Examining Libido, Promiscuity, Heavy Drinking, and Anxious Attachment as Predictors of Sexting in College Students
Abstract

The current study used an online self-report survey to examine libido, promiscuity, heavy drinking, and anxious attachment as predictors of sexting in college students. Participants were 178 University of Rochester undergraduates (82% female) from the psychology subject pool. Before accounting for our controls of relationship status and unlimited texting, libido was significantly associated with sexting behavior. After accounting for controls the same pattern emerged, demonstrating libido was still significantly related to sexting. Thus, individuals’ sexual desire was positively associated with engaging in sexting behavior, and specifically higher libido levels predicted a higher frequency of sexting. Promiscuity and heavy drinking correlated with sexting, but did not provide unique predictive information. Attachment anxiety did not significantly predict sexting. Implications will be discussed.
Examining Libido, Promiscuity, Heavy Drinking, and Anxious Attachment as Predictors of Sexting in College Students

Sexting, or the sending of sexually explicit messages or photographs via cell phone, is a new and popular behavior in modern society stemming from the ever increasing use of technology, especially amongst today’s adolescents and young adults. Due to the possible legal issues with minors involved in sexting, it is a topic of current concern in the media. This type of flirting in the 21st century is still a budding area in research, with not many studies indicating psychological factors that may predict sexting behaviors. The current study examined four potential predictors for sexting frequency among college students.

Previous research on sexting has yielded some related findings to our current study. In a correlational study done by Henderson and Morgan (2011), they examined young adults’ sexual relationships and participation in sexting. The study used 468 students (234 female, 325 male) enrolled at Boise State University in general psychology courses, with an average age of 20.59 years and who were largely White/Caucasian (81.7%). Information was collected through self-report questionnaires including sexting behaviors (frequency), attitudes, and beliefs, and sexual behaviors (frequency of sexual experiences and number of partners). Their results established 60% of participants had sent nude or semi-nude photograph messages, and 64% sent sexually explicit text messages via cell phones. A higher number of sexual intercourse and oral partners positively correlated with sexting behavior. Based on these findings, we wanted to see if similar results could be produced by assessing promiscuity as a predictor of sexting frequency, which may be a factor driving higher numbers of sexual partners that this study found.

In a 2010 research article, Ferguson examined the relationship between sexting behaviors and risky sexual behaviors among young Hispanic women. The study consisted of 207 women
from a Hispanic Serving university in the south, having an average age of 20.70 years, with the
majority being of Hispanic ethnicity (96.1%). A self-report survey was used to evaluate sexting
behaviors (frequency of messages sent/received), attitudes towards sexting, and experience of
pleasure in sexual behaviors (from kissing to intercourse). Also, a questionnaire of Histrionic
Personality Disorder symptoms was developed from DSM-IV criteria and used in the study.
Ferguson’s results found 20.5% of participants sent erotic/nude photographs, and 34.5% received
such, at least once. Sexting behaviors correlated positively and significantly with reported
pleasure in sex and with positive attitudes towards sexting; and Histrionic traits showed to be a
significant predictor for sexting. To build upon this study, we wanted to see if their results would
generalize to a predominately White sample of both men and women. Also, we wanted to see if
higher libido levels could account for more reported pleasure in sex since those with higher sex
drives may enjoy each sexual experience more than those with lower sex drives. Thus, people
with higher libido levels may seek out more sexual experiences, such as by engaging in sexting
behaviors.

In addition, an article by Weisskirc and Delevi (2011) examined the relationship between
sexting behaviors and adult romantic attachment styles, specifically anxious attachment. Their
sample consisted of 128 students (22 males, 106 females) enrolled in human development and
family studies classes from two public, state universities with an average age of 22.77 years, with
most being Latino (55%) and Euroamerican/White (27%) ethnicities, and most being in a
relationship at the time of data collection (58%). Participants completed an online survey which
measured their adult attachment styles, sexting behaviors (frequency), and sexting attitudes.
Results indicated that participants involved in a committed relationship were more likely to have
sent a sexually suggestive text and to have sent a text message propositioning sexual activity,
than those who were single. Additionally, a statistically significant relationship was found between those individuals in relationships with anxious attachment styles and sending a text message propositioning sexual activity; anxiety may be related to viewing sexting as a normative behavior and the belief that their partner expects them to engage in such. Based on this data, we wanted to find out if similar results could be found in a predominately White sample.

