Digital indiscretions are infidelities aided by technology. As people reach out to each other through new technology, new types of relationships and new types of relationship conflicts occur. Researchers Katherine Hertline, Joseph Wetchler, and Fred Piercy define infidelity thusly: “At its very core, infidelity refers to any behavior that breaks the contract that two people have with each other. What is especially complex about the broad definition of infidelity is that two different people in the same relationship might have different ideas about what represents infidelity or constitutes an affair.” In addition to the normal differences of opinion about what constitutes infidelity, couples may find it even more difficult to agree about what constitutes infidelity given the possibilities created by technology. For example, there are apps that play fake background sounds to help corroborate a lie, apps with disappearing or self-destructing messages like Snapchat and Wickr, dating sites for married people such as Ashley Madison and Victoria Milan, revenge sites like Don’t Date Him Girl and Cheaterville, as well as a plethora of GPS and spying sites to keep tabs on a partner.

It is difficult to be clear about unacceptable relationship behaviors when the opportunities for connection and betrayal escalate so quickly. Is it acceptable to reconnect with exes via Facebook when you are in a relationship? How much liking on someone else’s page is too much? Under what circumstances should you share passwords with a partner? Is there a difference between a private infidelity that only the parties involved know about and a public infidelity that plays out via social media? What happens when a betrayed partner can stalk an affair partner on social media? How much spying is too much spying? The age of technology raises serious questions about the boundaries between
public and private as well as commitment and infidelity. This chapter suggests answers to some of these questions through the stories of women who experienced digital indiscretions.

**METHOD**

As the research shows, men are socialized to be sexual and women are socialized to keep silent about their sexual experiences and desires; men’s infidelities are normlized as “men being men” while women’s infidelities are policed by strong social shaming consequences. My research focuses on the lesser-publicized aspects of infidelity by interviewing women who had been cheated on, women who cheated, and women who were the “other woman.” I conducted 110 interviews with women across the United States using snowball sampling. Just as a snowball gathers more snow as it rolls down a hill, interview participants increasingly came to me through word of mouth, social media, and two Los Angeles talk radio programs that gave my number on air when I spoke on their shows about infidelity. As per the agreement that I made with my university’s Institutional Review Board, an approval organization that ensures no researcher harms a human subject, interested interviewees contacted me and we either met at a location of their choice or spoke on the phone. Each woman chose her own pseudonym and, to further protect her privacy, I omitted all geographical references. I used an open-ended interview protocol that asked each woman to define infidelity and then tell me about her experiences with infidelity. Many women told multiple stories during interviews that lasted an average of approximately sixty minutes.

The data for this study includes fifty-five interviews where women who were cheatered on, were cheaters, and/or were the other woman mentioned technology. Because I did not ask about technology, the scope of these references is wide and ranges from technology used to cheat to the technology used to catch a cheater. There were eighty-two incidents of being caught in a digital indiscretion, which totals approximately 1.5 incidents per interview. Discoveries aided by technology included, in order of frequency: phones (texts, pictures, calls, call history, etc.), websites, email, Facebook, and other social media. The most popular sites that revealed digital indiscretion were dating websites. The most frequently mentioned email providers were Gmail, Yahoo, and Hotmail. In addition to Facebook, the mentioned social media sites were MySpace, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. Other technologies used to cheat or to discover cheating included MapQuest, PayPal, Skype, the iPhone, iPad, and Xbox. The interviewees’ ages ranged from 21 to 60; the average age was 35. The women self-described their sexual orientation and race: Forty-six (84 percent) identified as heterosexual, four identified as heteroflexible, three identified as lesbian, and two identified as bisexual. Thirty-one (56 percent) women identified as African American, fourteen identified as white, five identified as Latina, identified as Asian, and three identified as biracial (one, black and white; two, white and Latina).

