Running head: IMPACT ‘SEXTING’ HAS ON YOUTH CULTURE

**The Impact of ‘*Sexting*’ on Youth Culture**

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**Introduction**

Tony Blair (2005) stated in a speech that the issue lies within the system of criminal justice in the sense that it is trying to fight 21st century crimes with 19th century methods. As society progresses and technology advances it can become difficult for criminologists alike to prevent and/or deter new crimes. Therefore, the evolution of technology is correlated with the evolution of crime and impacts society as a whole. Technological trends among teenagers and the youth culture is growing rapidly and at a rate much faster than among adults. As parents and adults are trying to remain vigilant at monitoring the behaviour and actions of the younger generation (Parker, 2009), it would seem as though they are constantly one step ahead in terms of technological intellect.

The Internet has been deemed an insecure and dangerous place for children and teenagers regarding peer-to-peer communication and the lack of privacy it entails. Nevertheless, advancements have allowed parents to secure and monitor the Internet and limit the use of it for their children. However, as stated, the younger generation is one step ahead and has now resorted to personal hand-held devices such as cell phones to maneuver around the “parent obstacle” of continually being limited and monitored. Thus, the evolution of a new crime has emerged and has made an aggressive impact on the youth culture; *‘sexting’*. This recently developed term is described as, “the practice of sending or posting sexually suggestive text messages and images, including nude or semi-nude photographs, via cellular telephones…” (Parker, 2009). The acts of *‘sexting’* are highly controversial and have generated an enormous amount of issues in the legal context of crime. Youths are unaware of the legal consequences that are now being struck down upon *‘sexting’* offenders such as felonies and misdemeanors to sex crimes resulting in imprisonment.

This new trend has not only affected the younger generation criminologically, but has sociologically altered the way in which teenagers interact intimately. *‘Sexting’* has become increasingly problematic within the criminal justice system and has created a new form of intimate communication for the younger generation with limitless possibilities as the cellular industry continues to generate technological advancements for their products. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the increase of *‘sexting’*, a new technological development, among society has and will continue to impact youth culture, both criminologically and sociologically.

**Methodology**

The primary objective for this paper was to outline and evaluate the potential connection of peer-to-peer communication devices, such as the cellular telephone, with youth culture and criminal activity. In order to focus on a single relatable topic, an initial Google search was completed to find a correlation between the two entities. Google keywords applied consisted of “youth crime and technology”, “peer to peer communication”, “cellular devices and crime”, and “cellular devices, crime, and teenagers”. After briefly reviewing each of the search outcomes, a topic was then chosen that was of great interest to the reader, with plenty of supporting documentation. The topic was *‘sexting’*.

The actual data for this paper was attained through the conduction of a literature review. Journal articles were chosen by random selection through online database searches. Databases utilized for performing the search were Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and Scholars Portal. Keywords entered during this search included “sexting”, “youth culture”, “cellular devices”, “child pornography”, “youth sex crime”, “advances in technology”, and “teenagers and texting”. Once a minimum of 20 articles were retrieved, each article was reviewed for both relevancy to the thesis, and to ensure they came from reliable sources. The most useful articles were then selected for further examination, and used as references in this paper. A total of four journal articles were subjected to support the thesis.

**Background**

Considering new technology is constantly being developed and improved there is plenty of technological jargon such as *‘sexting’* which has not been regarded as a word in the English dictionary and therefore has no set definition. The word was developed by creating a portmanteau where two words, sex and texting, are combined to create one word, *‘sexting’*.As with the word, ‘blog’ which was once considered technological jargon and is now defined in the English dictionary, the word *‘sexting’* will ultimately have a similar result. Having been reported as technological jargon terminology as early as 2005, *‘sexting’* has since been occurring world-wide. Gaining enormous popularity among teenagers, this form of sexual expression has generated numerous legal cases with argumentative charges and sentences and is now being considered as a dangerous crime.

‘*Sexting’* was made possible by way of advancements in technology and the lack of awareness to the possible problems that could occur with the possession of such an innovation. It was the development of text messaging from cellular devices, along with the addition of cameras manufactured into cellular devices. These technologies allowed individuals, predominantly teenagers, to take part in illegal activity being completely unaware of the possible consequences.

The insufficient knowledge teenagers possess regarding the concerns of *‘sexting’* is surprising for the rates at which these acts are occurring among the younger generation is astonishing. A recent survey conducted by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com (2008) examined teens (13-19) and young adults (20-26) who were sending or posting sexually suggestive/explicit text and images; *‘sexting’*. The data revealed that approximately 20% of teens overall have sent/posted nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves. This figure was represented by 22% teen girls and 18% teen boys. The study further discovered that 39% of all teens send or post sexually suggestive messages, therefore signifying that messages (text, email, IM) are more prevalent than sexually suggestive images. As well, this survey questioned where the majority of these sexually explicit messages and images were being sent to and approximately 71% of teen girls and 67% of teen boys sent/posted this content to a boyfriend/girlfriend. These numbers indicate that *‘sexting’* is not regarded as consequential and deemed as a popular trend among teenagers.

**Criminal Impact**

The more people are becoming aware of *‘sexting’*, the more publicity the topic is receiving. From being discussed on daytime talk shows, to being mentioned and reenacted in popular evening television programs, the issue of *‘sexting’* is extremely prominent in society. Legal issues surrounding *‘sexting’* are seeming to be problematic and causing concern regarding sanctions imposed upon *‘sexting’* crimes and the charges and sentencing options that are given. The issue is that teenagers are not aware of the legal consequences that can originate from sending sexually explicit text and images to another, specifically when age is considered.

