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Benefits of Sexting among Long-term Monogamous Romantic Partners

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The team sought to investigate if sexting would predict an increase in sexual satisfaction among emerging adults (18-29 years old) in a long-term committed relationship (12 months or more). We also investigated if sexting could potentially have other benefits. A sample of 272 individuals completed the survey including a demographic questionnaire and a ten-question self-constructed scale measuring sexting behavior, sexual satisfaction, and higher agreement on certain sexual facts. Results indicate sexting predicted an increase in Sexual Satisfaction scores and Sexual Facts scores. These findings support past studies that indicate sexting between couples in a committed relationship was linked to improvement in sexual satisfaction. In addition, our results demonstrated sexting may have additional benefits beyond improving romantic relationships.

Keywords: sexting, young adults, sexual satisfaction

Introduction

Sexting is defined academically as delivering or receiving sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images through electronic means (Delevi & Weisskirch, 2013; Silva, Teixeira, Vasconcelos-Raposo, & Bessa, 2016; Wiederhold, 2011). Some dictionaries (e.g., Merriam Webster, n.d.) included the term as it grew in popularity. As 21st-century technology progresses, so has the era of sexting and researching its implications on a social, psychological, and legal level (Ouytsel, Walrave, & Gool, 2014), particularly for young adults and teenagers (Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial that research identify the pros and cons of this phenomenon to ensure young adults be able to make an informed decision before engaging in sexting.

The authors investigated the potential benefits of sexting behavior within couples in a long-term monogamous relationship. Existing literature has demonstrated sexting may improve romantic relationships and sexual relationships among couples (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014; Jeanfreau, Wright, & Noguchi, 2018; Jin & Park, 2010). Hertlein and Ancheta (2014) found participants reported improved confidence in discussing and exploring sexual topics, though the authors did not specify the topic's nature. The present study was interested in investigating the relationship between sexting behavior and relationship satisfaction. To expand on Hertlein and Ancheta's (2014) findings, the authors sought to observe if sexting behavior would improve participant knowledge about sexual facts, specifically around the use of contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Why do People Sext?

Sexting is utilized to maintain romantic relationships in adolescents and young adults (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011). Additionally, Albury and Crawford (2012) found that couples saw sexting as a means to flirt, be intimate, show affection, and signal trust. They also found sexting can be exhibited in a "truth or dare" context (p. 205) or non-sexual situations, such as the workplace. For example, a co-worker takes a picture of his genitals and shows it to another co-worker as a joke (Walker, Sancu, & Temple-Smith, 2013). In addition, Walker et al. (2013) found that couples will sext for fun or out of boredom, sexual experimentation, or to maintain a form of intimacy in a long-distance relationship.

Prevalence of Sexting

Klettke et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis to review the prevalence of sexting for multiple age groups. A review of twelve studies found a prevalence rate of 10.2% to 35.37%

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among adolescents (aged 10 to 19). The rates differed due to the types of sexting (i.e., sending, receiving, reciprocal sexting) and sampling method. Findings on gender differences were also inconsistent. Some studies indicated women were more likely to engage in sexting, while others found no gender differences or that men engage in more sexting behaviors. This rate increases from 33.3% to 56.6% among adults, with an average age range of 18-30. In both groups, the lowest rate was among the more representative samples (U.S. population). A more recent meta-analysis of 50 studies published in 2020 found sexting behaviors among emerging adults to be between 15.0% to 38.3%, depending on the nature of the message (Arnett, 2015; Mori et al., 2020). The authors defined “emerging adults” as individuals between the age of 18 to 29, a definition used in the current paper.

Gender Differences in Sexting

In the 21st century, sexuality and “being sexy” (Ouytsel et al., 2014, p. 205) have become trending topics in social media, television, music, and tabloids. Celebrities have become more candid and forthcoming about their relationships, in turn normalizing these topics to the public and gradually shifting sexuality and sexiness from being taboo. This shift may convey a message to consumers that it is more acceptable to take risqué selfies (Curnutt, 2012; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Ouytsel et al., 2014). However, studies have shown that a double standard still exists between men and women having sexual relationships and sexting (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker et al., 2013).