Although qualitative research is cemented as a legitimate social science method, the veracity of interview data is often questioned. What if an interviewee is lying? What if lying is not intentional but the memories are inaccurate? Many people who agree to share their stories with a stranger are people who have given their narratives careful consideration and may have even crafted the story in their favor prior to agreeing to participate. Others may be reticent to tell the entire story about their biggest betrayal or their deepest regret. Finally, these stories only consider one perspective; and infidelity, by definition, includes at least three. While these are each reasonable concerns, this research focuses on validating these women’s stories and not verifying whether their stories are true.

Using methods associated with grounded theory, I read each interview transcript and coded it for emergent themes. I noted the number of times certain incidents regarding technology recur. The numerical data reporting how many times someone was caught via text message, however, was less interesting than the behavioral data that provided insight into the relationship between technology and infidelity. Thus, this chapter is less about the technology used to cheat—or to get caught cheating—and more about how behaviors are shaped by the role that technology now plays in infidelity. The five emergent themes of connection, obsession, hateration, humiliation, and vindication focus on women’s stories that explain how infidelity in the age of technology shifted or shaped their own behavior.

**ANALYSIS**

**Connection**

It is easier to connect with people in the age of technology. Technology relationship maintenance is managed using phone, text, video chats, social haptic networks, and social media. Geographic distance is no longer a reason to reject a potential relationship. Long-distance relationships are not as convenient as the partner who lives a fifteen-minute drive away, but these relationships are no longer as inconvenient when letters were the primary means of communication.

Vanessa’s unfaithful boyfriend was in the military. She described their constant communication by explaining, “We talked on the phone two to three times a day. We were communicating on Facebook. We traded emails, so we were constantly in touch and in each other's lives, and for someone still to be leading that type of life outside of the life you think they’re leading ...”

As Vanessa discovered, and as another interviewee, Evelyn, counted on, maintaining a secret relationship is also made easier by technology. Evelyn’s
When XeenaSummer ended a sexual relationship with her married best friend, she avoided seeing him even though they lived in the same town. But through Google chat and texting every morning five days a week, her affair partner sustained a connection beyond just friendship. XeenaSummer explained, "He'll throw a flirt dagger here and there, to kind of like make me aware that I'm still attracted to you some kind of way' or that 'I'll still do you,' but he hasn't asked, like, 'so can I go to your place?' "

Technology obviously plays an impactful role in relationship maintenance with or without infidelity. The ubiquity of technology, however, makes its role in relationship initiation even more pertinent to infidelity. The interviewees recounted several stories of partners' digital indiscretions via online relationship initiation. Dawn's husband initiated "an inappropriate Facebook phone affair" with a woman he knew thirty years ago in high school but was always afraid to approach. Other husbands had profiles on PlentyOfFish.com and AshleyMadison.com. Lassie's husband and Fifi's boyfriend both hid their Facebook activity from their partners. India's husband met his second wife on MySpace while he was still married to India.

Women also initiated online relationships. The possibility that Charlotte would leave her husband became even more certain after she reconnected with a friend on Facebook who is now her fiancé. Ebony decided her husband's affair was no reason to break up their family, but she admitted to being unhappy until she discovered the computer.

So my niece turns me on to the computer. Mind you I don't know nothing about a computer. She tells me, 'Auntie you outta see on this computer. You can go on these sites and you can do this and you can do that.' So one day I go over to her house and I'm looking at her computer and they have this site called Unhappily Married. I'm like, oh, ok. So she shows me how the thing goes and we're doing it. And I'm like, 'Aahh, this is fun. I'm just enjoying it. So, next thing you know, I want a computer.

Even after being caught by her husband, Ebony changed her screen name and was back in the online dating and cybersex game.

Technology not only helps people meet to cheat, but it can also expedite interactions and disassociate those same interactions from in-person constraints. Sasha noted how texting accelerated her relationship with an older married mentee. She explained how their casual interactions about common interests became flirtatious, "I really attribute [texting] to both of our boldness, and how it progressed. Things that I never would have said. Things that he never would have said except it could be said in a text message." Sadie's long-term relationship with a married man also began with texting. She admitted, "I didn't even think about the wife. It didn't even cross my mind." Since texting was their primary means of communication, Sadie's partner's wife was not part of her life.

