

Research Paper

## Relationship Between Sexting, Stress and Depression among Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

Sexting (sending and receiving of explicit photos and text messages) among young adults have been continuously linked with its adverse effects on mental and physical health. The study sought to 1) identify relationship between sexting, stress and depression among young adults, and 2) examine the effect of sexting on people who are in relationship and examining their behavior. The sample consisted of 100 participants (18-30 yrs.) (mean age = 20.56 years, SD= 1.88). The tools used were Sexting Behavior Questionnaire (SBQ) and ASSD - BSPSA (English Version). The result was drawn using Mean, SD and Pearson's Correlation for the statistical analysis of all the variables. Overall, 94% of the population did not engaged in sexting. They showed mild or no signs of stress and depression. Women were slightly more prevalent to stress and depression than males.

**Keywords:** *Sexting, Depression, Stress, Anxiety, Victimization, Cyberbullying, Violence Abuse*

Numerous studies have been conducted on sexting and its effect on the mental health of young adults. Sexting has been defined by Morelli (2016) as sending, receiving or forwarding of sexually explicit messages, images of photographs of oneself to others. Sexting is done by all the age groups, it is more popular among the adolescents and young adults as they are excited to experiment new ways to increase the spark of the relationship and be satisfied. It is divided mainly into three categories:

- Images shared between the partners
- Images of partner shared with third party
- Images shared between people not in relationship, but the hope of relationship is there

The widely used social media is Snapchat (Ouytsel J. V., Gool E.V. et al 2017). This application is mostly used for sexting as the images get self-destroyed in 10 seconds and therefore feel assure about images not getting leaked. In the most recent study by Gonzalez A.G. et al (2021) it was seen that sexting was higher in students. It was positively correlated with depression and stress. Depression as mentioned by APA Dictionary of Psychology is a

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negative affective state, ranging from unhappiness and discontent to an extreme feeling of sadness, pessimism, and despondency, that interferes with daily life. In another study conducted by Klettke B. et al (2019) he showed that sexting was related to higher depression, anxiety and stress. It also affected a person's self-esteem negatively. For sexual orientation in sexual behaviour studies showed divergence of opinion. In the study conducted by Ouytsel J.V. et al (2021) it was seen that Lesbian, Gay and Bisexuals were more involved in creating, sending and receiving of sexting images than heterosexuals. They also experienced online sexual pressure.

In two different studies Currin J.M. et.al. (2016) and Hertlein K.M. (2015) it was seen that there was no negative impact on non-heterosexual women and sexting is more acceptable in same sex relationship respectively. According to the literature, gender differences in sexting behaviour were evident (Ross J.M. 2019). In line with these results, a significant positive relationship was same between sexting and online sexual victimization (Gasso A M. et al 2020), poor mental health was also seen. Association for sexting was seen with increase in sexual abuse and intimate partner violence (Titchen K.E et al 2019), which greatly impacted psychological and physical health of an individual. In the same context, cyber victimization lead suffering to mental health. Young adults showed depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation (Medrano J.L.J. 2018). It was also seen that they were forced into more sexting (Drouin M. et al 2015). Moreover, they had risk of leaking of images and coercion from their partner (Ouytsel J.V. et al 2020). Regarding sexting and alcohol or substance abuse there was seen a positive correlation between them (Dake J.A. et al 2012).

The relationship between sexting, stress and depression have been evidently seen and in recent times has gain attention from parents as well (Keefe G.S. et al 2011). Sexting came into being because of popularity and easy access to social media by young adults. These days it is considered the bridge for most of the relationship. Young adults in order to feel connected and to be interested started to send sexts to each other. This has resulted in increasing adaptation and fondness towards it. In this day and age, it has also become a way to gain control, abuse and use violence towards the partner. It has also become a milestone that people need to achieve in order to feel accepted by their peers (Ponnet K. et al 2017). More over young adults need to understand that sharing these private text and photos comes with a risk of itself. And sharing them they need to be aware of the relationship they have and the trust they have on that person.

Altogether sexting has gained more popularity with the increasing use of internet and social media. It does contribute both positively and negatively to the relationship (Holmes L.G. et al 2021). Young adults in relationships, casual or serious are involved in sexting to explore their bond and themselves. It also provides excitement and newness in their relationship.

