

Review

Emerging Adults and the Dangers of Cyberspace: Sexting and Sextortion- A Literature Review

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Texting is a relatively new word describing the transmission, by electronic means of sexually explicit photos or messages, commonly of females. Research indicated that ending up in the wrong hands, posting, sending, and forwarding sexual images and videos may be damaging, sometimes for the long run to those pictured or filmed. Sextortion [coming from 'sexual' and 'extortion'] is the blackmailing of the pictured individuals, by using threats or coercion to release more sexually explicit pictures of themselves to avoid wide dissemination of the pictures that the sextortionist already has in his possession. The ages 18-25 have been referred to as 'emerging adulthood' during which the youngsters are in the midst of establishing their identity, developing their self-esteem, and gaining social recognition. Sexting, or sextortion may have wide and far negative implications on their present and future functioning in the social arena, on their self-esteem and their establishing a path for their adult life. The present paper describes those phenomena, and its impact on emerging adults.

Keywords: Texting; Sextortion; Cyber bullying; Victims; Emerging Adults; Youngsters; Effects of Bullying

"Ashley Reynolds was a happy 14-year-old who loved sports, did well in school academically and socially, and enjoyed keeping a journal she intended her "future self" to read. But what happened in the summer of 2009 was so devastating that she couldn't bring herself to record it in her diary—or speak about it to anyone. She had become the victim of sextortion, a growing Internet crime in which young girls and boys are often targeted. Her life was being turned upside down by an online predator who took advantage of her youth and vulnerability to terrorize her by demanding that she send him sexually explicit images of herself." [FBI website <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/sextortion> retrieved Sept. 3, 2017]

Cyberbullying: Texting and Textortion

Adolescents and emerging adults [those 18-25 years old] [1] have been fascinated with the seemingly unending uses that are available to them by the newly developed technology, including smart phones, twitter, Facebook, and e-mails, to name just a few. One of the common uses of that technology are the sexually related and at times explicit words, pictures and videos that a young female [it is mostly females, but not

only] may send online to a guy that she may be interested in, in an attempt to encourage him to notice her, and make herself more desirable [2,3] found that heavy use and reliance on the Internet and cell phones starts as early as age 12. Moreover, he pointed out that 91% of emerging adults go online, and their primary communication was carried out via text messaging. About three quarters of youngsters in that age group own a cell phone, through which they text. [4] noted that female youngsters may sext in order to arouse the interest of an individual that she may be interested in, or alternatively to keep her partner who may request it happy, while males may sext as a strategy of luring or arousing females to engage in sexual acts with them. Reviewing sexting by gender, Howard (2017) [5] indicated that "where females (66%) were more likely to be solicited sexually than males (34%), males (57%) were exposed to more uninvited sexually explicit material than females (42%). Both males and females (51% versus 48%) were found to be similarly harassed"(p. 35).

The website of the gov't of Ontario, Canada [http://www.ontario.ca/page/bullying-we-can-all-help-stop-it?gclid=EAIaI-QobCHMt56P6eGJ1gIVx7fACh0npw-B9EAAYASAAEgJTOvD_BwE retrieved Sept. 3, 2017] indicated that cyber bullying is "electronic communication that:

- Is used to upset, threaten or embarrass another person.
- Uses email, cell phones, text messages and social media sites to threaten, harass, embarrass, socially exclude or damage reputations and friendships.
- Includes put downs, insults and can also involve spreading

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rumours, sharing private information, photos or videos or threatening to harm someone.

- Is always aggressive and hurtful.”

Many emerging adults, who text sometimes naively sexually related material of themselves, may not comprehend or even disregard the possible negative outcomes of their irresponsible behavior which may start by impulsiveness, as a joke, or as an attempt to become socially acceptable [6,7]. Once words or a sexually explicit picture were sent online, the sender has no more control over what happens with it. And here is where sextortion comes into play. Sextortion is exploitative and it is, essentially, the connection of sex and extortion. In other words, once sexually related words, pictures or video are sent online, it opens the door to perpetrators to coerce, via physical threats and cyber bullying, the sender to submit more explicit pictures and possibly perform sexual favors in order to avoid the perpetrator’s threats that he would make public the sexually explicit material that he already has, and thus available to millions of other network users to watch [8,9]. Emerging adults, aged 18-25, are most involved in sexting and most vulnerable to sextortion. The anonymity that comes with sexting and the use of one’s cell phone or computer, adds to the ease with which predators lurk around and use the youngsters’ vulnerability [4,10].

Emerging Adults

Munsey (2006) [11] highlighted Arnett’s recent theoretical conceptualization of the age between adolescence and adulthood. Arnett termed it ‘Emerging adulthood’ and characterized it as including the following features:

- Age of identity exploration - where the young people explore who they are, and essentially, what they want to do and be when they grow up.
- Age of instability - these years are marked by residence changes, where youngsters attend college, or live with friends or a romantic partner. These frequent moves may end once they get settled, marry and/or have children of their own.
- Age of self-focus - his age is characterized by the youngster involvement in self- exploration, focusing on who they are, where they want to go in life, who they may want to marry, and how they want their future to be.
- Age of feeling in between - While emerging adults feel that they are taking responsibility for themselves, they do not yet feel like full-fledged adults.
- Age of possibilities - Optimism is one of the more salient feelings and viewpoints of that age. These youngsters feel that they can live “better than their parents did”, that they will find a lifelong soul mate, that they will secure a good and well-paying job, and be

personally and professionally satisfied and fulfilled.