Ishtar had the exact opposite experience. Ishtar was in an open relationship and her husband would help her take sexy photos for her lover. Yet Ishtar watched her lover's very different life unfold on Facebook. She said, "By being on Facebook I got to see his wife, I got to see his kids, and I started to feel really guilty because my marriage was solid. I was being honest with my husband. He knew everything and encouraged everything and this man that I was basically in an affair with was lying to his family." Ishtar confessed that his wife "wasn't real until I made that connection with him on Facebook." Because of this insight that was only made possible through social media, Ishtar decided to end the relationship.

Obsession

The use of technology is not only about whether one can and will be unfaithful. A betrayed partner is also in the position to decide how much she wants to know, and technology plays a prominent role in this. Some women do not want to know any details about their partner's infidelity; some women want to know everything. The discovery options aided by technology are vast—cell phones, caller ID, voicemail, email, PayPal, bank records, digital cameras, instant messages, texts, MapQuest, and social media profiles including (but not limited to) Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Some discoveries among the women I interviewed were accidental, but most were the result of a focused and intentional obsession with discovering information about a partner's affair. Irene acknowledged, "For a number of years I lost my mind and started going through every email, every file, every underneath." Pauline noticed that her boyfriend of two years was leaving his phone face down and liking smiley faces that women posted on his Facebook pictures. One night while he was sleeping, she went through his phone, because as she said, "I turn into an FBI agent when all this stuff happens."

Several women admitted that were not proud of their actions. Janet confessed to stalking her boyfriend's other girlfriend on social media—mostly Instagram. "I was literally stalking. I'm not even going to lie. I'm checking and I was like, 'What are you doing?' It's consuming some hours of my day because every hour I'm checking. Is she saying something? Are they together? Are they around each other? I have to stop." Ironically, Janet did not have a Twitter or an Instagram account; she would log onto friends' accounts to gather information. Alesia conceded to going too far while confirming her boyfriend's infidelity when she said, "And then another time, there was this girl who left a message on his phone. I called that girl, which is so out of character for me. I hated that! I'm calling these girls asking what the dude is doing and stuff like that. I hated that. Because that's the girl I always tried to avoid being. Looking
through cell phone bills and bank accounts; he took me out of my element and I didn't like that."  

Linda's husband was a serial cheater. She perused cell phone records and financial statements, called hotels, searched his computer and iPad, and read messages. She even emailed one of his mistresses.

So I did something that's not very nice. I created a fake Gmail account that sounded just like it would be his Gmail account and I emailed her and I said, 'Hey, what's going on? This is the best way to contact me right now. How're you doing?' She writes back, 'Oh I feel like somebody that's lost her best friend. I've missed you so much and not being able to talk to you is just awful. You can't live like this. Your wife is crazy. Just go get a disposable cell phone. Go to the pay phone if they still have them. Do anything. I have to talk to you.' And so then I started asking questions. I made up questions that I supposed he would ask, like 'What do you want from us?' And she said, 'I want to be walking down the beach hand in hand, growing old together but I know that's not what you're telling me is going to happen.' That made me feel sad. I probably hurt her.

Linda admitted, "I have a PhD in each of his affairs." Later in the interview she mused, "I think I got addicted to the hunt, the hunt for information." A hunt that was made possible by the same technology her husband used to be unfaithful.

Hateration

Technology often reveals information about the affair partner that may have otherwise remained unknown. Hateration—an intense disdain for someone—is what can happen when the primary partner receives digital information about the secondary partner.

India expressed hateration towards her husband's affair partner who he met on MySpace and eventually married.