Research has found that young men are positively reinforced and have increased desirability and popularity from others when they either collect images of women (Ringrose et al., 2013) or post pictures on social media of themselves emphasizing their muscular stature (Ouytsel et al., 2014). When Ringrose et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study on sexting and double standards in the United Kingdom (U.K.), adolescent girls were labeled as a “slag” (p. 316) or “sket,” who are “girls who do not ‘respect’ themselves” (p. 314) if they send a suggestive image.

Despite the double standard of sexting in a heterosexual setting, Ringrose et al. (2013) also found a “new norm of feminine desirability” (p. 312). For example, a thirteen-year-old girl whom researchers interviewed discussed the dynamics of negotiating whether to send a “special photo” (p. 311). The adolescent reported feeling more attractive and desired, as the young boy who was talking to her provided compliments and described her body as ideal. The young boy did ask for a picture. However, she told him she could not; she did not have enough credits on her app (phone application) to send one. In actuality, the young girl did not want to send a picture, as she feared being called a “sket.”

Adolescents interviewed by Ringrose et al. (2013) additionally explained what it meant to attain high “ratings” (p.

312). For example, an adolescent boy described that having multiple suggestive images of young girls was not only seen as proof that he could talk to the opposite sex, but it also increased his popularity in the school’s social hierarchy. He then told researchers that he would never send one of himself, although he asked for suggestive photos. This example relates to the double standard of sexting; women are expected to send explicit pictures of themselves, but not men. A 13-year-old boy was interviewed and explained to researchers that there is a “masculine code of honor” and ethics (p. 314) not to expose the face or identity of the image, as this is deemed problematic (Ringrose et al., 2013). However, there is always a chance to reveal the girl’s identity. Although a girl may feel valued or more attractive while negotiating with a boy for a photo, he has the power and final say over what happens with the picture once it is sent to the receiver.

Risk and Consequences of Sexting

Studies on teens and young adults found a correlation between sexting and risky sexual behaviors, such as increased frequency of unprotected sex, sexual hook-ups, and substance use and abuse (Benotsch, Snipes, Martin, & Bull, 2013; Dir, Coskunpinar, Steiner, & Cyders, 2013). One study found a correlation between sexting and infidelity (Jeanfreau et al., 2018). Trub and Stark (2017) found attachment anxiety and avoidance behaviors correlated with sexting, suggesting sexting could be a maladaptive behavior to seek attachment and emotional regulation.

Sexting may also be risky and potentially a crime depending on the circumstances, such as the age of consent. The act’s legality may differ regionally. Electronic and computer-mediated communication (CMC) increases the chance of distribution crossing state lines or even the border. A receiver could share explicit photos or messages among an audience without the sender’s consent (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012). Some studies have also found that individuals are pressured or manipulated by their romantic partners to send explicit photos (Drouin, Ross, & Tobin, 2015; Ross, Drouin, & Coupe, 2016). The nature of such non-consensual sexting has been considered similar to intimate partner violence (Klettke et al., 2014). For example, a romantic partner may use control over the explicit media to blackmail the sender. An ex-partner may distribute the sexually explicit images or videos without the sender’s consent to cause them distress or embarrassment (i.e., revenge porn) after the relationship ends. These non-consensual behaviors have legal consequences. For example, in Lacey, Washington, three middle school teenagers faced charges for the sexual exploitation of a minor. A 14-year-old girl told authorities she had sent a nude photo of herself to a 14-year-old boy she was dating at the time. However, she stated they broke up, and the ex-boyfriend decided to send this picture of her to another 14-year-old girl. These three teenagers faced charges

of going to juvenile detention for 30 days, as well as the possibility of registering as a sexual offender (Associated Press, 2010; Pawloski, 2010). It is important to note that even the teenager in the photo was at risk of being charged with child pornography and sexual exploitation of a minor. Even consensual sexting between adolescents can lead to unwanted legal troubles (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Chalfen, 2009; Eraker, 2010; Ouytsel et al., 2014). An example would be disseminating sexually suggestive pictures of a teenager to older teens or adults, deeming this act as sex work, and distributing child pornography (Willard, 2010).