Through extensive research it would seem as though child pornography is the most prevalent charge laid against those involved in *‘sexting’* crimes and is of great debate. One particular case involved six Greensburg Salem High School students in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, all of who were between 14-17 years old (Brunker, 2009). Three teenage girls allegedly captured nude or semi-nude photographs of themselves and sent them to three teenage male classmates by way of their cell phones. While the three girls faced charges of manufacturing, disseminating, and possession of child pornography, the three boys faced charges of possession of child pornography.

Patrick Artur, an accomplished defense attorney for child pornography, stated that the prosecution of the minors for photos they took of themselves opposes the purpose of the laws set out to deter the typical offender (Brunker, 2009). Under Pennsylvania’s child pornography law, there is no mandatory minimum sentence length, therefore the students would not be incarcerated but would, however, have to register as sexual offenders for at least ten years. This particular case emphasizes the criminal impact *‘sexting’* can have on youths and how it can greatly affect their status in society. If they were required to register as a sexual offender it would become permanent on their criminal records and would limit their opportunities in the future. It would seem as though that the prosecution of a juvenile for allegedly creating and distributing child pornography was a topic of little occurrences; however, since the development of *‘sexting’*, there have been an increase in these types of cases.

Another example of the criminal impact *‘sexting’* has on youth culture is that of 18-year-old, Isaac Owusu, of Morrisville, Vermont where he was sentenced up to two years in prison (Curran, 2009). Owusu was a former standout athlete at South Burlington High School who was caught up in a sexual assault charge where he contended that the girls were willing participants in the incident. Vermont enacted a new law that allowed minors charge with first offense of *‘sexting’* to be deemed negligent in juvenile court as opposed to being prosecuted as adults or put on the state’s sex offender registry. After pleading guilty, Owusu was able to get the charges dropped however will still serve 90 days for two counts of committing a prohibited act and one count of lewd and lascivious conduct. This example examines how serious such an offense can become to the extent that imprisonment may be required depending on the country or even state an individual resides. Teenagers who are participating in what would seem to be careless, harmless, and meaningless activities even with friends or significant others actually place themselves at risk with the criminal justice system; these actions can be life altering and should never be taken lightly.

**Social Impact**

Not only does *‘sexting’* impact the youth culture criminologically, but it has social implications as well that have altered the way in which teenagers interact with one another both conversationally and intimately. Furthermore, there have been recent reports documenting the hardships individuals must endure once the *‘sexting’* images or texts are released to the general populace of the schools and/or friends.

Society as a whole has adjusted the way in which technological advancements have provided individuals with a new means of communication. Text messages are now used more often than the act of calling a person; the impersonality of texting has taken over the idea of having a true conversation. It is stated within the research of Faulkner and Culwin (2005), that text messaging is favoured above conversations and e-mailing and particularly teenagers, especially girls, are the most frequent text users. These results would therefore be significant to the survey that the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy conducted. They are intertwined and related for the survey found that teenage girls who sent/posted sexually suggestive images did so more than teenage boys and also that sexually suggestive text were sent/posted more than images. Communicating by way of text messages is de-sensitizing the younger generation and therefore has an impact on the social ways in which youths interact with one another. The idea that parents provide cellular devices to children as the costs fall is only maintaining the problem and beginning *‘sexting’* at a younger age (USA Today Magazine, 2009).

An important social impact to note when discussing *‘sexting’* is the influence the repercussions can have on the individual who has been sexually exposed to others. As the survey stated, 71% of teen girls and 67% of teen boys intended on sending/posting their sexually suggestive text or images to a boyfriend or girlfriend. Thus assuming that they were expecting the sexually explicit material to remain with the individual it was sent to and was not to be viewed by others. However, incidents have arisen where sexually explicit images or text have been sent or posted to others that were not initially to be involved and have resulted in devastating and tragic events. Being young and naïve, teenagers are unaware of the outcome and affect that *‘sexting’* and bullying/teasing combined can have on individuals.

An example of such a case was that of Jessica Logan, a typical, well-rounded 18 year-old who had been involved with a *‘sexting’* incident with her boyfriend at the time (Celizic, 2009). Jessica had sent nude images of herself to her boyfriend at a time where they were dating, yet when they broke up the boyfriend decided to send the nude images to other girls in their high school. It was the harassment and name calling that led Jessica into to a downward spiral of depression and misery. These acts alone were the sole cause of Jessica’s suicide. Indications of her altered moods were unnoticeable aside from the skipped classes here and there. It wasn’t until an acquaintance of Jessica’s had committed suicide, to which she attended the funeral, and to where she returned home and hung herself in her closet with her cell phone in the center of the floor beneath her.

There have been other documented cases where *‘sexting’* acts were the generating force behind bullying or teasing, thus leading to suicidal events. It would seem as though the social impact of *‘sexting’* has become dangerous and life-threatening to teenagers who place trust in the wrong places. These issues are a result that the originator of the sexually suggestive text or images has no control over the use of such material once sent or posted.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion it would seem as though *‘sexting’* is becoming a global issue that needs to be addressed sternly and with proper sanctions in place for those who offend. The criminal justice system must keep in mind, however, that the purpose is to try and keep young offenders out of the system and to imprison or place teenagers on the sexual offenders list would simply undermine that purpose. The societal impacts are becoming of grave concern, for teenagers are reporting participation in *‘sexting’* to be astonishingly high.

These numbers, combined with the criminological consequences that could result in such activities indicates that the youth culture is being threatened due to such technological advancements. Providing the young population with knowledge, stories, and examples of consequences of such “illegal” activity should be a high priority for criminologists and parents alike. Alterations to the social and criminological impacts on youth culture must be done in order to stabilize a rapidly increasing world-wide problem.

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