**Current Study**

The current study was designed to investigate how predictor variables of libido, promiscuity, heavy drinking, and anxious attachment relate to sexting frequency, while controlling for relationship status and overall texting frequency due to having an unlimited texting cell phone plan. Our criterion variable, sexting frequency, described how often each student engaged in sexting, defined as the sending of sexually explicit messages or photographs via cell phone. To assess this, we included a sexting scale in the self-report survey which asked the participants to indicate how often they send sexually provocative messages to another individual by text or email. We hypothesized higher libido levels, indicating the subjects’ general sexual desire, to be associated with a higher frequency of sexting. Based on Ferguson’s (2010) results linking pleasure in sexual behaviors and Histrionic traits with sexting, experiencing greater pleasure and being more sexually seductive may be due to individuals having higher libidos and greater promiscuous tendencies, respectively. In addition, we hypothesized higher levels of promiscuity to be linked to greater sexting frequency. Given that previous research by Henderson and Morgan (2011) supported a link between a higher number of sexual intercourse and oral sex partners among those who sexted, these types of individuals could be more naturally inclined to engage in sexual behaviors, such as sexting, with multiple partners. We also hypothesized heavy drinking, consuming large amounts of alcohol, to be correlated with higher
sexting frequency. Since alcohol tends to lower individuals’ inhibitions and reasoning skills, they may be more likely to sext while heavily intoxicated because they may be less fearful of possible consequences and/or believe it is a good idea (even when it’s not). Finally, we hypothesized having an anxious attachment style will be related to higher sexting frequency since individuals with this style are more prone to seek high levels of intimacy, approval, and responsiveness from their partners. Past research (Weisskirc & Delevi, 2011) has found data supporting the correlation between attachment anxiety and sexting among adults in committed relationships.

Method

Participants

One hundred and Seventy-eight University of Rochester undergraduate students (82% female) from the psychology subject pool took part in the study. Participants had an average age of 20 years (SD=1) and were racially distributed as White/Caucasian (69.1%), Black/African American (4.5%), Latino (5.1%), Asian (18%), and Other (3.4%). The students received extra credit to be placed toward their psychology courses.

Measures

Sexting. The Sexting Scale (developed for the current study) is a 12-item self report scale that assesses an individual’s frequency of sending sexual messages via text or email. The items of the Sexting Scale ask participants to rate how often they send sexually provocative messages to another individual by text or email (e.g., “Talk dirty with someone via text/email,” “Send flirty/sexy text messages of yourself to people,” “Try to get someone sexually excited via text/email”). Participants responded to the items on a 6-point scale (1 = never, 2 = very rarely, 3 = rarely, 4 = occasionally, 5 = frequently, 6 = all of the time). Responses to the items were
summed so that higher scores indicated higher levels of sexting frequency and the scale demonstrated high levels of internal consistency (α = .93) in the current sample.

**Libido.** The Libido Scale (developed for the current study) is a 9-item self-report scale that assesses an individual’s sex drive. The items of the Libido Scale ask respondents to rate the overall level of their sex drive (e.g., “I tend to be horny most of the time,” “My mind often wanders to sex,” “It doesn’t take much to turn me on”). Participant responded to the items on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all true, 2 = a little true, 3 = somewhat true, 4 = mostly true, 5 = very true). Responses to the items were summed so that higher scores indicated higher levels of libido and the scale demonstrated high levels of internal consistency (α = .92) in the current sample.

**Promiscuity.** The revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI-R; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008) is a 9-item self-report scale that assesses an individual’s tendency to engage in sexual relationships without deeper emotional commitment. The items of the SOI-R ask respondents to rate their tendency to prefer either unrestricted sex (without the necessity of love) or restricted sex (only in the context of a long term loving relationship) based on three subscales. The first subscale measures their casual sexual encounters (e.g., “With how many different partners have you had sexual intercourse without having an interest in a long-term committed relationship with this person?”). Participant responded to the items on a 9-point scale (1 = 0, 2 = 1, 3 = 2, 4 = 3, 5 = 4, 6 = 5-6, 7 = 7-9, 8 = 10-19, 9 = 20 or more). The second subscale measures their attitudes about uncommitted sex (e.g., “Sex without love is OK”). Participant responded to the items on a 9-point scale (1 = very strongly disagree, 2 = strongly disagree, 3 = moderately disagree, 4 = slightly disagree, 5 = neither agree nor disagree, 6 = slightly agree, 7 = moderately agree, 8 = strongly agree, 9 = very strongly agree). The third subscale measures their desire for uncommitted sex (e.g., “In everyday life, how often do you have spontaneous fantasies about
having sex with someone you have just met”). Participant responded to the items on a 9-point scale (1 = never, 2 = very seldom, 3 = about once every two or three months, 4 = about once a month, 5 = about once every two weeks, 6 = about once a week, 7 = several times per week, 8 = nearly every day, 9 = at least once a day). Responses to the items were summed so that higher scores indicated higher levels of promiscuity and the scale demonstrated high levels of internal consistency (α = .85) in the current sample.