Benefits of Sexting

While sexting poses a substantial risk for those engaging in it and a concern for mandated reporters working with teenagers, some studies have found it beneficial within committed relationships. Research has demonstrated sexting as healthy for the growth and nurturance of romantic relationships (Jeanfreau et al., 2018). Couples also use sexting in long-distance relationships to engage with one another in a sexually intimate manner (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Walker et al., 2013). Studies of long-distance committed relationships linked sexting to strengthening the romantic relationship (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014; Jin & Park, 2010). Other studies have found couples who engaged in sexting have higher satisfaction with the romantic and sexual relationship when compared to couples who do not wish to sext (Parker, Blackburn, Perry, & Hawks, 2013). Sexting can also act as a novel activity for committed couples (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014), which is crucial for sexual satisfaction (Pascoal, de Santa Bárbara Narciso, & Pereira, 2013). Hertlein and Ancheta (2014) also linked sexting to reduced anxiety and increased communication about sexual topics, as sexting serves as a buffer to shyness or hesitation to face-to-face discussions.

Beyond committed relationships, sexting has also served as a way for individuals to explore their sexuality without placing themselves at risk of pregnancy or contracting STIs (Chalfen, 2009; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Sexting is potentially a safer substitute for those concerned about their physical health or sexual intercourse conflicts with their religious beliefs (Ouytsel et al., 2014). Sexting and CMC can serve as a beneficial outlet for teenagers, specifically female and queer youth, to explore their sexuality, a safe holding space where they do not have to worry about stigmas they may face otherwise (Hasinoff, 2012; Thurlow & Bell, 2009). For marginalized groups, being able to sext may positively mediate one's identity and self-empowerment (Hasinoff, 2012).

Methods

Participants

Three hundred and forty-six participants were recruited through social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) and community listservs. Of the total convenience sample recruited, 74 responses were excluded for not consenting, failing to meet criteria, or incompleteness. To qualify for the study, participants must be American and in a long-term (12 or more months) monogamous romantic relationship at the time of the survey. In addition, both the participants and their partners must be emerging adults (age 18 to 29; Arnett, 2015; Mori et al., 2020). Due to the survey's transient nature, only surveys with 100% completions were included in the final analysis. Thus, a total of 272 participants were included in the initial analysis.

Measures

Demographics. Participants provided demographic information about their ages (18 to 29), ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Detailed information on participants' demographics was included in Table 1.

Sexting Questions. The definition of sexting provided to participants was "sending sexually explicit messages or photographs via electronic means (i.e., text messages, email, social media private messages)." Four questions were constructed to measure participant perceptions of engaging in sexting. Questions were rated on a five-point scale. The first question (How often do you engage in sexting with your romantic partner?) measured the frequency of sexting and rated 0 (Never) to 4 (All the time). The second question (How comfortable are you with sexting your romantic partner?) measured comfortability with sexting, rated 0 (Very uncomfortable) to 4 (Very comfortable). The third question (Do you enjoy receiving sexting from your romantic partner?) measured enjoyment when receiving sexting, rated 0 (Not at all) to 4 (Very much enjoy). The final question (Do you feel pressured into sexting by your romantic partner?) measured any potential coercion into sexting was reverse rated 4 (Never) to 0 (All the time). Reliability analysis for the questions returned a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .690, an acceptable range (Kline, 2013).

