curiel 2012), and these variations may influence the expression of sexuality and intimacy. Albeit research in this domain is limited (Deardorff et al. 2010). These cultural differences are influenced by contextual factors such as immigration status and acculturation that shape the degree to which sexual scripts are expressed (Hernandez and Curiel 2012; Sastre et al. 2015). Additionally, sexual scripts are not static since cultural level norms could be interpreted by each individual differently. There are intra- and interpersonal variations in sexuality expression even when gendered cultural level norms are in place (Masters et al. 2013).

Gender

Because of marianismo, the traditional Hispanic belief that women should not express sexual desire (Hussain et al. 2015), adolescent Hispanic girls who engage in sexting face the possibility of stigmatisation if their behaviour is made publicly available. Additionally, girls are generally more likely to experience pressure to engage in sexting from boys than vice versa (Lippman and Campbell 2014). This is evident in the sexual double bind for adolescent girls, by which boys perceive girls who engage in sexting as 'sluts,' while girls who refuse to engage in sexting are perceived as 'prudish' (Lippman and Campbell 2014).

Moreover, there are greater social repercussions for girls than for boys if the sexualised images are circulated, or if it is publicly known that they produced these images (Lippman and Campbell 2014). It is also important to recognise that sexual double standards for adolescent girl's sexual behaviour are also endorsed by girls; where even though there is recognition of these standards as being problematic (Lyons et al. 2011). There is evidence that Hispanic adolescent girls acknowledge the existence of SDS related to their expression of sexuality and expectancies of sexual health (Gubrium and Torres 2013). For these reasons, it is important to tease out the differences in subjective perceptions of girls' sexting between those reporting they did send sexually explicit images during high school, and those who did not.

Ethnicity

Most research on sexting has focused on White populations; only three studies to date have focused exclusively on sexting trends among Hispanic youth and young adults (Castañeda 2017; Ferguson 2011; Romo et al. 2017). This is concerning given racial/ethnic minority adolescents engage in high levels of social media usage,

including the distribution of content via cellular phones and other platforms (Mitchell et al. 2012; Peskin et al. 2013). Researchers suggests that racial/ethnic minority adolescents engage in sexting at higher rates than Whites (Dake et al. 2012), while others report that Hispanic girls are the least likely to engage in sexting (Peskin et al. 2013). Our goal in this study therefore was to understand the perceptions and associations that Hispanic women had around sexting during high school to help make greater sense of these sometimes contradictory findings.

The study sought to identify the reflective perceptions concerning girls' engagement in image sexting during high school, and subsequent perceptions of and responses to those who engaged in sexting practices. Gathering reflective data from participants who had completed high school no more than five years prior to the interview date allowed for more critical thinking about the experiences, greater reflection on larger contextual issues, and potentially greater honesty in answers given the distance in time (Offord, Hannah and Cooper 2006). Prior research has noted that retrospective recall methods are useful in encouraging critical examinations of experiences, as well as the identification of factors influencing decision making of participants' past personal behaviours (e.g. Huber et al. 2013; Sieving et al. 2005), even in cases where data collection is taking place more than a decade after the events occurred (e.g. Blome and Augustin 2015; Sieving et al. 2005). Relatedly, the disclosure of possible involvement in legally problematic behaviours, i.e. the distribution and receiving of sexually explicit images involving those under the age of sixteen, also highlights the importance of using college women's recall of events (Chalfen 2009). Concerns about legal consequences of engaging in or having knowledge about incidents of underage distribution of sexual content may bias participants and their willingness to share experiences (Wolak, Finkelhor and Mitchell 2012).

