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Young Adult Women, Sexting, and Risky Sexual Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored associations between sexually explicit text messaging (sexting), social media use, and engagement in risky sexual behaviors among young adult women to determine whether online sexting and social media activity was associated with real-world sexual behaviors. Participants completed a self-administered anonymous, online survey that included 66 questions assessing demographic information, use of technology, sexting activity, and sexual behaviors. A greater proportion of participants reported sexting than in previous studies and results indicate sexting is used to maintain intimate relationships online. Results also suggest that, for young women, social media and sexting facilitate alternative intimate communication, without physical intimacy. As interactions in online settings become more common within intimate and committed relationships, attitudes toward conventional, unconventional, and riskier sexual behaviors may also become more positive. Thus, present findings are valuable for understanding technology's role in young adult women's sexual behaviors.

Keywords: sexting, sexual health, social media

INTRODUCTION

The Internet influences the lives of young adults on almost a daily basis with 87% of 18 to 29 year-olds using social networking websites (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). The popularity of social media presents ample opportunities for exchanging sexual information and can directly affect the users' own sexual intentions and actions (Sean, Young, & Alexander, 2013). Practical and empirical understandings of the relationship between social media and sexuality in young adults is advancing due to the commonality of social media use by this age group as well as frequent participation in riskier sexual practices such as engagement in casual sexual relationships. These relationships are generally non-romantic and non-committal ranging from "friends with benefits" to completely anonymous sexual encounters with varying degrees of emotional intimacy and risky sexual practices (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Fortunato, Young, Boyd, & Fons, 2010; Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). Casual sex and number of sexual partners increase psychosocial and physical

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risks with research showing increased incidences of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections associated with “hooking up” (Jonason, Li, & Richards, 2011; Lehmiller, Vanderdrift, & Kelly, 2014; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). The present study aims to understand potential differences in sexual behaviors – behaviors that are known to increase the likelihood of poor emotional and physical health outcomes – among young adults who engage in sexualized Internet and social media use.

In particular, “sexting”—or exchange of sexual content through text messages—has drawn significant legal and research attention in the last few years. Some researchers have found that adolescents who engage in sexting are more likely to have unprotected sexual intercourse and, among girls, have an increased number of physical partners (Benotsch, Snipes, Margin, and Bull, 2013). These are similar to aforementioned risks associated with casual sexual activity. However, other research has challenged those findings (Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, and Zimmerman, 2013). The present study adds to the body of literature by developing a profile of “who” is sexting and what sexual risk behaviors are associated with both social media use and sexting. The goal is to address some of the knowledge gaps in the bigger picture of online behaviors relating to adverse sexual health outcomes. Since females are more likely to engage in social media and send messages that include sexual material (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014), this study specifically looks at the relationship between online engagement, sexting, and riskier sexual behaviors among women transitioning to adulthood.

METHODS

A sample of 145 emerging adult women (i.e., 18-25 years) was recruited through flyers, social media, and college classroom announcements at a southeastern university; the sample was comparable to the demographics of emerging adults in the state where recruitment occurred (Forbes, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d). Recruiting and analytical procedures were online and approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board. Participants completed an anonymous, online survey that included 66 questions assessing demographic information, use of technology, and sexting behaviors (i.e., “have you ever sent a text message that contained sexually explicit words, images, or videos?”).

Two reliable measurements assessing self-reported sexual behavior, potential of having unplanned pregnancies and/or contracting a STI were used to understand participants’ riskier sexual practices: *Attitudes Toward Unconventional Sex Scale* (ATUSS; Wenner, Russell, & McNulty, 2010) and the *Sexual Risk Survey* (Turchik & Garske, 2009). The latter of the two measurements was a 23-item questionnaire that asked participants how many times they engaged in risky sexual practices over the past six months (e.g., “Had anal sex without a condom” and “Had vaginal intercourse without protection against pregnancy”). The reliability of this measure was acceptable ($\alpha = .85$). The ATUSS includes 5 items with 7 options ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* and assesses the extent to which individuals engage in sexual behaviors that “deviate” from traditional sexual practices (Wenner, Russell, & McNulty, 2010, p. 80) An example question was “I like to experiment with different sexual practices”; the resulting Cronbach’s α for this study was .73.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to fulfill a need in current literature by investigating associations among online engagement, sexting, and risky sexual behaviors with emerging adult women. Analysis was first conducted to investigate group differences by relationship status,

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race/ethnicity, and online activities. A multiple regression was then performed to assess how sexting and enjoyment of online engagement was related to engagement in risky sexual behaviors.

