



The sending and receiving of sexually explicit cell phone photos (“Sexting”) while in high school: One college’s students’ retrospective reports



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ABSTRACT

The sending and receiving of sexually explicit photographs via cell phone, *sexting* has received much publicity in the popular media and increasing attention in the scientific literature. The research is being fueled, in part, by the several potentially problematic psychosocial and legal consequences of sexting, particularly when the person pictured in the photograph is a minor. Despite the surveys (those published in peer-reviewed journals and elsewhere) that have been conducted, their methodological limits have left us without a clear sense of even how many male and female teens are sending, receiving, and forwarding these sexually explicit photos via cell phone. The present study surveyed over 1100 undergraduate students from a single university regarding their experience with sexting while in high school. Results revealed that over 19% of the students reported having sent nude picture of themselves to others via cell phone (i.e., sexting), over 38% reported having received such a picture from someone else, and nearly 7% admitted to having forwarded such a picture to one or more others. Sex differences regarding sexting as well as its targets and its relationship to religiosity were also explored.

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1. Introduction

Cell phones and other modern communication technologies (e.g., Facebook, Tweeting, Instant Messaging, Instagram, Skype, Facetime) allow us virtually instant access to others at any time, from and to almost anywhere. Young adults are particularly likely to utilize such means of connecting, with approximately 95% of those ages 18–34 in the U.S. owning cell phones (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2011), with figures not much lower for younger teens (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013). Unfortunately, these new means of connecting also provide new opportunities for people to “engage” with others (often many others) in ways that may not always be in their long-term best interests (e.g., Anthony Weiner).

In this paper, we examined one particularly important way of connecting, *sexting*, defined here as the transfer of sexually explicit photos via cell phone, a relatively recent phenomenon that has

garnered significant media attention (e.g., Ali & McGhee, 2013; Evangelista, 2009; Fattah, 2008; Hoffman, 2011; Rubinkam, 2008). Initial reports of the prevalence of sexting came from national surveys sponsored by and/or appearing in, popular media (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com, 2008; The Associated Press and MTV, 2009) and later by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). These surveys found that, across the age range of adolescents through adults, males and females were sending and receiving sexually suggestive/explicit photos via cell phone at prevalence rates of less than 10–30% or more. Soon after these surveys were made public, the first peer-reviewed, empirical studies appeared in scientific journals (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaita, & Rullo, 2013).

In the last two years, many more sexting studies have been published, almost all involving surveys of teens and/or young adults (Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Delvi & Weisskirch, 2013; Dir, Cyders, & Coskunpinar, 2013; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Englander, 2012; Farber, Shafron, Hamadani, Wald, & Nitzburg, 2012; Ferguson, 2011; Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013; Henderson, 2011; Hudson, 2012; O’Neal, Cummings, Hansen, & Ott, 2013; Peskin et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2012; Temple, Paul, Le, McElhany, & Temple, 2012; Turchik & Gidycz, 2012).

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Despite this recent tsunami of sexting research, one would be hard-pressed to derive a reliable estimate of the prevalence of the sending or receiving *sexts*, even among the most popular targets of this research, adolescents and young adults. The primary reasons for this difficulty are methodological: Specifically, the heterogeneity among studies in how sexting was operationalized and how the results were reported (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013). The definitions of sexting used across these studies varied dramatically, including “nude photos of breasts or genitals” (e.g., Strassberg et al., 2013; Temple et al., 2012), photos described as “semi-nude” (Henderson, 2011), “almost nude,” “nearly nude” (Lenhart, 2009), “sexually suggestive” (Benotsch et al., 2013), “sexually provocative” (Dir et al., 2013), simply “sexual images” (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2012), or even text messages described as “sexually charged,” (Dir et al., 2013) or “sexually suggestive” (Delvi & Weisskirch, 2013). Given this heterogeneity of operationalizations of sexting, it is no surprise that it is virtually impossible to arrive at a consensus for the prevalence of these behaviors.

Establishing reliable estimates for sending and receiving sexually explicit cell phone photos by minors (i.e., those less than 18 years of age) has been further hampered by the practice by some researchers of reporting pooled data in ways that mask important distinctions. For example, Mitchell et al. (2012) concluded that, based on their large-scale survey, only one percent of minors sent naked photos of themselves to others. But this figure included children age 10–17 and, while accurate for those 10–14, was exponentially higher for older teens. Yet the article’s abstract focuses on the 1% average, and this is the figure captured by the media (O’Connor, 2011). Further, other studies have reported prevalence rates for samples that *included, but were not limited to*, minors (Associated Press-MTC, 2009, National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com, 2008). Yet this legal adult – minor distinction has potentially important age-specific legal ramifications and/or other repercussions (e.g., school suspension). In addition, some research has reported the frequency of “sexting behavior,” failing to distinguish between the sending and receiving of these photos (Dake et al., 2012), despite the evidence that the prevalence, correlates, and consequences of these behaviors can be quite different (e.g., Strassberg et al., 2013).