Sexual Satisfaction Questions. Three questions were constructed to measure sexual satisfaction. The questions were worded similarly (How satisfied are you with your romantic relationship with your romantic partner?) with the second and third questions replacing "romantic relationship" with "sexual relationship" and "sexual encounter." The definition of sexual relationships and sexual encounters was provided to the participants. A sexual relationship was defined as "overall satisfaction of all sexual activities including those that do not involve penetrative sex" (i.e., kissing, mutual

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics

Measures	M (SD) or n (%)				
	Male (n = 62)	Female (n = 200)	Non-binary (n = 9)	Agender (n = 1)	Total (n = 272)
Age (in years)	23.97 (3.44)	23.06 (2.45)	23.44 (4.13)	22	23.28 (2.78)
Ethnicity					
White/European	40 (64.5%)	142 (71.0%)	8 (88.9%)	0 (0.0%)	190 (69.9%)
Hispanic/Latinx	1 (1.6%)	6 (3.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (100.0%)	8 (2.9%)
Black/African American	1 (1.6%)	4 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (1.8%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	13 (21.0%)	37 (18.5%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	51 (18.8%)
First Nation/Native American	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.4%)
Biracial	5 (8.1%)	8 (4.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (4.8%)
Arabian	2 (3.2%)	2 (1.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (1.5%)
Sexual Orientation					
Straight/Heterosexual	44 (71.0%)	146 (73.0%)	1 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	191 (70.2%)
Gay or Lesbian	9 (14.5%)	9 (4.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	18 (6.6%)
Bisexual	8 (12.9%)	37 (18.5%)	1 (11.1%)	1 (100.0%)	47 (17.3%)
Pansexual	1 (1.6%)	3 (1.5%)	3 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (2.6%)
Asexual	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.0%)	2 (22.2%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (1.5%)
Demisexual	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.4%)
Queer	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	2 (22.2%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.1%)
Prefer not to say	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.4%)
Sexting Score	2.96 (0.66)	2.66 (0.75)	2.86 (0.79)	2.5	2.73 (0.74)
Sexual Satisfaction Score	3.20 (0.74)	3.33 (0.67)	3.22 (0.87)	1.67	3.29 (0.70)
Sexual Facts Score	3.59 (0.53)	3.71 (0.46)	3.89 (0.33)	2.33	3.69 (0.48)

masturbation).” A sexual encounter was defined as “only sexual activities that involved penetrative sex.” Reliability analysis of the questions reported an α of .739.

Sexual Facts. The final component involved the participant agreement with specific sexual facts, specifically their agreement on facts relating to STIs and the use of contraception. Participants had to rate their level of agreement on three statements: It is important to discuss the use of contraceptive/birth control/protection with a partner before a sexual encounter; It is important to discuss sexually transmitted infections (STIs) status with a partner before a sexual encounter; Both partners share the same amount of responsibility to think about and discuss using contraceptive/birth control/protection. Responses were rated 0 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). The three questions returned an α of .687.

Procedure

The authors’ study was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants completed the survey through the Qualtrics online survey platform between September 2020 and October 2020. All forms of advertisement were accompanied by a letter of information detailing the study’s nature and purpose. Once participants clicked the link, the consent form was displayed. After consenting, they

were asked to complete a screening questionnaire to ensure they met the criteria. At that point, participants were asked to complete the questionnaires in the order they are presented in the Measures section.

Data Analysis

Due to the small number of participants classifying the sample based on ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, these groups were collapsed into dichotomous groups during the data analysis process. This procedure collapsed ethnicity into White/European (coded 0) and non-White (coded 1); gender into Male (coded 0) and Female (coded 1); and sexual orientation into heterosexual (coded 0) and LGBTQ+ (coded 1). In addition, when collapsing the gender category, nine participants identified as “non-binary,” and one participant identified as “agender” were removed. Gender was collapsed as the groups were too small, and it was inappropriate for them to be absorbed into the “male” or “female” categories. Therefore, only 262 participants were included in the regression analysis.

The questions’ average score was used to obtain a total score for Sexting, Sexual Satisfaction, and Sexual Facts, resulting in three continuous scales ranging from 0 to 4; Sexting score, Sexual Satisfaction score, and Sexual Facts score. Two two-stage hierarchical regressions were utilized to de-

termine the overall effect that demographic variables (i.e., age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) and the Sexting score have on the Sexual Satisfaction score and Sexual Facts score. The authors hypothesized that an increase in Sexting score would predict a higher Sexual Satisfaction score. The authors also hypothesized that an increase in Sexting score would predict higher Sexual Fact scores.