The majority of the sample reported their race/ethnicity as Caucasian (66.7%, $n = 97$), followed by African-American (31.4%, $n = 46$), and Hispanic (4.9%, $n = 7$). The women were between the ages of 18 and 25 with an average age of 22.07 ($SD = 1.67$). A slight majority was single (52%, $n = 75$) while 29.4% ($n = 43$) were currently dating, 9.8% ($n = 14$) were engaged, and 7.8% ($n = 11$) were married. In regards to sexual orientation, there was little diversity present with 89.2% ($n = 129$) identifying as heterosexual or straight. Fifty-eight women (40%) stated that they had engaged in sexting while 87 (60%) had not. Conversely, a majority ($n = 128$; 88.3%) did use and enjoy social media.

Table 1 reports chi-square comparisons of women's sexting based on race/ethnicity, relationship status, and online activities. No significant differences in sexting behavior were found based on participants' relationship status or general use of social media. Racial differences were compared by using Caucasian participants as a reference group; due to lack of diversity, the only minority group tested was African Americans. Results revealed that individuals engaging in sexting were more likely to be African American and more likely to report not being a virgin (77% of those who do not sext reported being virgins).

Table 1
Sexting (sending/receiving sexually explicit text messages) based on participant characteristics and technology use ($n = 145$)

	No Sexting ($n = 58$)		Sexting ($n = 87$)		<i>p</i>
	%	(<i>n</i>)	%	(<i>n</i>)	
Ethnicity ^a					
Caucasian	44.3	(35)	55.7	(44)	.026*
African American	27.1	(13)	72.9	(35)	
Relationship status					
Single	42.6	(29)	57.4	(39)	.541
In a relationship	37.7	(29)	62.3	(48)	
Virgin					
Yes	77.4	(24)	22.6	(7)	.000***
No	30.4	(34)	69.6	(78)	
Use social media					
Yes	37.5	(48)	62.5	(80)	.137
No	58.8	(10)	41.2	(7)	

^a Caucasian participants were used as reference for African Americans. Total does not equal 100% because racial/ethnic groups with low n are not listed.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 1 Continued

Sexting (sending/receiving sexually explicit text messages) based on participant characteristics and technology use ($n = 145$)

	No Sexting ($n = 58$)		Sexting ($n = 87$)		p
	%	(n)	%	(n)	
Enjoy social media					
Yes	26.9	(21)	73.1	(57)	.004**
No	55.2	(37)	44.8	(30)	
Primarily use phone to access social media					
Yes	20.0	(13)	80.0	(52)	.032*
No	56.3	(45)	43.8	(35)	
Send online private messages					
Yes	35.9	(42)	64.1	(75)	.044*
No	57.1	(16)	42.9	(12)	
Search for places online to meet potential romantic partners					
Yes	16.2	(6)	83.8	(31)	.000***
No	48.1	(52)	51.9	(56)	
Flirt with someone online					
Yes	37.2	(16)	62.8	(27)	.000***
No	41.2	(42)	58.8	(60)	
Search online for information on current romantic partner					
Yes	46.3	(25)	53.7	(29)	.004**
No	36.3	(33)	63.7	(58)	
Have online blog					
Yes	36.0	(45)	64.0	(80)	.011*
No	65.0	(13)	35.0	(7)	
Use internet for long distance romantic relationship					
Yes	11.3	(7)	88.7	(55)	.000***
No	61.4	(51)	38.6	(32)	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

While no differences in sexting were found based on participants' general use of social media, a number of differences emerged based on specific online activities. The following group differences were found to be significantly linked with sexting: enjoyment of social media, using the phone to access social media, sending private online messages, searching for places online to meet potential partners, flirting with someone online, having an online blog, and using the internet for long distance romantic relationships. Interestingly, individuals who used the internet to search for information on their *current* romantic partner were less likely to send sexts.

Multiple regression analysis (Table 2) was performed assessing relationships between sexting, enjoyment of social media, and engagement in risky sexual behaviors (as measured by the *Sexual Risk Survey*). Enjoyment of social media was a significant factor in predicting number of people participants had "hooked up" with (i.e., engaged in sexual behavior without commitment; $b = .04$, $p < .05$) and the number of partners with whom they had physical—though non-sexual—relationships ($b = .05$, $p < .01$). The association between social media enjoyment and having "friends with benefits" (i.e., having sex with someone they knew, but not in a committed relationship with) as well as unprotected sex approached significance, as did sexting and

unprotected oral sex. Individuals engaging in sexting reported significantly more positive attitudes toward unconventional sexual practices ($b=5.45, p<.001$).