**Heavy Drinking.** The Heavy Drinking Scale (Leonard, 1993) is a 9-item self-report scale that assesses an individual’s frequency of heavy drinking within the last year. The items of the Heavy Drinking Scale ask participants to rate their frequency of heavy alcohol consumption (e.g., “IN THE LAST YEAR, how often did you… Have a hangover due to drinking?” “Embarrass yourself due to drinking?” “Get sick due to drinking?”). Participants responded to the items on a 9-point scale (1 = Never, 2 = 1-2x, 3 = 3-6x, 4 = 7-10x, 5 = 1-2x Per Month, 6 = 3-4x Per Month, 7 = 1-2x Per Week, 8 = 3-5x Per Week, 9 = Daily or Almost Daily). Responses to the items were summed so that higher scores indicated higher levels of heavy drinking and the scale demonstrated high levels of internal consistency (α = .89) in the current sample.

**Anxious Attachment.** The Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, and Brennan, 2000) is an 18-item self-report scale with two 9-item subscales for attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. For our study we only used the attachment anxiety subscale that assesses an individual’s current level of anxiety in close relationships. The items of the ERC-R ask respondents to rate their worries related to abandonment by a romantic partner, which assesses the level of attachment anxiety in their relationships (e.g., “I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me,” “I’m afraid that I will lose my partner’s love,” “When my partner is out of sight, I worry that he or she might become interested in someone else”).
Participants responded to the items on a 7-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Neutral / Mixed, 5 = Slightly Agree, 6 = Agree, 7 = Strongly Agree). Responses to the items were summed so that higher scores indicated higher levels of anxious attachment and the scale demonstrated high levels of internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$) in the current sample. After examining the item-level reliability statistics, we determined that item number seven did not convincingly contribute to the cohesiveness of the scale and thus, was not included in the item total. With the item included the internal consistency was $\alpha = .93$, but increased to $\alpha = .95$ once the item was dropped from the scale.

Controls. The participant’s current relationship status was assessed on a 1-item self-report scale (e.g., “What is your current relationship status?”) using a 6-point response scale (1 = Single, 2 = Dating more than one person, 3 = Dating a single person, 4 = In a committed relationship, 5 = Engaged, 6 = Married/Committed partnership). Participants who are dating may engage in sexting more frequently than single individuals since they already have someone with whom they can potentially sext. The general amount of texting for the individual was assessed on a 2-item self-report scale (e.g., “On average, how many texts do you send per day?” “Do you have unlimited texting on your cell phone?”). A text box response scale (numbers only) and a 2-point response scale (1 = No, 2 = Yes) were used, respectively. Participants who text in general more frequently, and with unlimited texting plans, may then engage in sexting more often than individuals with low rates of texting or limited texting plans.

Procedure

The study was presented as a survey through an online portal. Participants received an online link which allowed them to access the anonymous survey at their convenience on any
computer or internet-capable device. After completion online, participants were awarded their psychology course extra credit.

**Results**

Table 1 presents the bivariate correlations of the variables in the study. Sexting demonstrated a significant correlation with three out of the four predictor variables in the expected direction, demonstrating a particularly strong positive correlation between libido and sexting. Thus, higher levels of libido were associated with higher levels of sexting behavior. A positive correlation between promiscuity and sexting, and heavy drinking and sexting was found; indicating higher levels of promiscuity and heavy drinking were both associated with higher levels of sexting behavior. No significant correlation was found between attachment anxiety and sexting. Higher levels of libido were significantly associated with higher levels of promiscuity and heavy drinking, yet with lower levels of attachment anxiety. In addition, higher levels of promiscuity were correlated with heavy drinking, such that high levels of promiscuity were associated with higher levels of heavy drinking. Taken as a set, these correlations suggest an interesting pattern of associations among the predictor variables and sexting meriting further analysis in a multiple regression framework.