Results

Two hundred and twenty-five (82.7%) participants reported engaging in at least some sexting behavior. Linear regression was performed to analyze if age predicted a change in sexting behavior. The analysis found that an increase in age predicted a decrease in sexting behavior $F(1, 270) = 8.924, p = 0.003, R^2 = 0.032, \beta = -0.179$. Fisher's Exact Test of Independence was run on the remaining demographic variable because many cells (more than 20%) had an expected count of below five (Kim, 2017). Ethnicity ($p = 0.618$), gender ($p = 0.957$), and sexual orientation ($p = 0.635$) had no statistically significant relationship with endorsement of sexting behavior.

Testing of Assumptions for Regression Analysis

Firstly, a sample size of 262 was deemed adequate, given five independent variables in each analysis (Tabachnick, 2007). Secondly, an examination of correlations revealed that no independent variables were highly correlated (no r -value higher than 0.9). Collinearity statistics were all within accepted limits ($VIF < 3.0$; Coakes, 2001). Examination of the Mahalanobis distance scores indicated no multivariate outliers. Finally, the residual and scatter plots indicated the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were all satisfied (Pallant, 2020).

Predicting Sexual Satisfaction Score from Sexting Score

A two-stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with the Sexual Satisfaction score as the dependent variable. The dichotomous demographic variables (ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation) were entered at stage one of the regression to control for any impact they may have on the Sexual Satisfaction score. The Sexting score was entered at stage two. The analysis revealed that at stage one, the demographic variable did not contribute to a significant regression model, $F(4, 257) = 2.321, p = 0.057, R^2 = 0.035$. Introducing the Sexting score variable to the regression model explained an additional 8.9% of the variation in the Sexual Satisfaction score, and this change in R^2 was statistically significant, $F(1, 256) = 26.014, p < 0.001, \Delta R^2 = 0.089$. The regression statistics are summarized in Table 2.

Predicting Sexual Facts Score from Sexting Score

A second two-stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with the Sexual Facts score as the dependent variable. The dichotomous demographic variables (ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation) were entered at stage one of the regression to control for any impact they may have on the Sexual Facts score. The Sexting score was entered at stage two. The analysis revealed that at stage one, the demographic variable did not contribute to a significant regression model, $F(4, 257) = 1.764, p = 0.137, R^2 = 0.027$. Introducing the Sexting score variable to the regression model explained an additional 2.8% of the variation in Sexual Facts score, and this change in R^2 was statistically significant, $F(1, 256) = 7.488, p = 0.007, \Delta R^2 = 0.028$. The regression statistics are summarized in Table 3.

Discussion

Over the years, the availability of electronic devices, such as smartphones, tablets, and personal computers, has grown tremendously. Electronic media delivery is at an all-time high, with streaming services overtaking traditional cable and satellite television and social media far outpacing traditional forums. In this modern world, sexting seems unavoidable, with newer studies on prevalence showing increased endorsement rates by adolescents and adults alike (Jeanfreau et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has also caused increased challenges for intimate relationships. For example, when the U.K. first started a nationwide lockdown, couples in a romantic relationship who did not live under the same roof were not allowed to meet indoors. Thus, the barrier to physical intimacy, traditionally a concern for long-distance relationships, suddenly became very real for couples who may have been living on the same street. As alluded to above, the advent of technology provides a logical solution to mandated social distancing for alternative methods for sexual intimacy. Therefore, it is no surprise that couples in romantic relationships may turn towards methods such as sexting to meet the need for sexual intimacy. Findings from the current paper continue this trend with a relatively high prevalence rate when compared to older studies.

