Pressured Sexting and Revenge Porn in a Sample of Massachusetts Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Digital communications are largely used for positive interactions but can also be a vehicle for harassment. Previous research has made it clear that sexting occurs, at times, because of peer pressure. This study examined pressured sexting and the unauthorized release of images in a cross-sectional sample studied in 2013-15. The convenience sample examined 1,320 students in Massachusetts. Over the years, more students admitted to sexting, but fewer reported any degree of pressure to sext. More than a third of sexters in 2014 and almost half of sexters in 2015 reported that the picture had been released without their consent. Interestingly, this did not seem to occur primarily within established relationships; instead, it seemed to target most often sexters who declined to date someone. Unauthorized distribution was related to several risk factors, including younger-aged sexters, those who sexted to multiple recipients, and those who were pressured into sexting initially.

KEYWORDS

Distribution, Pressured, Revenge Porn, Sexting, Sextortion, Sexualized Digital Behaviors

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the turn of the century, digital communications (text messaging, social networking, digital pictures, etc.) may have played a secondary role in peer aggression, but in 2016, digital technology has become a primary method of communication between youth. A Pew study released in 2011 found that almost all teens use the Internet, and 78% own a cell phone. Social networking is almost universal: a 2014 study of the same sample reported on here (487 18- and 19-year-olds at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University) found that 97% have a Facebook (social networking) account (Englander, In Progress). Three-quarters of teens “text” (i.e., use text messaging) and the median number of texts per day is sixty. Messaging is also done through Facebook and other social media. Heavy digital use is found among all social classes (Rainie, Lenhart, & Smith, 2011). The ubiquitous use of text messaging does not seem to be a passing fad; rather, it seems to be increasing in popularity. In 2010, 44% of teens studied at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) listed text messaging as their most preferred type of communication, but by 2015, that proportion had risen to 62% (Englander, In Progress).

Most researchers have focused on experimental evidence examining the degree of positive and negative interactions used in social media, others have pointed out that ethical perspectives have been considered less often. One study pointed out that youth perceive the Internet as a reciprocal relationship, and that the ethics of the user can be of primary importance in considering whether technology is used for positive or negative purposes (Harrison, 2015). The issue of ethics is related...
to that of intention. Being sent a nude picture or a picture of people having sex is clearly sexual harassment - unless the recipient requested such images. The ethics of fulfilling a peer’s request are quite different from the ethics of intentional harassment. Pictures of a nude peer may be shared with others, not for the purpose of harassing the recipient but instead to simply share an intensely interesting photo with a friend (Englander, 2012b).

Yet while Harrison’s research suggests that the ethics of the user are paramount in determining how digital technology is used, there are also some digital events that are almost certainly sexual harassment, such as malicious pressure to sext, the unauthorized distribution of a nude photo (sometimes called  revenge porn or sextortion), or sexualized name-calling online. A 2011 study by the (AAUW) found that about one-third of females and one-quarter of males had been called names like “slut” or “fag” on a website or through texting. Sexting appears to occur (at times) when others pressure or coerce the subject to send a nude photo of themselves (National Campaign to Prevent Teen & Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008; Englander, 2012a). Other research has examined sextortion and revenge porn. These slightly different phenomena are sometimes confused. While both may involve the misuse of real or fabricated nude images, sextortion is the use of these images for financial or sexual gain, although one study did include revenge as a possible motive (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2014). Cases of sextortion may involve individuals who receive, find, or fabricate a naked image of an individual, and then contact that individual to extort money or more pictures, under threat of exposure (Wittes, Poplin, Jurecic, & Spera, 2016). Revenge porn is “the distribution of sexually graphic images of individuals without their consent” (Citron & Franks, 2014). Rather than posing a threat of exposure, it seems to involve the actual distribution of private images without any preceding threat of doing so. It is typically viewed as engaged in by former romantic partners who expose nude images previously sent by a willing partner as an act of revenge for having been rejected. Some cases may certainly have elements of both revenge and extortion (Wittes et al., 2016), but it may be the preceding, conditional threat of exposure that really separates sextortion and revenge porn. That conditional threat is an attempt to literally extort something (money, sexual images, relationship cooperation) from the victim. Wolak and Finkelhor (2014) found that online perpetrators of sextortion were most often seeking sexual images, whereas in person perpetrators of sextortion were most often demanding that the victim return to their relationship.

That study examined sextortion in more detail. Wolak and Finkelhor recruited 1,631 victims from social media and found that few reported to police, but one-quarter sought psychological help; and 1 out 8 felt that they actually needed to move their place of residence in order to feel safe (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2014). Almost half of perpetrators carried out their threats and grievous harm was not uncommon, including assault and rape. More than half (60%) knew the perpetrator in person, while the other 40% met them online. This sample wasn’t intended to be representative of the US population, as it was compromised of victims who wanted to be surveyed and did not compare their characteristics to other digital users or types of victims. A different kind of sample was examined by researchers at the Brooking Institute, who examined 78 cases of sextortion being prosecuted in courts of law (Wittes et al., 2016). That sample reflected the small number of cases that are detected by law enforcement, and was comprised of victims who were disproportionately under 18 years old. They were targeted both through social media and through hacking of personal computers (but most often through social media). All perpetrators were male, and all targeted more than one victim. Child victims were both genders, but adult victims were almost all women.

Some perpetrators had personal relationships with some of their victims, while others did not. In contrast, revenge porn is viewed as occurring primarily within personal relationships, primarily romantic relationships that are over. One survey examined the circumstances that might lead to revenge
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