**Rationale-** The topic relationship between sexting, stress and depression among young adults was done as sexting is becoming one of the milestones for a relationship and the effect it has on a person's mental health. This study focused on the effects of sexting on the group of people who are already in a stable and serious relationship to understand the role sexting plays in it.

## METHODOLOGY

**Aim-** To identify the relationship between sexting, stress and depression.

### **Objective-**

- To assess the relationship between sexting and anxiety
- To assess the relationship between sexting and depression.
- To assess the relationship between sexting and stress

### **Hypothesis-**

- There will be significant relationship between sexting and anxiety
- There will be significant relationship between sexting and depression
- There will be significant relationship between sexting and stress

### **Variables**

Sexting, Depression and Stress

### **Sample**

The sample for this research was gathered from Delhi NCR. Sample mainly consisted of young adults which comprised of college going students from different colleges majorly with some who had just started and were already working. The age range for it was from 18 to 30 years ( $M_{age} = 20.56$ ;  $SD_{age} = 1.88$ ). The total population for the research consisted of 100 samples. There were 45 males and 55 females participants.

**Inclusion criteria-** All the samples had been in relationship above 6 months

### **Tools-**

There were 2 tools used for the purpose of this study. The tools used were Anxiety, Depression and Stress Scale; ADSS- BPSA (English Version) (Bhatnagar, Singh, Pandey. 2011) and Sexting Behavior Questionnaire; SBQ (Morelli et al. 2016).

1. **Anxiety, Depression and Stress Scale-** This scale was developed by Pallavi Bhatnagar. It consists of 48 items which is divided into 3 subscales, anxiety subscale (19 items), depression subscale (15 items) and stress subscale (14 items). This scale has 'Yes' and 'No' as option that need to be chosen. The scoring is done on the basis of, if 'Yes' then 1 is endorsed and for 'No' 0 is endorsed. Both Cronbach's alpha and Spearman-Brown coefficient showed reliability of the scale measured as 0.81 and 0.89 respectively.
2. **Sexting Behavior Questionnaire-** Sexting behaviors were examined through this scale (Morelli et al. 2016). It is a modified version of previous scale (Dir 2012). It consists of 37 items. This scale covered three dimensions: sending, receiving and posting sexts. It is a 5- point likert scale consisting of 1 (never), 2 (rarely or a few times), 3 (occasionally or 2-3 times a month), 4 (often or 2-3 times a week), 5 (frequently or daily). The scale reached a Cronbach alpha of 0.92. The reliability for the three sub dimensions showed: the receiving subscale exhibited a Cronbach alpha of 0.85, with the sending subscale showing 0.84 and the posting subscale showing 0.94.

### **Procedure**

Prior to the survey, the participants were provided with the consent information and consent to participate in the study. They were asked to verify that they aged between 18 to 30 years. Once the consent was given, the participants were given a set of close-ended questionnaire. They were allowed to not participate if they found questions too personal. It took around 20

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minutes to complete the questionnaire. Participants were then thanked for participating in the study.

### RESULTS

To study the variables of this study, the results have been analyzed by the use of mean, standard deviation and Pearson's Correlation.

The findings are discussed further.

*Table 4.1: Mean of the variables in young adults*

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Sexting	Male	45	42.34	10.48
	Female	55	40.66	8.89
	Total	100	41.92	9.67
Anxiety	Male	45	4.26	3.59
	Female	55	6.7	5.11
	Total	100	5.7	4.69
Depression	Male	45	3.86	3.64
	Female	55	5.76	4.3
	Total	100	4.98	4.13
Stress	Male	45	4.71	3.5
	Female	55	7.32	4.21
	Total	100	6.25	4.13

*Table 4.2 Pearson's Correlation between variables*

Variable	Pearson's Correlation
Sexting & Anxiety	0.018
Sexting & Depression	0.007
Sexting & Stress	-0.087

### DISCUSSION

Sending, receiving or forwarding of sexually explicit messages, images of photographs of oneself to others is said to be sexting (Morelli et.al, 2016). It is usually done using digital devices like phone, laptop or computer. Sexting has gained more popularity with the increasing use of internet and social media. The widely used social media is Snapchat. Sexting is done by all the age groups, it is more popular among the adolescents and young adults as they are excited to experiment new ways to spice up the relationship and be satisfied.