For these reasons, we specifically examined Hispanic college women's reflections on high school sexting, including (1) their perceptions of girls sending sexually explicit images during high school, and (2) the social consequences faced by those girls who sent sexually explicit images during high school. Using a comparative approach, particular attention was given to differences and similarities in beliefs about sexting held by women who had sexted in high school and those who had not sexted in high school. Furthermore, the relationship between perceptions of and actual engagement in the consensual self- distribution of sexualised images was investigated. This was important to examine as prior research has shown that adolescent and young adults' intended behaviours do not always match their actual behaviours, particularly when considering sexual health or intimate relationship decision making (Alexander and Fisher 2003; Jacobs et al. 2016; Laursen et al. 2012). Thus, the qualitative data gathered provided detailed information about both subjective perceptions of sexting behaviours and actual behavioural outcomes by comparing women of the same educational cohort, generation, ethnic identity and geographic region of residence, based on their adolescent sexting history.

Methods

Between 2014 and 2015, criterion sampling was used to recruit a sample of 56 women who were first, second, third and fourth year college students, self-identified as Hispanic, and had graduated from high school in the last five years (age 18–24;

Table 1. Reported familial nations of origin.

First familial nation of origin	N	%
Brazil	1	2%
Chile	1	2%
Colombia	4	8%
Cuba	21	42%
Dominican Republic	2	4%
USA	4	8%
Italy	1	2%
Nicaragua	2	4%
Peru	3	6%
Puerto Rica	5	10%
Spain	2	4%
Venezuela	4	8%

Creswell and Poth 2016). Participants were recruited via an online psychology research pool at a large public Hispanic Serving Institution in the southeast USA. The eligibility process required individuals to be screened based on ethnicity, age, gender and sexual orientation (heterosexual). Participants scheduled a convenient in-person interview time, completed a consent form informing them of their rights as participants, and were awarded course credit upon their completion of the interview. The study was approved by Florida International University's Institutional Review Board.

All participants self-identified as Hispanic women and were current undergraduate students. Of the 56 women that were interviewed, 50 complete the full survey; the remaining provided either partial data or the data were missing due to technical issues (e.g. problems with Wi-Fi connectivity). The participants' interviews were included in the analysis as they met the study eligibility, but their demographic data were not included. Of those participants who did complete the survey, the average age was 20.80 ($SD = 1.95$). The majority reported that their first familial nation of origin was Cuba (42%, $n = 21$) (see Table 1 for complete national breakdown). A total of 96% ($n = 48$) had lived in the USA for five years or more, and 38% ($n = 19$) lived their entire life in the USA. Most participants resided in or attended a high school in a neighbourhood with a median household income of $50,000 or more (70.83%, $n = 34$) and where more than 50% of the resident were of Hispanic origin (72.92%, $n = 35$). Two participants were excluded from neighbourhood level data because one had missing data and the other reported living in Venezuela during high school. The average number of lifetime sexual partners among participants was 2.94 ($SD = 2.78$), and 18.37% ($n = 9$) reported having had no sexual partners ever in life, this excludes data from one participant who did not provide an answer.

Interview procedure

Eight self-identified female Hispanic undergraduate research assistants interviewed participants at scheduled times. The research assistants completed an extensive interview training session led by the principal investigator. After participants had read and signed the study consent form, they completed an online questionnaire to report their demographic information, social media usage, and sexting practices. This questionnaire also asked participants whether or not they had sent sexualised images of themselves in high school. Responses were used to determine who were sexters and non-sexters.

Semi-structured individual interviews followed the questionnaire, and used open-ended questions guided by sexual scripting theoretical frameworks (Simon and Gagnon 1986). Participants were interviewed in a private conference room. Participants either selected a pseudonym or were given a pseudonym as an identifier. Individual sessions were audio taped. Participants were asked to provide an alias for the interview and transcript label. The interview process used a series of semi-structured and open-ended questions.

A questioning route provided a framework for developing and sequencing the questions. Questions included: When you were in high school, why did people engage in sexting or posting of sexual images on social networking sites? When you were in high school did you ever treat someone differently after you saw or heard images about them? When you were in high school did you ever engage in sexting or posting images? How did your high school friends feel about sexting? What were their judgments of people who participated in sexting? When you were in high school did both men and women engage in sexting or posting sexual images on social networks? Did you look at women who did it differently than men who did it?

Data analysis

Data collection and analysis proceeded in parallel, beginning with the use of constant comparative method (Patton 2002). Four undergraduate research assistants not involved in the data collection process transcribed the interviews. The principal investigator and one undergraduate research assistant verified the completeness of the transcripts, accuracy of the discussion content and quality of transcriptions.