I don't want to label somebody, but a lot can be said about somebody that goes to the Internet to get their spouse. I can understand being too busy. I can understand dedicated dating systems that you actually have to have somebody helping you try to find somebody. That's fine, but when you're just openly putting stuff out there on MySpace and Black People Meet, It wasn't Black People Meet—what was that other website called—some black—I don't know. Anyways, she had like three or four of them where she openly was, `I'm looking for a husband. I'm taking applications for a husband.'

For some of the women interviewed, hateration developed from looking at social media profiles and was based on the affair partner's appearance. Janet described her boyfriend's other girlfriend.

She is real vain as far as her looks. Everything is a picture. You would think she's a superstar the way she'd post stuff on Twitter, Facebook, and now Instagram. Everything is me, me, me, me, me, me. I know this because I'm kind of like a low-key stalker. I've gotten better because I can go like days, even weeks without wondering what she is doing or if she's around here or if they're together or something like that. But that's what it came out of. So it had gotten to the point where I knew exactly all her flaws. She's knock-kneed, something wrong with her eye, [she's] a mixed chick, [and her] hair doesn't grow; usually mixed girls have nice hair. It got really bad. I knew when she would be talking subliminal. She was talking about him. Just little stuff she was real, real, real, real put it in your face-type chick not knowing that I would see it or know about it.

The visual nature of social media lends itself to judgment. People put themselves out there to be seen, but everything about an affair partner is more harshly judged by a betrayed primary partner.

When FiFi saw the "slut girls" her boyfriend was interacting with on Facebook, she immediately worried about her sexual health. She said, "I was like 'hell no I don't want to have anything wrong with me' so I went and got checked out so everything was clear thankfully." When pressed to define a "slut girl," FiFi explained, "Just the way that they were dressed. They had their little club outfit on or they take their picture of themselves in the mirror. They don't even have people take pictures of them; they are the ones that take them. Stuff like that. Heavy makeup, their hair done, and their heels, and their nice little club-going-out outfit. I don't know. I guess I can't call them a slut because they didn't know he had a girlfriend so it's not their fault." As she explained, FiFi realized that she was harshly judging other women because of her boyfriend's behavior and not theirs. Social media leaves us with impressions and not necessarily accurate representations, but even when what we see is not true, knowing that other people think it is true, can be a profound form of humiliation.

Humiliation

Discovering a partner's affair can be embarrassing. Women are apt to blame themselves. The shame, silence, and insecurity that develops from being cheated on is commonplace. What may be even more humiliating, however, is having your privacy broadcast without your permission. Several of the
women interviewed told stories of feeling devastated from having to involuntarily share their intimate moments with another woman.

Melanie was upset that even though the father of her daughter was there for her birth, he celebrated their first baby's arrival with his other woman by cell phone. Melanie said, "When my daughter was born in May, he stayed with me for the four days that I was in the hospital, but he used to take pictures of her and like text and text and text. And later I found out that he was texting the girl pictures of my daughter, and that when he used to go smoke outside of the hospital he would call her." Melanie was unaware at the time that their private celebration as new parents was being shared.

In hindsight, Anne's happy memories of her thirtieth wedding anniversary and a romantic vacation became tainted when she realized her husband shared them with his affair partner. She recalled telling him, "You promised that you would call me. You forgot, but yet during this romantic weekend you did not forget to call your mistress."

Sharing intimate moments with strangers can be humiliating and so can sharing those intimate moments with your entire social circle. Janet was ready to fight her boyfriend's girlfriend. She justified her anger by telling the other woman, "These are the consequences of sneaking around with someone else's man and putting it all over the social network for everybody to see." The infraction was not just cheating but its publicity. Sarah lamented about her boyfriend’s infidelity: "I think it would’ve been less painful had I known about her, had he been straightforward with his feelings. Instead he tried to hide it. I had to find out through Facebook and my cousin, and it was very humiliating for me."