Depression is a serious mood disorder which affects a person's mental and physical health negatively, and the way he behaves. It causes a person to feel low, sadness and loss of interest in the activities.

Stress can be said to be a change physical, emotional or psychological. It is how your body reacts to a given situation. Stress is experienced by every person at some point of time in their life and the difference is made only by how you react to it.

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Sexting and stress have been seen affecting each other, as in one of the researches it was found that anxiety and stress were high among the people who received sexts (Dodaj et.al, 2020).

The aim of the research is to identify the relationship between sexting, depression and stress among young adults. The sample for this research mainly consisted of young adults. The age range taken for it was from 18 to 28 years ( $M_{age} = 20.56$ ;  $SD_{age} = 1.88$ ). The total population for the research consisted of 100 samples. There were 45 males and 55 females. All the samples had been in relationship above 6 months.

The statistical tools used were anxiety, depression and stress scale (ADSS) and sexting behavior scale (Morelli et. al, 2016).

Sexting was seen mostly low in the population of this study. Out of 55 females 94.54% of them scored low on sexting and from 45 males 93.33% of the males scored low on sexting while the other half of the population were moderately high in sexting. Overall, 94% i.e., 94 participants out of 100 participants scored low on sexting. Lower sexting implies higher understanding among the participants in their relationship. The longevity of the relationship must have led them to gain trust and confidence.

Anxiety was seen to be moderate in the population of the study. It scored 5.7 which was between  $P_{50} - P_{75}$ . Female participants were seen to have moderate anxiety by scoring 6.7 and male participants had comparatively lower anxiety i.e., mild anxiety scoring 4.26.

For depression the population scored 4.98 which is moderate level of depression. It scored between  $P_{50} - P_{75}$ . The females scored 5.76 which was moderate level of depression. Males scored .86 which meant they had mild depression.

Stress was seen to be moderate in the population of the study scoring 6.25 between  $P_{50} - P_{75}$ . The females were seen to have moderately high level of stress scoring 7.32 and males scored 4.71 which is mild level of stress.

The results of both the gender were seen to be similar, however males were seen to have less anxiety, depression and stress.

The correlation between the variables i.e. sexting, depression and stress was calculated using the Pearson's Correlation.

A weak correlation of 0.01 was found between sexting and anxiety indicating they have a direct relationship i.e. increase in sexting will increase the anxiety but have near to no effect. A weak correlation of 0.007 was found between sexting and depression indicating that there is near to no effect on each other.

A negatively weak correlation was between sexting and stress implying an inverse relationship between the two variables. The correlation between sexting and stress was - 0.08.

The relation between sexting, depression and stress have been seen in the past researches. The research showed that there is a relationship between sexting, depression and stress

(Klettke, Hallford et.al.,2019). The more sexting lead to increase in depression, stress and anxiety.

People who were involved in sexting were majorly because their partner wanted. Therefore, they were forced by their partner's into it. This is also known as sexual coercion. In a study conducted by Drouin M., Ross J. And Tobin E. In 2015, it was seen that one fifth of people became involved in when they were not ready. They were forced by their partners and had symptoms of anxiety, depression and generalized trauma. Sexting is majorly popular in western countries. Established relationships have no such trouble in sexting as compared to relationship that are not established. It was also seen that established relationships had lesser amount of sex in between them as they grow up and are mature enough to know that these photographs are sent using internet which is not safe and reliable.

It has been seen over and over in researches that higher the sexting, higher will be the anxiety, depression and stress. Whereas in this research it was the opposite. All the three hypothesis are rejected. There was negligent effect of sexting on anxiety, depression and stress. The effect might be mitigated as they might consider sexting as a part of their relationship instead of it being an obligation to them.

### **Limitations / Implications**

- The research sample was small and only consisted people of Delhi NCR. It can be increased to other regions.
- Responses were collected through google forms, so they can be biased
- More variables can be added for testing the sample
- People from various backgrounds can be included

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***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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