Simultaneously, the investigators constructed a preliminary coding framework after in-depth reading of the first ten transcripts, which included the application of sexual scripting theory and adolescent sexting research that focused on gender appropriate sexuality behaviours. This process involved the identification of coding categories, establishing the boundaries of categories, assigning the segments to categories, and summarising the content of each category. The goal of this approach was to discern conceptual similarities, to refine the discriminative power of categories, and to identify patterns (Patton 2002). The second stage of analysis involved the continuing re-examination of initial codes applied across all interviews, as well as revising them where necessary to develop specific themes.

The principal investigator and lead graduate student reached agreement with the two broad themes and subsequent subthemes that emerged from the data after three meetings. Four coders measured agreement with subthemes, which resulted in a Fliess kappa score of 0.67, indicating substantial agreement (McHugh 2012; Nichols et al. 2010). Disagreements between four coders were addressed by the principal investigator and lead graduate student. This method of analysis connected developing categories with emerging relationships between them, which was implemented throughout the analysis process.

Findings

Of the 56 women in the study, only 25% ($n = 14$) had received an image-based sext at some point in high school. The majority of these featured another girl (64.29%; $n = 9$). Additionally, most of the participants (76.79%; $n = 43$) reported that they had not sent

an image-based sext featuring themselves during high school. Of the 13 (23.21%) who did report having sent a sexual image featuring themselves during high school, approximately half had done so more than once during that period.

The most common type of image was a picture, although three (23.08%) had only sent videos, and two (15.38%) had used both methods. The content of sexts sent during high school also differed; more than half of the sexters stated that their sext only portrayed their fully nude upper body (61.54%; $n = 8$), while five (38.46%) had sent fully nude images. Of these, five (38.46%) participants purposefully did not include their face in their sexts.

Analyses of participants' interview content led to the identification of two broad emergent themes: (1) reasons why girls sexted images during high school; and (2) social consequences for those girls who had sent an image-based sext. The results of sexters and non- sexters perceptions are presented below.

Perceptions of why girls engaged in sexting

Non-sexters' perceptions

The majority of women in this study who had never sent a sext of themselves (65.12%; $n = 28$) viewed girls that sent sexually explicit images in high school as attention seekers. Coded as 'wanting to be noticed by others/peers', this attention-seeking explanation had three related sub-themes. The two sub-themes reported by the non-sexters under attention seeking were attempting to fit in or gain acceptance (6.98%; $n = 3$) and physical or sexual pride (6.98%; $n = 3$). However, the most common attention seeking sub-theme reported by the non-sexters was seeking popularity, with more than half (55.81%, $n = 24$) of non-sexters pointing to this as a reason why girls sexted in high school. Popularity, coded as 'wanting to be known, liked, admired, or supported by others,' was viewed as a positive outcome by these women.

> Well, when I was in high school, they most likely did that because they wanted attention, I believe. (Belle, Year 3)

After attention-seeking, the second most common theme about why girls sexted in high school was responding to requests from a boy (6.98%; $n = 3$). Described as 'when a male peer or partner asks for or demands a sext', the non-sexters reported that this reason commonly occurred because they were trying to please their current or potential partner (Table 2).

> Females are more like 'I want to please you' type of thing. I feel like girls are more vulnerable in relationships. They're more likely to do what their boyfriend requests. (Daisy, Year 4)

Sexters' perceptions

Among those who had sent a sext, the most common reason given for doing this was to respond to a request from a boy (100%; $n = 13$). The majority of the women who had sent a sext during high school said they had sent it to a boyfriend. Sending a sext in the context of a relationship was perceived by the sexters as a reasonable rationale by these young women. However, two sub-themes emerged within this

Table 2. Non-sexters' perceived reasons why girls sexted in high school.