Hope was humiliated by her husband in multiple ways:

The week that we got married I saw on some social networking site some girl mentioning him in a status. I don't know if it was Facebook or MySpace, but she mentioned him in a status saying that she was in love with him and I was thinking 'What in the world?' So I sent her a message. I go, 'You talking about same person?' And she said 'Yes. That's my boyfriend.' And I said 'That's crazy. We just married last week.' And she said, 'Well I don't believe you.' So I emailed her some of the photos and she said, 'Well he was just over here, and I was just horrified. I had a big wedding and I felt like how stupid would I be to go back and tell my parents and everybody else that a week in and he has somebody else.'

Hope went on to describe her husband's disregard for her privacy.

I think the worst part was I saw where he had been reaching out to some of my Facebook friends. They were people that I had gone to college with. He didn't know them and he was reaching out to people on my Facebook friend list. That's how he had been talking to a girl that had lived in my freshman dorm. They had been talking about me and he had been lying. This girl wasn't really a friend of mine but she knew me and she wasn't somebody I wanted in my business but she is somebody that's okay enough to be a Facebook friend. I saw where he had just told her all kinds of stuff. He told her the reason we weren't having sex was because I was getting a gut and he told her that I had a drinking problem, which wasn't true. I guess he was just setting that up to be his reason things didn't work out. I don't know why he did it.

A public affair is devastating for private people. For many women, there is nothing more private than their sexual lives. Once this private information is made public through technology in general, and social media in particular, the genie cannot be returned to the bottle. There are, however, subtle ways that a woman scorned on social media can be vindicated.

### STI TESTING: THERE’S AN APP FOR THAT

Jessica Ross

Healthvana is a downloadable phone app that allows users to locate the closest STI test centers, privately and securely hold their sexual health records, and then share this info with whomever they choose. Excited to hear about this new technology promoting sexual safety and pleasure in the twenty-first century, we arranged an interview with the CEO and founder of Healthvana, Ramin Bastani, to learn more.

Jessica Ross: What motivated you to create Healthvana?
Ramin Bastani: After being slapped in the face for asking a woman about her sexual health status, the app was created to allow people to verify someone else's STD status in a way that was hopefully a little less awkward and unreliable. [The app was originally called Hula; the name was changed to Healthvana in 2014.]

Even if people say that they have been tested, it doesn't really matter because they may be lying or they may not even know what their real status is. Whenever you get tested, the doctor generally says, “Hey if you don’t hear from us within two weeks, no news is good news” and then you never actually get your results. Sadly, we know of a lot of people who were tested positive but fall through the cracks and never actually find out. We think Healthvana makes for a more meaningful and reliable conversation in a fun and appealing way. It's funny though, it didn't take long for us to realize that the biggest problem we are actually solving has nothing to do
with STDs or HIV, it actually just has to do with empowering patients to get their medical records because that is honestly the hardest thing to do. The rest we can take care of once their records come in, but ensuring patients receive their records is the biggest challenge that Healthvana is solving.

JR: How does Healthvana change up the conversation regarding STIs between current/potential sexual partners?

RB: There are two ways Healthvana changes the conversations, and the first one is online. About 50 million people are dating online in the United States. People can initiate this conversation about STD and HIV status online with potential partners and people can also share their personal medical information online with a partner if they want. At some point, a lot of these same people will actually get tested and put on their dating profile that they have been tested, but there is no way of knowing if that is really true. Healthvana only displays the records from verified test centers and doctors. So, in this online context, we really help because people can have this conversation before they even meet up. We are also useful for the people who use the apps like Tinder and Grindr that are geolocated because on Healthvana you can see what other people were last tested and decide who you would like to hook up with. If you had a choice, would you rather hook up with the person who was tested a month ago, or nine months ago?

The second way Healthvana helps change up the conversation is in person. We hear stories all the time about people saying things like, “Unzip me,” which refers to a feature on the Healthvana app that appears when someone shares their profile with you. “Unzip me” has become an easy and fun icebreaker into the conversation of STI and HIV status. Users have shared stories with us that it becomes this sexy conversation-starter of “I’ll show you mine, if you show me yours.” At the same time, this promotes more testing especially if one person hasn’t been tested recently. This feature also means that partners are able to show each other medically accurate records.