Arnett (1995) [12] observed that youngsters at that age, with the issues that they may need to address, and with their lack of experience and often immaturity, are prone to engage in reckless behaviour, aggressiveness, sensation seeking, egocentrism, and the autonomy they have from the adults who used to peer into their world and attempt to exert their influence on their behaviour. It is easy to see to see that consequently emerging adults, who live a stormy period in their development, encounter many obstacles and problematic behaviours which older adults would not. For instance, [13] found that many emerging adults display mental health disorders, and [14] put that number as high 50% of youngsters at that age range. Add to that texting and cyberbullying, and it opens the way to further emotional and social issues [15].

Prevalence of Cyber bullying

No exact numbers are available regarding the prevalence of sextortion, since this word has started to be used relatively recently, and no surveys are available to denote the number and severity of these cases [16]. However, it is suggested that most sextortion cases [up to 70%] are unreported and thus it is possible that the authorities and researchers are not aware of the scope of the problem [17]. So, while we do not have exact number of texting and sextortion incidents in the U.S., we know that it is a growing problem, which is grabbing public attention due to extreme measures that some youngsters employ, such as suicide, as a result of being sexually exposed and bullied online [18]. The Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] recently reported that sextortion is a global problem and is consistently and significantly intensifying in the U.S. and around the world [19]. Day (2015) highlighted the same problem exists in the U.K., where youngsters are facing the same cyber bullying. In the Philippines, noted Felongco (2015) [20], it is gaining public attention and is forcing the authorities to take steps to apprehend cyber criminals.

The effects of Cyberbullying and Sextortion

There are almost no academic or research papers on the effects of textortion, though there is some evidence that the professional community is ‘waking up’ to the potential damage of cyberbullying [21]. Sextortion, as pointed above, could have devastating effects, and aside from the most extreme one [suicide], there are reports of youngsters who were so bullied and ended up suffering from significant emotional distress, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and possible loss of work places and romantic partners [22,23,21].

In their study on cyberbullying of young adults, [24] found that “Consistent with research on traditional bullying, the possible negative effects of cyberbullying were most pronounced for the cyberbully/victim participants, especially the males. These individuals generally reported having more negative physical, psychological, and academic effects from electronic bullying than those in other groups [those subjected to non-electronic bullying]. Others have noted that bully/victims experience the

emotional problems associated with victimization and the behavioral difficulties associated with children who bully” (p. S18). [25] cited a study conducted by the Cyberbullying Research Center, where it was discovered that anger and frustration remain the dominant responses among senior and junior high students [26]. Mitchel, Finkelhor & Becker-Blease (2007) [27] asked 512 psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers to indicate the reasons youth sought their help. Those professionals indicated that a third of the youth they treated sought such treatment as a result of having been cyberbullied. Clearly, then, cyberbullying is having significant clinical effects on today’s youth. DeSmet, Deforche, Hubklet, Stremersch and De Bourdeaudhuij (2014) [28] found in their study that obese youngsters were significantly more cyberbullied, and consequently experienced lower quality of life, lower motivation for physical activity, lack of willingness to attend school, and toyed with suicidal ideation as well.

“So, what does this all mean? Research confirms that both bully victims as well as offenders are emotionally harmed by the act of cyberbullying. In a fact sheet produced by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, loneliness, humiliation, anxiety, worries and insecurity were each reported as further manifestations of the initial emotional responses to the bullying process. These feelings have the potential to cause students to fear going to school. This constant instability makes it difficult for bully victims to adjust socially and emotionally, focus on their studies, and develop in a healthy mental fashion. These responses can lead to more serious clinical implications, such as depression, which can continue to develop into even worse problems” [29].

To conclude, it is clear that cyberbullying, especially for emerging adults could be harmful in the short and long term. Sometimes those traumatic events may haunt the person throughout his or her entire life. Parents, teachers, and law enforcement officials must spread the word that it is harmful and not a threat that the youngster can cope with alone. I chose to end this article with a quote from the FBI Website on handling online conversations responsibly:

“Don’t Become a Victim of Sextortion

Special Agent Larry Meyer and other investigators experienced in online child sexual exploitation cases offer these simple tips for young people who might think that sextortion could never happen to them:

- Whatever you are told online may not be true, which means the person you think you are talking to may not be the person you really are talking to.
- Don’t send pictures to strangers. Don’t post any pictures of yourself online that you wouldn’t show to your grandmother. “If you only remember that,” Meyer said, “you are probably going to be safe.” - If you are being targeted by an online predator, tell someone. If you feel you can’t talk to a parent, tell a trusted teacher or counsellor. You can also call the FBI, the local police, or the National Center for

Missing & Exploited Children’s Cyber Tipline.

- You might be afraid or embarrassed to talk with your parents, but most likely they will understand. “One of the common denominators in the Chansler case,” Meyer noted, “was that parents wished their daughters had told them sooner. They were very understanding and sympathetic. They realized their child was being victimized.” [FBI website <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/sextortion> retrieved Sept. 3, 2017]

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