Coding category	Description	Example quotation	N
1) Attention	Wanting to get noticed by others/peers	'To get attention, to make themselves known.'	28
Popularity	Wanting to be being known, liked, admired, or supported by others	'It made them well-known yes, more people would know. Everyone would know, yeah.'	24
Attempting to fit in of gain acceptance	Wanting to join or belong to a specific group of peers. Meeting group norms and behaviours	'Maybe they wanted to be accepted in a particular group. Or they thought they were gonna be rejected from others if they didn't engage in those types of behaviours.'	3
Physical or sexual pride	Proud to show or present self as physically attractive or sexy. Appear sexually or physically desirable	'They want to, um, attract the other person, like showing them naked pictures.'	3
2) Response to request from a boy	When a male peer or partner asks for or demands a sext	'Females are more like 'I want to please you' type of thing. I feel like girls are more vulnerable in relationships. They're more likely to do what their boyfriend requests.'	3

categorisation to explain why the sexters responded to the request. The first and most commonly described sub-theme was its acceptable and normalised role within the contexts of a committed relationship's trajectory (92.31%; $n = 12$).

> You know, I was with my boyfriend and just seemed like the next thing to do … but I don't think he's- he's not the type of person to do that even if something were to happen to us. (Luna, Year 1)

Over a quarter of the sexters noted that sending a sext during high school was evidence of the trust they had for their boyfriend and the relationship (30.77%; $n = 4$). Responses to this second sub-theme were coded using the description 'evidence of confidence, bond, covenant or connection with boy in some level of relationship.'

> Umm, because I had this guy that I had liked since sophomore year and like he I considered him my best friend … like I trusted him more than anybody I had known ok (Fun Size, Year 1)

Among sexters, the least likely reported reasons for engaging in this behaviour during high school were to get attention from a boy they were dating or liked (15.38%; $n = 2$) or to be sexually empowered (7.69%; $n = 1$). The one woman viewed her decision to send sexually explicit images as a way to take control of her sexuality and sexual expression (Table 3).

Sexting consequences

Non-sexters' responses

Across both groups of participants, those high school women featured in widely shared sexts faced negative consequences from peers. However, non-sexters were only

Table 3. Sexters' perceived reasons why girls sexted in high school.

Coding category	Description	Example quote	n
1) Response to request from a boy	When a male peer or partner asks for or demands a sext	'Then yeah, well, we do it all the time. It's our boyfriend.'	13
Acceptable relationship communication	Normalised behaviour and form of communication between consenting couple in a relationship	'I kept it limited to committed relationships longer than 8, 9 months. About 8 months. Umm, and it was only ever to the boyfriend.'	12
Evidence of commitment and trust in emerging or established relationship	Evidence of confidence, bond, covenant or connection with boy in some level of relationship	'You know, we knew each other very well and … and I thought it was okay because of that— and I still think it's okay as long as you trust that person and you don't … you don't um, you're not afraid that they might share it.'	4
2) Attention	Wanting attention from others in the school	'Um, in my opinion, I feel that most of people that did it they wanted attention, they want to be known and I guess if that was like the easiest way to do it.	2
3) Sexual empowerment	Take ownership of one's own sexuality and sexual expression	'And like why, it's because It was just something you feel like I guess, empowered by it.'	1

aware of girls sending sexts in cases where it was widely distributed; they were not able to comment on cases that remained between two individuals or within smaller peer groups. Non-sexters reported that they also treated sexters negatively; including calling the woman featured in the image(s) names (25.58%; $n = 11$), losing respect for her (13.95%; $n = 6$), and avoiding interactions due to fears of negative social repercussions from their association with them (4.65%; $n = 2$).

> I think we saw [girls who sent sexually explicit images] as promiscuous or naïve. Because you know eventually you run a chance of it spreading or someone else knowing so I think they probably saw those people as that way. (Mae, Year 4)

Only a few non-sexters were somewhat supportive of other girls who had sent sexts featuring themselves that were shared widely in high school. Empathy and pity described the perceptions that these non-sexters (4.65%; $n = 2$) held about these girls. One participant (2.33%) who had never sent a sext also took the step of supporting and building a friendship with a girl whose sext had been shared without her consent in high school. They viewed the girl featured in the text as a victim.