JR: Do you think Healthvana helps combat the stigma associated with positive test results?

RB: That’s a good question. . . . We do know that a lot more people talk about it, especially if they are dating online. That’s our hope and intent. We are trying to create more discussion even if that includes positive test results, which is great because [it’s important that people] know their status. You’ve got to keep in mind that a lot of STDs are curable or manageable. If you are HIV positive, you can actually share information about your viral load, which indicates whether or not you’re taking your medication. If you take your medication every day, your viral load can become undetectable and the odds of transmitting the virus can be greatly reduced. This still sounds terrifying to some people, but others think this sharing this information is a huge move towards destigmatizing positive HIV. HIV is not at all a death sentence anymore; it is a chronic condition that is totally manageable.

Visit www.healthvana.com to learn more about Healthvana and to create your free profile today. You can download Healthvana onto iPhones from the app store, or use Healthvana’s mobile optimized website from any other smartphone.

Vindication

In the past, infidelity was more difficult to prove—until it met technology. In these interviews, women found creative ways to prove their suspicions of infidelity, specifically when their partners refused to confess. When Hope, as mentioned in the previous section, found evidence of her husband’s inappropriate behavior on Facebook, she told herself, “I have to print it out so if I ever change my mind or he makes up a really good lie I can go back and look at it and remember why this won’t work out.” When her husband continued to lie, she showed the printed messages to his parents. She recalled, “It wasn’t until probably my fourth instalment of emails, pictures, and video that I sent [to] his parents and they were over there crying, that he said ‘Okay, I did it. Just stop sending stuff to my parents.’” Hope admitted that she did not want to send so much proof to his parents, but she desperately needed them to know the truth.

Hope’s decision to print her evidence was an opportunity to create physical proof of his digital indiscretions. Lassie also printed all of the sexual communications between her husband and the other women that she found in his email. She said, “I printed them out and I just left them—I wanted to really screw with him, so I left them on the floor with my engagement ring on top of them and then left the apartment and waited for him to come home.”

Whereas Hope and Lassie printed the virtual evidence so they would have physical proof, Pauline engaged in what she called “a whole different game of technology” when she found virtual evidence of her boyfriend’s emotional affair.

I screen shot all the messages to myself and I had thought about posting them to Facebook. I thought, ‘No, I’m not going to be public like that, then I’d be one of those messy girls. At my age, that’s not okay.’ So I screen shot them to myself...
I had seen the girls’ numbers [and] I had all their numbers in my phone. I had the screen shot text messages and when I woke him up I’m like ‘Why were you saying—?’ And then I said the woman’s name. I’m like, ‘Why were you telling her this when you—?’ I just said everything that I had found and I was like, ‘Before you say anything, don’t try to deny it because I’ve screen shot everything to my phone and I have their numbers.’

Pauline didn’t need physical evidence. She used technology for her record keeping.

Like Grace and Pauline, Teah considered going public with videotape proof that her husband was having sex with strippers and prostitutes. She said, “I had dreams of sending those sex tapes to his mama and his family and friends. I was going to call it our special day and it was going to be him fucking a whore or somebody like that in his car or something like that.” She never did because thinking about it made her feel worse.

Irene confessed, “If I have any regrets in my life it would have been the amount of energy that I put in, just cause I always just felt like I wanted him to admit it. I wanted to know the truth. I was partially insane during those years cause that’s all I would do sometimes, just go through stuff, tear up, and call numbers.”

In contrast to Teah and Irene, Maria found a way to feel vindicated once she tricked her husband into confessing. She used a calling card that would display an untraceable number on the caller ID and then she called their house. She told her husband that a woman with a high-pitched voiced called claiming, “He’s mine. You need to let him go so I can have him.” With the assistance of the phone card, she convinced her husband that she received this call over and over until he confessed that there was another woman. In the absence of a willing confession, vindication made possible by technology is one step women may choose in beginning the healing process after infidelity.

