



The association between smartphone dating applications and college students' casual sex encounters and condom use



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore the association between using smartphone dating applications (apps) and having unprotected sex with a casual sex partner.

Study design: This is a cross-sectional study. Students were recruited from four university campuses in Hong Kong by convenience sampling.

Main outcome measures: Subjects completed a structured questionnaire asking about the use of dating apps, sexual history and socio-demographic information. Multiple logistic regressions were used to explore the association between using dating apps and having unprotected sex with a casual sex partner.

Results: Six hundred and sixty-six subjects were included in the analysis. Users of dating apps were more likely to have had unprotected sex with a casual sex partner the last time they engaged in sexual intercourse (aOR: 10.06). Using dating apps for more than 12 months was associated with having a casual sex partner in the last sexual intercourse (aOR: 3.21), as well as having unprotected sex with that casual partner (aOR: 13.56).

Conclusion: We found a robust association between using dating apps and having unprotected sex with a casual sex partner, implying that using dating apps is an emerging sexual risk factor. We recommend that interventions promoting the safe use of dating apps should be implemented.

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Introduction

Smartphone dating applications (apps) are very popular nowadays due to advanced mobile technology and widespread Internet access. Several studies have been conducted exploring the adverse impacts of dating apps on sexual risk behaviours. However, findings about the impacts of dating apps on unprotected sex and casual sex remain conflicting. For instance, a study in the United States (US) found that app users were more likely to have a higher number of partners [1], while this association was not supported in a Hong Kong study [2]. Importantly, previous studies were conducted exclusively among homosexual men. The generalizability of the findings to the heterosexual population is unclear because distinct differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals in their sexual behaviours and sexual risks have been evident in previous studies [3,4]. In addition, youths are the most engaged group to use new technology to connect with others for friendship, dating and sexual relationships. The lack of

knowledge regarding the association between using dating apps and the sexual health of youths of various sexual orientations necessitated the present study. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the association between using dating apps and having a casual sex partner and unprotected sex among college students.

Methods

Sampling and procedure

This was a cross-sectional study conducted on four universities in Hong Kong, with students recruited by convenience sampling between September and November 2015. A recruitment booth was set up in the central location of university campuses. The questionnaires were individually handed out and collected. Students were excluded if they did not understand English and Chinese, or if they had already been recruited for the study. Written consent was obtained for all study subjects. The study subjects anonymously self-completed a coded questionnaire to avoid social desirability bias. The subjects were informed that they could skip any questions they did not want to answer.

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Study instruments

The frequency of using smartphone dating apps was assessed. The operational definition of “smartphone dating app” was that it was primarily for dating, that it used GPS functionality to locate other users nearby, and that users could send text messages and pictures [5]. History of sexual intercourse (oral/vaginal/anal intercourse) and age of the first sexual intercourse were assessed. Those who had sexual intercourse were also asked whether the type of sex partner in their last sexual intercourse encounter was committed or casual. The operational definition of a “committed partner” referred to a boyfriend, girlfriend or life partner.

Statistical analysis

Simple and multiple logistic regression analyses were used to identify factors associated with having a casual sex partner and having a casual sex partner without condom use the last time they had sexual intercourse. The Hosmer & Lemeshow Test was used to evaluate the model fit of multiple logistic regression models [6]. Multicollinearity diagnostics were also performed for all regression models. In each regression model, only subjects with full data were included in the analysis. Imputation or other substitution methods were not used.

All statistical analyses were conducted by the SPSS 23 with p values < 0.05 indicating statistical significance.

Ethics approvals

Ethics approval was obtained from the university institutional review boards.

Results

A total of six hundred and seventy-six people were approached. Of these, ten people (1.5%) were excluded because they indicated that they were not a college student. Finally, six hundred and sixty-six students were included in this study. 52.9% of study subjects ($n = 352$) indicated that they used dating apps. Of these, 51.7% of study subjects ($n = 182$) did not have sexual intercourse experience. Among the overall sample, 17% of study subjects ($n = 111$) indicated that they were homosexual or bisexual.