Table 2

Unstandardized regression coefficients (b) and standard errors (SE) for number of people engaging in sexual behaviors based on sending/receiving sexually explicit text messages (sexting) and social media enjoyment (n = 110 sexually active women).

Standard multiple regression: predictors	F	b	SE	p
Physical partners (no sex)				
Sent sexts	3.44	.17	.50	.73
Enjoy social media		.05	.02	.01**
R ²		.30		
Hooked up				
Sent sexts	2.08	.01	.51	.99
Enjoy social media		.04	.02	.05*
R ²		.24		
Number of sexual partners				
Sent sexts	1.37	1.68	1.02	.10
Enjoy social media		.00	.04	.95
R ²		.19		
No protection from pregnancy				
Sent sexts	1.58	.42	1.21	.73
Enjoy social media		.09	.05	.08 [†]
R ²		.21		
Fellatio without condom				
Sent sexts	3.43	1.58	.85	.07 [†]
Enjoy social media		.06	.04	.10
R ²		.31		
Friends with benefits				
Sent sexts	2.98	.71	.51	.17
Enjoy social media		.04	.02	.07 [†]
R ²		.28		
ATUSS*				
Sent sexts	5.88	5.45	1.59	.00**
Enjoy social media		.02	.07	.82
R ²		.37		

*ATUSS – Attitudes toward unconventional sexual practices scale

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, † = approaching significance

DISCUSSION

Results suggest sexting is not uncommon among young women and the present sample reported a higher rate of sexting than previous research (Gordon-Messer, Bauermeister, Grodzinski, & Zimmerman, 2013). Some individuals engage in sexting more often than others and a primary goal of this brief report was to better understand who sexts and what other sexual behaviors are associated with sexting.

Compared to people who did not sext, the present study found a greater proportion of people who participated in sexting had been sexually active and were more engaged in online

activities – often through mobile technology. Cross-sectional results suggest that women use social media and the internet as a way to find and maintain intimate relationships. Given the positive associations between social media enjoyment, number of physically intimate partners, and “hooking up,” results suggest a positive link between social media engagement and risky sexual activity. Following this logic, future research is needed to observe potential links between social media, sexting, casual sexual activity, and adverse sexual health outcomes, such as unintended pregnancies and STIs. Of particular importance is longitudinal work to identify pathways from social media use to sexual health outcomes for diverse groups of young adults. There is already evidence suggesting casual sex or “hooking up” puts emerging adults’ health at risk (Jonason, Li, & Richards, 2011; Lehmiller, Vanderdrift, & Kelly, 2014; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000); but a knowledge gap still exists linking online social media behaviors with negative sexual health consequences through sexting and casual sexual behaviors.

Based on regression findings, it appears that it is not necessarily sexting that is linked with sexual behaviors, but more general engagement with social media. Although exploratory in nature and based on a relatively small sample of women, results tentatively indicate that social media may function as a sexual network in addition to non-sexual socializing. This is consistent with previous research stating the sexual aspects of mobile technology are on the rise (Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013). Within social groups there are subgroups of individuals enjoying and engaging in unconventional or riskier sexual practices; similarly, there appear to be groups of people online that also prefer unconventional sexual activities - and sexting might be one of these more explicit virtual sexual behaviors. Key differences between face-to-face and online sexual exploration include the “always on” nature of sexually-explicit content as well as perceived social acceptance of content and/or unconventional behaviors through reinforcing behaviors such as “liking” and sharing content (Williams & Merten, 2011).

In the present study, participants who reported sexting held substantially more accepting attitudes toward unconventional sexual behaviors. This demonstrates a need for additional research to determine whether youth who frequently observe their peers and famous “others” engaging in sexting and related online sexual behaviors develop more positive attitudes toward unconventional sex practices as well as a sense of self-efficacy in their own sexual abilities (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). As sexting becomes more common, attitudes toward riskier sexual behaviors may also become more prevalent. It is critical to understand the implications of a potentially increasing trend in technology-mediated sexual interactions for young adult (and adolescent) sexual behaviors, safer sex practices, and sexual health (Jonason, Li, & Richards, 2011). This is a particularly important research initiative for young adult African American women who are most at risk for poor sexual health outcomes (Lindberg & Singh, 2008).

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