CONCLUSION

Infidelity in the age of technology means the possibilities for connection, obsession, hateration, humiliation, and vindication are greater than they were before technology became such an integral aspect of infidelity. A private indiscretion gone digital has a permanence and a viral capability that was previously unmatched. Al Cooper, author of Sex and the Internet, identified “accessibility, affordability, and anonymity” as three factors that can distinguish Internet infidelity from traditional infidelity.13 The ability to get online any time for free, and to interact with people without them knowing more than you share with them, makes infidelity irresistibly sexy to some.

The issue, however, is not just how people cheat but how people respond to cheating. What if a woman connects with an affair partner online who seems perfect on phone, text, and email, but is actually a dangerous, abusive, and violent man? What happens when an obsession or hateration turns into stalking and threatening? There is only a thin line separating hateration and humiliation from cyberbullying and slut-shaming. What if someone goes public with vindicating evidence that turns out to be false? What happens when vindication is violence? What happens when the offending partner turns violent against the person seeking vindication?

The social implications of infidelity in the age of technology are greater than interpreting the actions of a partner who turns the phone face down or refuses to share social media passwords.

Technology shapes infidelity by providing new tools for initiating and maintaining the secrecy of affairs. Infidelity shapes technology by creating tools that more easily facilitate an ancient indiscretion in our twenty-first-century lives. Understanding the feedback loop between infidelity and technology means understanding our new sexual selves.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How do you think technology has changed or impacted relationships?
- Has it opened up new possibilities that never existed before?
- What has been your experience using technology to engage in intimate relationships?
- Do you think technology has made it easier for people to cheat on their significant partners?
- Do you think it was ethical for some of the women to access their partners phones, profiles, and personal records?
- What are your reactions to hearing so many women tell similar stories about how they caught their cheating partner and how they reacted to the indiscretion?

NOTES

3 Heteroflexible is defined as a person who primarily identifies as heterosexual but occasionally participates in homosexual activity.
4 An exception would be in cases where people consider porn to be infidelity. In this instance, a third person is not necessarily directly involved.
CONSENSUAL
SEXTING AND CHILD
PORNOGRAPHY

Legal and Cultural Controversies

Lara Karaian

News media, mainstream books, and popular culture across North America have pronounced girls the disempowered and duped victims of the "pornification" of a generation and the rise of sexualized cyberculture. The teenager's world, we are told, is "steeped in highly sexualized messages" as well as "extreme pornography . . . hit songs and music videos [which] promote stripping and sexting"—the practice of sending or posting sexually suggestive text messages and images, including nude or semi-nude photographs, via cell phones or over the Internet. A growing body of research on sexting highlights the distinctions between consensual and nonconsensual sexting, and considers its potential influences and effects within our contemporary context. Consensual sexting is predominantly framed, however, as a risky consequence of childhood sexualization. Tween and teenage girls are purportedly being mal-socialized to deny their natural "innocence," to prematurely embrace and express the characteristics of porn culture, and to engage in "self-sexualization" in the form of sexting. For instance, the Canadian documentary Sext Up Kids: How Children Are Becoming Hypersexualized warns of Western mainstream media's sexualization of young people and its negative effects on girls' self-esteem and their sexual health. The film also advances the claim that hypersexualization works in conjunction with easy access to Internet pornography to allegedly force teenage girls to expose their semi/naked bodies using digital technology, "often with grave consequences." M. Gigi Durham describes this cultural landscape as one tainted by what she calls the "Lolita Effect"—the apparently "distorted and delusional set of myths about girls' sexuality that circulates widely in our culture and throughout the world, that works to limit, undermine, and restrict girls' sexual progress." Durham draws on the tragic and infamous 12-year-old love interest of Humbert Humbert,