Two hundred and sixty students who had sexual intercourse experiences (39.0%) were further analysed to explore factors associated with having a casual sex partner in their last encounter. The prevalence of having a casual sex partner in their last sexual intercourse experience was 21.2% ($n = 55$). Of these, 74.5% ($n = 41$) did not use a condom with the casual sex partner. Table 1 shows the socio-demographics and sexual history of the subjects.

Table 1 shows the results about factors associated with having a casual sex partner in the last encounter by simple and multiple logistic regression analyses. After controlling for socio-demographic factors, the use of dating apps (relative to nonusers) was not associated with having a casual partner in their last sexual intercourse experience. The length of time using dating apps was put into the regression model for further analysis. It was found that using dating apps for more than 12 months (relative to nonusers) was associated with having a casual sex partner in their last sexual intercourse experience (aOR: 3.21, $p < 0.05$). Other factors associated with having a casual partner in their last sexual intercourse experience included older age (aOR: 1.37, $p < 0.05$), being bisexual/homosexual male (aOR: 6.90, $p < 0.01$), and having a monthly income \geq HKD 5000 (aOR: 4.12, $p < 0.01$). Students who were currently in a relationship were less likely to having a casual sex partner in their last sexual intercourse experience (aOR: 0.18, $p < 0.01$).

Table 2 shows the results about factors associated with having a casual sex partner without using a condom in their last sexual

intercourse experience. The use of dating apps was associated with having a casual sex partner without using a condom in their last sexual intercourse experience (aOR: 10.06, $p < 0.05$). Further analysis found that using dating apps for more than 12 months (relative to nonusers) was associated with having a casual sex partner without using a condom in their last sexual intercourse experience (aOR: 13.56 $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, we found that bisexual/homosexual males were more like to have a casual sex partner without using a condom in their last sexual intercourse experience (aOR: 6.22, $p < 0.01$).

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, it was the first study to explore the association between using dating apps and sexual risk behaviours in a sample with different sexual orientations. Our study found a robust association between using dating apps and sexual risk behaviours. Users of dating apps were more likely to engage in sexual risk behaviours, including having a casual partner in their last sexual intercourse encounter and having unprotected sex with that partner. However, due to the limitation of a cross-sectional design, we could not establish a causal relationship between using dating apps and sexual risk behaviours. We hypothesized that the association between using dating apps and casual sex partners can be bidirectional. People intending to look for casual sex will use dating apps to look for potential sex partners. On the other hand, a study suggested that the convenience and mobility of dating apps might facilitate casual sex [7]. Furthermore, people always carry their phones, and users can easily arrange casual sex. This merits further longitudinal studies to test our hypotheses.

Dating app users were less likely to use condoms with the casual partners. This finding was consistent with those of previous studies, which found that Internet dating and sexting (sending or receiving sexually explicit photos) on mobile phones were associated with more unprotected sex. A study on college students in the US found that students who engaged in sexting were more likely to have more total unprotected vaginal and anal sex acts in the last 3 months (7.97 vs. 2.92), and more likely to have more sexual partners in the last 3 months (1.22 vs. 0.79) than those who did not [8]. Further qualitative studies are needed to understand the reasons for having unprotected sex among app users.

Besides, it was extremely alarming to find that unprotected sex was highly prevalent (74.5%) among students who had casual sex partners in their last sexual intercourse encounters as unprotected sex can lead to sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies. A study on female college students indicated that condom use was 0% in oral sex experiences and 69% in vaginal sex experiences [9]. A study in the US found that more than half of men aged 18–24 years did not use a condom in their most recent vaginal intercourse with a casual sex partner [10]. Studies reported that college students tend to be sexually adventurous, with multiple sexual partners and inconsistent condom use, suggesting that this group of people should be targeted in sexual health interventions [11,12].

In addition to dating app users, we found that older students, bisexual/homosexual male students, students with a higher monthly income and students who were not in a relationship were more likely to have a casual partner in their last sexual intercourse experience. Furthermore, older students and bisexual/homosexual male students were more likely to have unprotected sex with that partner. The findings about the association between socio-demographic factors and our study outcomes were consistent with those found in previous studies and probably not unique to our study population. First, previous studies also found that older college students were less likely to have consistent condom use in the previous 30 days and use condom during the last sex than younger college students [13,14]. Second, the association between sexual risk behaviours and sexual

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