

The Boston Globe

Girls Gone Wild Goes Techie

By Laura Sessions Stepp

December 12, 2008

YOUNG PEOPLE use the Internet for marvelous things: raising money for charitable causes, shopping for bargains, staying in touch with family and friends. But a sizable number also courts danger online. This includes kids still in braces.

According to a survey by the youth research firm TRU, 20 percent of teens have sent nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves over the Internet. Thirty-three percent have received such photos or videos via e-mail, instant message, or webcam.

Considering that this pinup technology has been widely available for only two to three years, these proportions are not insignificant. What's also perplexing is that more girls than guys take part: 22 percent to 18 percent. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before girls gone wild also went techie.

Is this simply a new way of flirting? Perhaps. Of temporarily assuming a new identity like the hooker costumes that abound on Halloween? Probably.

But it also may be girls' latest - and potentially damaging - play for power in our highly sexualized culture. A young woman in the Bay area of California explained why she started instant-messaging nude photos to a boy she met just once at church camp: "He asked me to do it in an e-mail. At first I thought, 'Are you crazy?' But I was home alone one day and I just did it. He liked it a lot, so I did it again.



... "I'm not even attracted to him. I just want him to want me. It's definitely power. He begs me for these."

I've heard similar sentiments while writing "Unhooked," a book about girls and young women in the hookup culture. Girls bragged about how delicious it was to engage a young man sexually and then abandon him. Some said they moved on to new conquests even when they found themselves - to their dismay - feeling attached to the old ones.

Under the devil-may-care facade of many lay confusion, cynicism, or something bordering on depression.

The same thing is surely true for many of these young sex techies. The Bay area girl remembers thinking, "If he wants a fake thing, maybe he will want the real thing." He didn't, but she continued to send him photos when he asked, feeling "disgusted" with herself even as she hit the send button.

Having casual sex with someone you can see and talk to, as potentially risky as that is, is one thing. At least you have a shot at tracking the guy down should you get pregnant, a disease, or just plain mad.

Shipping nude photos over the Internet, even to someone you know, is different. You have no control over where those photos go once they leave your computer. The sweetest boyfriend in the world might nonetheless share photos of your breasts with a buddy or two. Or someone you don't know and don't particularly want to know might come across a nude pose and decide to find and "friend" you.

What's truly disturbing is that girls (and guys) realize such risks exist and send the images anyway. Almost two out of three teens in the survey described tech sex as both "flirty" and "dangerous."

So what to do?

Law enforcement officers can continue to warn kids about the dangers of the Internet. Parents can restrict e-mail accounts, block objectionable websites, and limit hours of access. But how effective are those tactics long term, competing against louder voices of friends and celebrities?

Perhaps concerned adults can learn from the anti-smoking movement. Young people eventually started smoking less not because they thought cigarettes would kill them. They smoked less because educators convinced them that they, not the tobacco industry, should take charge of their health, and that by saying no to smoking they'd be better athletes, have whiter teeth and healthier skin, and be healthier overall.

Positives motivate almost always better than negatives. What if adults said to teen girls something like, "Do you want to control your image and who has access to it? You - not your boyfriend, best friend, or classmate - should get to decide who sees how beautiful you are. That's real power."

~~~~~  
*Laura Sessions Stepp, a former Washington Post reporter, is a senior media consultant for The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. The Campaign, along with CosmoGirl magazine, sponsored the survey.*