

AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF THE PREVALENCE OF TEEN SEXTING

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The problem of “sexting,” a word derived from the words “text” and “sex,” has recently been brought to the public’s attention through a number of nationally-publicized cases where teens have been charged with the production and possession of child pornography as a result of sexting. Although there is no universal definition for sexting, it commonly means to send a nude, or semi-nude, or suggestive picture or message to another person via cell phone. As the proliferation of cell phones has grown, the problem of sexting seems to have grown as well. Recent studies have found that 75% of 12 to 17 year olds own cell phones, and nearly 90% of them regularly send text messages. Further, more than two-thirds of teens say that they are more likely to send text messages to their friends to communicate than speaking with them on the phone.

At the same time that cell phone use is increasing, to the point where nearly all teens have

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and use a cell phone, teens also are being exposed to sexually suggestive messages more and more, through the media, print ads, and online activity. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that nearly 50% of teens have had sexual intercourse and about 14% of sexually active girls and 10% of sexually active boys report that they do not use any type of birth control. Research also has indicated that teens who are sexually active are also more likely to engage in sexting, as nearly half of teens who reported having sexual intercourse within the past week also reported that they engaged in at least one instance of sexting in the past week as well.

Sexting can have social consequences for teens, as illustrated by stories of teens who were socially ostracized after explicit pictures, which were meant to be private between a boyfriend and girlfriend, were shared with much larger audiences. In addition to these social and personal negative consequences, sexting has recently led to legal consequences as well. One of the first states to receive media attention after threatening to bring charges against teens who had engaged in sexting was Pennsylvania. In 2009, a local district attorney in northeast threatened to charge 17 students who were either pictured in images or were found in possession

of images on their cell phones that prosecutors labeled as “provocative.” They were able to escape charges if they participated in an after-school program and probation. In Florida, an 18-year old was convicted of sending nude images of his 16-year old girlfriend to family and friends after they had an argument. He is now required to register as a sex offender for the next 25 years. Additionally, in states across the U.S., teens have been charged with a range of crimes, including disorderly conduct, illegal use of a minor in nudity-oriented material, and felony sexual abuse of children.

Although stories of sexting have dominated the media in recent years, we still do not know much about what drives teens to send these messages or what a typical “sexter” looks like. Thus far, little empirical research has been conducted to examine the nature and prevalence of sexting. Gleaning more information about sexting is important, given the sheer number of text messages that are sent and received every day. The current study hopes to fill this gap by examining the nature and prevalence of sexting using a sample of young college students. Through in-class surveys, this research examined the prevalence of sexting, as well as the reasons for sexting, and the characteristics of those who engaged

in this behavior.