The legal consequences of teen sexting derive primarily from the fact that nude photos of anyone under the age of 18 constitutes (and could, in theory, be treated legally as) child pornography. This then, technically, makes sending such a picture (even of oneself) the *distribution* of child pornography and its receipt, the *possession* of child pornography. Throughout the United States, possession or distribution of child pornography is a felony, often carrying consequences as severe as a mandatory prison sentence and/or placement on a public sex offender registry (Feyerick & Steffen, 2009).

The attempt to apply child pornography laws and consequences to sexting between teens has occurred in some jurisdictions (Irvine, 2009; Levisk & Moon, 2010; Ostrager, 2010; Schorsch, 2010; Schulte, 2009; Zetter, 2009; Zhang, 2010). Fortunately, teens are not often arrested for sexting (Chalfen, 2009; Wolak, et al., 2012). First, most instances of sexting are never reported to police or other authorities. Even among reported cases, legal consequences are the exception. In one report, arrest occurred in 62% of sexting cases when both an adult and a minor were involved, 36% of the “aggravated youth-only” (e.g., one teen coercing another to send you a sext of themselves) cases, and 18% of the experimental cases (youth only, no aggravation associated). Sex offender registration has only been applied in very few cases (Wolak, et al., 2012). Legislatures around the U.S. (and elsewhere, Crofts & Lee, 2013) have been scrambling to create or amend laws and other responses to sexting so as to discourage the behavior (when it involves images of

minors) without unreasonably punishing the more benign instances of this behavior (e.g., sending a sext to one’s girl/boyfriend) (Comartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2013; De Hoyos, 2013; Judge, 2012; Korenis & Billick, 2013; LaMance, 2013; Lewin, 2009; Rau, 2010; Ryan, 2010).

More common than legal consequences of sexting, but also potentially serious (especially for adolescents), are the damages to reputation and self-esteem that can occur when explicit cell phone photos are made public, i.e., when they are subsequently used by their recipients to embarrass or otherwise harm the subject of the photo, a form of cyberbullying (Dosstoc.com, 2011; Inbar, 2009; Patchin, Schafer, & Hinduia, 2013; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). There is little good data on how often this occurs or how serious the psychological consequences typically are. There have been anecdotal reports, however, of attempted suicides as a consequence of sexting gone wrong and several, apparently very uncommon (but well-publicized) instances of teens successfully taking their own lives following explicit photos they sent to someone ultimately being shared with many of their peers (Burleigh, 2013; Caron, 2011; Celizic, 2009; Inbar, 2009; Kaye, 2010).

Researchers have begun examining not just the prevalence of sexting, but also the behavioral and personality correlates of teens and young adults sending sexually explicit cell phone photos of themselves (e.g., Caron, 2011; Delvi & Weisskirch, 2013; Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; O’Neal, Cummings, Hansen, & Ott, 2013; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011). Some have found a relationship between sexting and other forms of sexual and non-sexual risk-taking (Benotsch et al., 2013; Dake et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2012). Several sexting studies have explored the motivations of teens and others in sending sexts and the targets of these photos (e.g., Henderson, 2011; Lenhart, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2012; National Campaign to Prevent Teen & CosmoGirl.com, 2008; Temple et al., 2012). Not surprisingly, boyfriends and girlfriends have been found to be the most common targets of sexts, and the most common reasons reported for sending them were variations of “flirting” and as a “sexy present.”

Because of the potentially serious negative consequences of sending nude photos of oneself to others, particularly by teens, it is important for adolescents, parents, school administrators, and even law-enforcement personnel and state legislators, to understand this phenomenon and its potential impact on adolescents, and requires that, at the very least, we have an accurate idea of the frequency with which such behavior occurs. Despite there now being a substantial number of research publications on sexting, the methodological limits of many of these studies, described earlier in this section, leaves it unclear how many teens are actually sending and receiving truly explicit cell phone photos of themselves.

A recent study of high school students attempted to assess the prevalence of sexting by teens while addressing these methodological issues. Strassberg et al. (2013) anonymously surveyed over 600 students at a single private high school. Their recruitment approach resulted in over 95% of eligible students participating, avoiding the possibility of volunteer bias (Strassberg & Lowe, 1995). We found that 18.1% of these teens (18.5% males, 17.2% females) reported having ever sent a sexually explicit image (*sext*; defined as revealing genitals for either sex or breasts for females) of themselves via cell phone to another person. Further, half (49.8%) of males and nearly a third (30.4%) of females reported having ever received a sexually explicit picture via cell phone. The high school seniors in this sample were the most likely to report having ever sent or received a sext, while the freshmen were the least likely to have done so. Despite our unambiguous operationalization of “sexually explicit” and the very high rate of participation, the generalizability of these findings was limited by only students at a single high school participating.

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