Multiple regression analyses were used to explore the ability of libido, promiscuity, heavy drinking, and anxious attachment to predict sexting behavior. As it can be seen in Table 2, higher libido levels were related to higher sexting frequencies ($\beta = .50, t = 6.42, p < .001$). In fact, libido levels alone accounted for about 28% of the variance in sexting, before controlling for other variables in the model. However, our hypotheses regarding promiscuity ($\beta = -.02, t = -.27, ns$), heavy drinking ($\beta = .10, t = 1.32, ns$), and attachment anxiety ($\beta = -.04, t = -.66, ns$) were not supported as these predictors were not statistically associated with sexting frequency.
Next, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to explore the ability of libido, promiscuity, heavy drinking, and anxious attachment to predict sexting behavior. To control for unlimited texting cell phone plans and relationship status, both were entered in the first step of the analysis as controls. As it can be seen in Table 3, being involved in a romantic relationship was strongly related to higher sexting frequency (β = .12, t = .36, p < .001), while having unlimited texting was marginally related to higher sexting frequency (β = .12, t = 1.63, p = .10). In fact, relationship status and unlimited texting accounted for about 14% of the variance in sexting. When libido, promiscuity, heavy drinking, and attachment anxiety levels were entered after controlling for relationship status and unlimited texting, libido was still significantly related to sexting (β = .39, t = 4.70, p < .001). The remaining predictors were not significantly related to sexting: promiscuity (β = .07, t = 0.78, ns), heavy drinking (β = .07, t = 0.78, ns), and attachment anxiety (β = .04, t = .55, ns). Thus, libido provided a small amount of predictive information on how frequently individuals engage in sexting, accounting for an additional 18% of the variance.

Discussion

Our hypothesis that higher libido levels would be associated with a higher frequency of sexting was supported by our results. Before accounting for our controls, libido was found to be significantly associated with sexting behavior. After accounting for relationship status and unlimited texting the same pattern emerged, demonstrating libido was still significantly related to sexting and accounted for about 18% of the variance. Thus, we found that individuals’ general sexual desire was positively associated with engaging in sexting behavior, and specifically higher libido levels predicted a higher frequency of sexting; those with higher sex drives sext more often than those with lower sex drives. Our findings were consistent with previous research by Ferguson (2010), linking reported pleasure in sexual behaviors with sexting. This supports
our idea that experiencing greater pleasure from sexual activities, including sexting, may be due
to individuals having higher libidos. These results have now been found to apply to Hispanic as
well as White individuals, showing potential for such to generalize across different ethnicities.

Our hypothesis that higher levels of promiscuity would be linked to greater sexting
frequency was only partially supported by our results. Although promiscuity was significantly
correlated with sexting in the predicted direction, it was not found to be uniquely related to
sexting once we ran our multiple regression analyses. Thus, we did not find that individuals who
practice greater amounts of casual sex with multiple partners predicted them engaging in a higher
frequency of sexting. Our findings were inconsistent with previous research by Henderson and
Morgan (2011) which supported a link between a higher number of sexual intercourse and oral
sex partners among those who sexted. We did not find evidence for these types of individuals to
be more naturally inclined to engage in sexual behaviors, such as sexting, with multiple partners.
This may be due to our smaller sample size, and/or the low levels of general promiscuity
reported in our sample.

Our hypothesis that higher levels of heavy drinking would be linked to greater sexting
frequency was only partially supported by our results. Although heavy drinking was significantly
correlated with sexting in the predicted direction, it was not found to be uniquely related once we
ran our multiple regression analyses. Thus, we did not find that greater incidences of consuming
large amounts of alcohol predicted a higher frequency of sexting by those individuals. We were
unable to find a study which directly related heavy drinking with sexting behavior, but many
articles, like Shah’s (2010), group both behaviors together as “risky situations” likely to co-occur
during adolescence and towards which individuals of this age group are inherently drawn,
regardless of the known potential consequences (both social and legal). It is reasonable to believe
individuals may be more likely to sext when heavily intoxicated because they may be less fearful of possible consequences and believe it is a good idea. Our findings, however, did not support this suggestion. This may be due to our small sample size, and especially the low number of male participants, who may be more likely to engage in heavy drinking than females.