> [I] just felt bad for them. Like well. Not people who participating in sexting but people whose picture got out, I felt bad for them. (Tampa, Year 3)

Sexters' responses

Similar to non-sexters, sexters reported that other girls in high school who engaged in sexting faced negative social consequences. They also engaged in victim blaming when they discussed other girls who sent sexts that were shared widely, asserting that these women were deserving of being called names (23.08%; $n = 3$), and losing respect and support from peers (23.08%; $n = 3$).

> Um, she got in a lot of fights, (mm), um everyone would call her like slut online, and she will get into a lot of arguments online also (paused) I mean honestly I didn't look at her in a positive way either. (Lea, Year 1)

Only one (7.69%) participant in this study had her sext shared widely without her permission. However, she experienced the very social consequences that participants reported could occur when girls' sexts were distributed without their consent.

> My peers, they stopped talking to me and they just like completely ignored me and they gave me a huge lecture about how that's terrible. (Vicki, Year 3)

Among participants who had sent sexts, the majority did not themselves report facing any negative social consequences. This was because their sexts had not been distributed beyond the intended recipient. However, these sexters did recognised the potential consequences they would have faced if the images were widely shared. Eight women (61.54%) noted that they, too, would have experienced social isolation, name calling and other negative consequences if their sexts were publicly shared.

> Umm … they would've bullied me for it. They would've said mean things to me, just like they did with other people. (Tampa, Year 3)

Sexters also expressed fear of the way in which the images they shared could affect their lives in the long term. Two women (15.38%) noted that if the images had been distributed widely without their consent it could have negatively affected their career and academic trajectories.

> I didn't do it anymore because of how many girls were getting their pictures like exposed they were being like people take it to the next level like they will make an Instagram dedicated just to naked pictures of girls … and their pictures that could like ruined their potential to get a job in the future … (Lea, Year 1)

Discussion

Overall, those who had sent image-based sexts had sent sexualised images of themselves multiple times. These images were typically framed to exclude their face. Indeed, the majority had purposefully not included their face, or only included their fully nude upper body.

Reasons for sexting

Across both groups of women, getting attention from and responding to a request from boys were cited as reasons why girls sent sexually explicit images during high school. However, the meanings and values given to these explanations differed somewhat between sexters and non-sexters; their comparative results are presented below.

Attention seeking

Seeking attention was one of the most often cited reasons given for why girls sent sexually explicit messages in high school. This supports previous research finding that attention-seeking from peers and partners is among the leading reasons that adolescents engage in sexting (Wolak, Finkelhor and Mitchel. 2012). Attention from peers is important to consider, given that fitting in and gaining acceptance from peers is

crucial during this developmental period (Guyer et al. 2014). It is important to note that the meaning of attention seeking differed between sexters and non-sexters. Specifically, non-sexters viewed this type of attention as negative despite sexters' motivations for positive attention; such that these women were desperate and willing to sacrifice their self-respect in their attempts to stand out from other women. In contrast, sexters viewed sending these images as a means of getting noticed and gaining the approval of peers. This is particularly the case when they were seeking the attention of men desirous of these types of images.

Response to a request from a boy

The main reason for sexting during high school was as a response to a request from a boy. The corresponding sub-themes indicate that sexting in adolescence was used to foster a positive romantic relationship. These findings are consistent with other studies that report romantic and sexual relationship motives for engaging in sexting (Ferguson 2011; Lenhart 2009). In fact, adolescents have been found to be the most willing to send sexts in the context of a romantic relationship (Mitchell et al. 2012). Although sexting is tied to intimacy behaviours, it is only when the partner or others distribute the image without consent that the meaning of sexting changes from being a normative form of intimacy (Englander and McCoy 2017).

