



## Original article

## Sexting, Substance Use, and Sexual Risk Behavior in Young Adults

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## A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** Cell phone use has become more widespread over the past decade. Young adults are frequently early adopters of new technologies, including cell phones. Most previous research examining sexting, the act of sending sexually explicit or suggestive images via text message, has focused on the legal or social consequences of this behavior. The current study focused on the public health implications of sexting by examining associations between sexting, substance use, and sexual risk behavior in youth.

**Methods:** Young adults (N = 763) completed online questionnaires assessing demographics, cell phone use (e.g., texting, sexting), substance use, and sexual risk behaviors.

**Results:** Sexting was reported by a substantial minority of participants (44%). Compared with their nonsexting counterparts, participants who engaged in sexting were more likely to report recent substance use and high-risk sexual behaviors, including unprotected sex and sex with multiple partners. Of those who engaged in sexting, a considerable percentage (31.8%) reported having sex with a new partner for the first time after sexting with that person. In multivariate analyses, sexting was associated with high-risk sexual behavior, after accounting for demographic factors, total texting behaviors, and substance use.

**Conclusions:** Results suggest that sexting is robustly associated with high-risk sexual behavior. Many individuals exchange explicit or provocative photos with long-term sexual partners, but at least some participants in this study were incurring new sexual risks after sexting. Additional research is needed to understand the contexts in which sexting occurs, motivations for sexting, and relationship of sexting to risk behavior.

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IMPLICATIONS AND  
CONTRIBUTION

The present study found relatively high rates of “sexting” (sending explicit photographs via text message) in young adults. Sexting was robustly associated with substance use and high-risk sexual behavior, including having multiple sexual partners, unprotected sex, and higher rates of sexually transmitted infections.

Cell phone usage has increased dramatically in the United States, with more than 320 million individual subscriber connections as of 2011 [1]. Americans send >2 trillion text messages annually, and almost 30% of U.S. households use cellular telephone connections exclusively [1]. Young adults and older adolescents are especially likely to be cell phone users. Eighty-three percent of 17

year olds own cell phones, and this percentage increases in young adulthood [2,3]. In particular, text-based communication is increasingly popular among youth. More than one-half of cell-owning teenagers text a friend at least daily, and approximately one-third report sending more than 100 text messages per day [4]. Although cell phone usage is popular and has advantages of convenience and enhanced security, there are disadvantages as well, including accidental injuries and deaths associated with distracted driving and interference with classroom-based learning among students [5,6].

Cell phone use has the potential for other negative outcomes. In recent years, a new trend of sexualized text commu-

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nication has emerged—“sexting” is typically defined as the act of sending sexually explicit or suggestive photographs via text message [7–9]. Sexting may result in adverse outcomes for those involved, including embarrassment, mental health problems, public dissemination of sexual photos, and legal consequences if the images are of underage individuals [2,10–12]. Prevalence estimates of sexting vary considerably, depending on the population assessed, the manner in which sexting is defined, and the timing of the survey [10]. In a recent national telephone survey of Internet-using youth (ages 10–17 years), Mitchell et al found that 2.5% of participants reported appearing in or creating sexually provocative images to be sent to others and 7.1% reported that they had received provocative images from others [10]. Older youth were more likely to engage in each behavior. In a sample of Internet-recruited adolescents and young adults, 19% of teenagers (ages 13–19 years) and 32% of young adults (ages 20–26 years) reported sending a nude or seminude picture or video of themselves to someone via text or e-mail [13]. In this same study, 31% of teenagers and 46% of young adults reported receiving a nude or seminude picture or video from someone else. In a second sample of youth (ages 14–24 years), 13% of female participants and 9% of male participants reported sending a nude photo or video of themselves to someone else [14]. The majority of such images appear to be exchanged between individuals who are already in a relationship, but some individuals report sending or receiving a sexual image when one of the parties was interested in initiating a relationship [2,10,15,16].

Most of the limited research on sexting to date examines the social and legal consequences of this behavior [17]. Less research has examined the potential health implications of sexting. Over the past dozen years, there has been increasing documentation of the role technology plays in sexual behavior. In multiple studies with diverse populations, researchers have documented that persons who seek sexual partners via the Internet show a pattern of substantially higher sexual risk behaviors. Persons seeking partners online report a higher number of sexual partners, more unprotected sex acts, higher rates of substance use in conjunction with sexual activity, and more sexually transmitted infections (STIs) [18–24]. Given the rapidly increasing popularity of cell phones, including the use of smart phones as web platforms, there would appear to exist a potential for cell phone technology to also play a role in sexuality, particularly in youth, the group that reports the greatest use of these devices.

There has been limited research examining the relationships between sexting and sexual risk behavior. In one preliminary study of primarily Hispanic young women, Ferguson found that 20% of participants reported engaging in sexting [25]. In this study, sexting was associated with sex without contraception, perceived pleasure of sexual activity, and histrionic personality traits, but it was not associated with the number of sexual partners or unprotected sex with new partners. The author concluded that sexting was unrelated to most sexual risk behaviors. Although a valuable contribution, this study was limited by a relatively small ( $N = 207$ ) and homogeneous (all female participants, 96% Hispanic) sample and a limited assessment of sexual risk behavior. The purpose of the present study was to examine relationships between sexting and a broad array of sexual risk behaviors in a larger more diverse sample of young adults. We hypothesized that sexting

would be reported by a substantial minority of participants and that sexting would be associated with sexual risk behavior. We further hypothesized that sexting would be associated with other risk behaviors, such as substance use.

## Methods

A brief survey was administered to students enrolled in undergraduate psychology classes at a large public university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. All surveys were completed anonymously online via a password-protected secure survey system. Participants received course credit for participation. The system was set up to award credit automatically while masking participant identities from the researchers. A total of 800 participants completed the survey. Data were collected from September to December 2011. This was one of several studies available for course credit during the fall 2011 semester. In total, 1,545 individuals participated in one or more of these studies. Thus, 800 of the 1,545 (51.8%) individuals who participated in research during the semester participated in this study. Four participants (.5%) were eliminated for random or problematic responding. Because we were specifically interested in the sexting behaviors of young adults, data analyses were restricted to individuals who were 18–25 years of age ( $N = 763$ ), a common age range used for defining “young adults” [26,27]. Participants were told that the survey contained personal questions about the use of cell phones and other technology, substance use, and sexual behavior. All consent procedures were conducted online. All study methods and materials were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Virginia Commonwealth University.

## Measures

Participants completed a self-administered anonymous survey that included questions assessing demographic information, cell phone ownership, sexting and other texting behaviors, substance use, and sexual behavior.

### Demographics

Participants were asked their gender, age, year in school, race/ethnicity, grade point average, employment status, student status (full or part-time), and whether they were a member of a fraternity or sorority.

### Texting and sexting

Participants reported whether they owned a cell phone. Participants were also asked to estimate the number of texts they send or receive in a typical day on a 10-point ordinal scale: 0, 1–15, 16–30, 31–45, 46–60, 61–75, 76–90, 91–105, 106–120, or >120. In addition, participants were asked whether they had ever engaged in sexting, which was defined as “sending or receiving sexually explicit or suggestive photos via text message.” Participants were then asked to report the total number of sexual images they had sent and the total number they had received. Finally, participants were asked to indicate the total number of times they had sex with someone for the first time after they had engaged in sexting with that person.

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