Our hypothesis that higher levels of anxious attachment would be associated with greater sexting frequency was not supported by our results. Anxious attachment was not significantly correlated with sexting behavior, nor was it found to be a significant predictor of sexting after we ran multiple regression analyses. Thus, we did not find that having higher levels of anxious attachment, often expressed as preoccupation with the other, a need for reassurance and fear of abandonment, predicted a higher frequency of sexting. Our findings were inconsistent with previous research by Weisskirc & Delevi (2011) which found data supporting the correlation between attachment anxiety and sexting among adults in committed relationships. This study did not find results to support Weisskirc & Delevi’s theory that individuals with this style are more prone to seek high levels of intimacy, approval, and responsiveness from their partners, at least not as evidenced by sexting behavior. This may be due to our sample consisting of predominately White participants, rather than Latino as it was with Weisskirc & Delevi’s sample and anxiety may function differently in different cultures. However, our results did support the prior finding in regards to relationship status (used as a control in our study) as a significant predictor for sexting behavior; Individuals who were involved in a relationship did report higher frequencies of sexting than those who were not involved.

Limitations

The present results should be interpreted in light of several important limitations. First, the study is comprised of mostly women, which may have affected the representation of libido,
promiscuity, heavy drinking, and attachment anxiety levels, as well as attitudes towards sexting and self-reported engagement in sexting behaviors. Males may be more likely to engage in casual sex with multiple partners, participate in heavy drinking more frequently, and have positive attitudes toward sexting and therefore, be more willing to disclose when and how often they sext. Having more males in our sample might have allowed us to find more significant results between our predictors and sexting frequency. Second, the sample was restricted to a college population. Consequently, we can only generalize our results to college age individuals; such findings cannot be assumed to apply to those outside of this age range nor those outside of a college environment or lifestyle. Third, the sample size was limited to 178 participants. A larger sample size would have given our results more power and might have found more of our predictors to be significantly associated with sexting behavior than was found. Fourth, there could be other possible predictor variables that were included in the present study that could be associated with sexting frequency. For example, the age of the individuals’ sexual debut may be correlated with sexting behavior; specifically, early adolescence sexual debut (before the age of 16) may be related to higher sexting frequency since it is known to be associated with more permissive attitudes toward sex and low levels of religious involvement.

In addition to replicating our results, future research might extend the present findings by implementing an objective form of monitoring the respondents’ sexting behavior. This could be done by means of an objective review of the cell phone calls and texting histories to help control for participants accurately or truthfully self-reporting their sexting behaviors. Also to improve upon participants’ accuracy of reported sexting frequencies, participants could be required to fill out a weekly journal entry recording their sexting behaviors within that time duration. This could establish more accurate frequencies than simply relying on participants’ long-term memory of
LIBIDO PROMISCUITY DRINKING ATTACHMENT AND SEXTING

every sexting activity they have engaged in, and allow the study to be conducted longitudinally and see if there are any changes or trends in sexting behavior over time among those individuals.

Conclusions

The present study contributed to the investigation of the underlying psychological issues relating to the frequency of sexting behaviors. As expected, higher libido levels were significantly associated with higher frequency of sexting behaviors. Individuals with a higher sex drive are likely to seek new ways to engage in sexual activities, and the progress made in technology has made communication, including that of sexual nature, more easily transmitted and prominent. Additionally, as expected, relationship status and unlimited texting cell phone plans were marginally significant in association with sexting frequency, accounting for about 14% of the total variance. Those in a romantic relationship may be more inclined to sext and at a higher frequency since they already have an established partner with whom they can engage in mutual sexting behaviors. Also, individuals with unlimited texting plans tend to text in general at a higher frequency and do not have to worry about going over their texting limit, and therefore, be more inclined to engage in sexting.

Based on the results from this study, the lack of significant associations between promiscuity and sexting, and heavy drinking and sexting, may imply that sexting is not related to such risky behaviors. So for those with higher libido levels, sexting may just be a healthy expression of their sex drives; it does not put them at risk for sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancy like engaging in promiscuous activities and heavy drinking (which can lead to promiscuous behavior). Since relationship status, unlimited texting, and libido make up about 32% of sexting’s variance that stills leaves 68% unaccounted for. More research looking into other possible predictors, such as age of sexual debut in adolescence, as well as repeated testing
of our predictor variables in a larger sample size needs to be explored to find the remaining contributors to the majority of sexting variance that is still undetermined.
Available at: http://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/mcnair_journal/vol7/iss1/9


Table 1. *Correlations among variables*

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*Note. *p < .05*
Table 2. *Regressions predicting Sexting*

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