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“Damned if you do... Dammed if you don’t”

THE AUTHORS

Julia Lippman & Scott Campbell (*Please see below for full citation and abstract*).

THE QUESTIONS

How prevalent is sexting among today’s teens and what is the impact of this new behavior?

THE RESEARCH

Given the extensive media coverage of adolescent sexting, it seemed important to understand what we know, and don’t know about this relatively new phenomenon. Julia Lippman and Scott Campbell provide an excellent overview of the relatively few research articles on this topic and offer some insights into the various influences that boys and girls experience when it comes to sexting.

Using the following definition of sexting – the transmission via electronic means of sexually provocative or explicit images or videos featuring someone known to the sender and/or receiver (Lenhart, 2009) – the authors found that even with the “firestorm” of media attention to this issue, relatively few adolescents seem to be generating or distributing these images to their peers. In four different surveys of teens ranging from 10-24 years 3% - 19% had sent nude or semi-nude photos of themselves and 7% -31% had received such as message.

The authors also noted some common findings among the research surveys. They found that:

- 1) sexts are often sent around with the permission or knowledge of the sender;
- 2) sexts are commonly sent to a potential or existing romantic or sexual partner;
- 3) sexting becomes more common as adolescents get older; and

4) girls are no more likely than boys to send these images of themselves.

The research suggests that those engaged in sexting have a greater likelihood of engaging in other sexual behaviors and are more likely to have experienced more sexual partners. But the authors caution about the use of a risk frame when looking at these behaviors since such frames may obscure more normative or even positive motivations for sexting. They do suggest using a developmental perspective that supports an adolescent's interest in the media, sexuality and their peers. Pre-teens tend to send more suggestive language and progress to images in later adolescence. When looking at this from a developmental perspective, the authors' findings suggest that sexting is often used as a way to make sexual interest known to a partner and, at least for some, an integrated component of adolescent courtship rituals.

What is key to these findings is that there were significantly different gender norms which may be considered a sexual double standard. For example, girls who engaged in sexting were considered "sluts" or "insecure" while those who did not send sexts were considered "prudes" or "stuck-up". When these decisions were examined for boys, there were no negative consequences of their choices. As mentioned earlier, sexting is NOT a highly prevalent behavior. However, youth do perceive it as fairly common among their peers. This perception may be part of the pressure that girls experience to continue this practice even when the consequences for this behavior are considered wrong. Clearly sexting is a lose-lose proposition for girls – hence the title, "Damned if you do, Damned if you don't..."

BOTTOM LINE:

Although there is considerable media attention to sexting it is still not a very high prevalence among teens today. However, given the increasing use of sexting as teens get older, the impact, particularly upon girls can be significant and damaging.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

As this article points out, those of us working in treatment with adolescents need to better understand their peer culture. This includes both the pressures that girls who sext are experiencing, while helping boys gain a deeper appreciation for the complexity and impact that their requests for "sexts" is creating. Unlike the clearer line between legal and moral consent and abuse that exists for most of the behaviors that we address daily (and our interventions for these behaviors that address respect, consent, etc), sexting, particularly for girls, has a strong relational component that makes treatment interventions for both females and males a more challenging issue to address. Further, given the statutory frameworks that may impose draconian consequences to what may be naïve and innocent "consensual" behavior, we face an urgent imperative to inform and guide teens to understand the potential legal consequences of their actions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

As a relatively new phenomenon, the practice of sexting, however limited, has outpaced the nuanced approach that public policy needs to create. Just as the ubiquitous availability of pornography has outpaced our thinking about how best to engage with young people at the intersection of their curiosity, message/image vulnerability, and appropriate sexual behavior, sexting brings us to the intersection of healthy sexuality, consent, relationship and sharing of self-nudity in a digital age. Over the next years, legislators will be struggling to create new laws that will better protect those who text consensually while holding accountable those whose sexts are meant to expose, hurt or harm. Our field needs: 1) to be in the forefront of that discussion to help guide legislation towards these critical differentiations 2) to be crafting guidelines for practitioners working with adolescents engaged in the behavior and 3) to develop educational opportunities for both adults and adolescents.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relational, normative, gender, and age dynamics of adolescent sexting in the USA using open-ended questionnaires. Girls in the study were no more likely than boys to sext; however, they were more likely to experience pressure to do so, particularly from boys. Girls were commonly judged harshly whether they sexted (e.g., “slut”) or not (e.g., “prude”), whereas boys were virtually immune from criticism regardless. Older adolescents described sexting as occurring primarily within the context of flirting, romance, or sex, whereas younger adolescents reported what might be described as “pre-sexting” behaviors, involving the joking exchange of sexually suggestive (but non-nude) photos with platonic friends. Although some adolescents expressed a fear that sexting might lead to reputational damage, the normative climate and desire for approval motivated some to sext regardless. Implications and avenues for future research are offered in the discussion.

CITATION

Lippman, J.R. & Campbell, S.W. (2014). Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't...If You're a Girl: Relational and Normative Contexts of Adolescent Sexting in the United States, *Journal of Children and Media*, 8:4, 371-386, DOI: 10.1080/17482798.2014.923009