Additionally, these findings highlight the gendered sexting dynamics within adolescent romantic relationships (Ringrose et al. 2012) and fit within the narrative of sexual scripts. At the cultural level of sexual scripts, differential gender role norms exist for intimate behaviours (Masters et al. 2013); within Hispanic culture these are machismo and marianismo (Sequeira 2009). The expected social norm is for men to initiate intimacy, which has been found across Hispanic samples, including youth (Raffaelli and Ontai 2001), young adults (Stephens and Eaton 2014) and sexual minorities (Carrillo and Fontdevila 2011). It is important to acknowledge however that Hispanic culture is not monolithic, and there is variation in the influence of these gender roles. Future research should explore cultural differences among Hispanic sub-groups related to feminine and masculine identity, and their relationship to expressions of sexuality and intimacy.

Sexual empowerment

Relationship context was the overarching connection among themes that emerged from the sexters' data. Interestingly, the sub-theme of empowerment also emerged as a perceived reason for sexting in high school. These findings highlight important nuances related to Latina sexuality and sexual scripts tied to sexting. In congruence with the cultural level sexual scripts that Latinas should not actively initiate sexual behaviours (Faulkner 2003), it was their male peers who initiated sexting. Yet, perceived empowerment emerged as a reason for sexting, which has been reported by previous research among Hispanic women (Ferguson 2011). At the interpersonal level of sexual scripts, cultural level expectations for sexual expression may be readapted through individual interpretations (Masters et al. 2013), in this case exemplified by the perception of empowerment gained through sexting.

Sexting consequences

Most participants in this study who engaged in sexting did so for romantic purposes. However, more than 75% of participants reported that they had not sent sexts of themselves in high school—while being aware of other girls who had sent sexts. These responses can be linked to a gendered awareness that young women's expression of sexuality through the production and sharing of sexts to their intimate partner could result in negative consequences (Ringrose et al. 2012; Stephens, Boyd and Ruvalcaba 2017). The clinical and psychological health outcomes of girls who have their picture distributed are disastrous. Victims report a range of psychological impacts, ranging from depression and anxiety to suicidal thoughts (Bates 2017; Ruvalcaba and Eaton 2020).

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge a number of study limitations, including the inability to generalise findings to a wider population. Also, there exists the potential for inaccuracies when discussing experience in hindsight, despite prior studies finding high reliability using recall methods (e.g. Blome and Augustin 2015; Huber et al. 2013). Future research might seek to address the social and legal consequences that high school students may face when disclosing sexting behaviours, to better address these recall bias concerns.

Additional limitations to consider include lack of diversity, age and geography. Specifically, the acculturation status of this sample was not captured. Additional cultural level information for the sample could have better situated the findings. It would be useful to assess within group variations in school and community cultural contexts given these have been found to influence attitudes towards sexting (Abeele et al. 2014; Dake et al. 2012). Finally, participants' age, educational status, context and motivations for reflecting on the incident at the time of data collection also will shape the meaning and values they gave to sexting while in high school (Blome and Augustin 2015; Huber et al. 2013). Ultimately, the findings represent participants' reflective perceptions at a specific point in time, which may have differed from when events were occurring and perhaps if they were asked to recall events again in ten years.

Conclusion

Findings from this study provide insights into Hispanic women's perceptions of sexting behaviours during high school. Specifically, women who sexted during high school and those that did not noted that seeking attention and responding to a boy's request were reasons why girls sent image-based sexts during high school. Results point to the need for further research exploring the gender and sexuality values of Hispanic adolescent girls and their negotiation when expressing their intimacy needs. This is necessary given nearly one quarter of the women in the present study reported sending sexts within their intimate relationships in adolescence. Future research seeking ways to empower and increase sexual health knowledge within this population should identify how sexting intersects with these processes. Furthermore, it is

recommended that sexual health education programmes aimed at Hispanic adolescent girls address sexual double standards and differential gender role expectancies related to sexuality and intimacy.

Note

1. Hispanic is a population category title created by the US government to identify people "who speak, are affected by or are Spanish-like" (Suro 2006). As it is incorrectly used to encompass other non-Spanish speaking nationalities such as Brazilians, terms like Latino/a and Latinx are often used instead. However, as the interviews for this study were conducted in an urban centre where most residents - including the study participants - primarily self-identified as Hispanic, the term is used in this paper.

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