Potential Benefits of Sexting at Improving Relationship

The increase in popularity of sexting also draws attention to its potential benefits. Much past research has shown potential benefits to sexual satisfaction (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014; Parker et al., 2013) and romantic relationships (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014; Jeanfreau et al., 2018; Jin & Park, 2010). Similarly, results from our study found that sexting predicted a statistically significant increase in the Sexual Satisfaction scores among heterosexual, cisgender individuals in long-term relationships, regardless of age, gender (male or female), or ethnicity. The Sexual Satisfaction score was made

Table 2
Results from Regressions for Sexual Satisfaction

Models	B	SE	β	F	R ²	ΔR^2
Stage 1				2.31	.035	
Age	-0.031	0.016	-0.122			
Ethnicity	0.021	0.094	0.014			
Gender	0.108	0.1	0.067			
Sexual Orientation	0.017	0.095	0.111			
Stage 2				26.014	.124	.089
Age	-0.012	0.016	-0.049			
Ethnicity	0.001	0.089	0.001			
Gender*	0.211	0.098	0.131			
Sexual Orientation	0.147	0.091	0.096			
Sexting**	0.29	0.057	0.312			

Note. * = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .001$

Table 3
Results from Regressions for Sexual Facts

Models	B	SE	β	F	R ²	ΔR^2
Stage 1				1.764	.027	
Age	-0.006	0.011	-0.032			
Ethnicity	0.126	0.065	0.122			
Gender	0.123	0.07	0.11			
Sexual Orientation	-0.026	0.066	-0.025			
Stage 2				7.488	.055	.028
Age	0.001	0.011	0.008			
Ethnicity	0.118	0.064	0.115			
Gender*	0.163	0.07	0.145			
Sexual Orientation	-0.035	0.065	-0.033			
Sexting*	0.112	0.041	0.174			

Note. * = $p \leq .05$

up of three questions asking participants to rate their satisfaction with their romantic relationship, sexual relationship, and sexual encounters with their current partner. Sexting normalizes discussion and communication of sexual topics between the couple. As past studies have pointed out, sexting could also be a buffer to shy and uncomfortable conversations about sex. For example, if a physical, sexual encounter with a partner did not go well, one may be nervous about bringing it up at the moment but may be more comfortable to bring up such a topic when sexting instead. This can avoid “ruining the moment” during sex and allows the couple to have adequate communication about their sex life.

Potential Benefits of Sexting Beyond Improvement of Relationship

The authors' second hypothesis was also supported by the result, to a more minor yet still statistically significant level. An increase in the Sexting score predicted a rise in the Sexual Facts score among heterosexual, cisgender individuals in long-term relationships, regardless of age, gen-

der (male or female), or ethnicity. Sexual Facts score measured participants agreement with three statements (i.e., importance of discussing contraceptive use, importance of discussing STIs, and both partners sharing responsibility for these discussions). It was impossible to conclude if sexting directly caused an increased in agreement with these statements. It was also impossible to conclude an increase in agreement with these statements represented any specific construct. Nonetheless, our results here demonstrated there was potential for sexting to have benefits within heterosexual, cisgender, monogamous relationships

Educational and Clinical Implications

The results of this study highlight the importance of re-evaluating sexting from being a traditionally problematic behavior (Döring, 2014) to a potentially healthy and beneficial behavior that can improve intimacy, communication (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2011), and sexual satisfaction (Parker et al., 2013) among partners. This finding is particularly important in sexual education for mental health clinicians,

physicians, teachers, and college instructors. Unfortunately, only 30 states and the District of Columbia require public schools to teach sex education (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019). Additionally, many schools do not discuss sexting in their sex education programs, and the variability in sex education across states can vary dramatically (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019).

Professionals can evaluate the findings of the current study as well as other similar studies and be encouraged to begin expressing to students and patients that sexting may have benefits that can improve intra/interpersonal dynamics of one's life. For example, a study by Brown et al. (2009) highlighted that the sharing of sexual content on the internet with others could be functional for individuals and assist with sexual identity development. Having sex education that includes the benefits of sexting, while also highlighting the pitfalls and danger zones, should be a new standard in the curriculum of sex education to keep up with the ever-evolving technology and platforms people utilize. Such pitfalls that need to be discussed are the power/control dynamics that can lead to abuse and manipulation, as well as criminal and legal regulations (Drouin et al., 2015), so communities can become aware of consequences and potential risks as their images may be stolen or shared without consent. Sex education should also include a thorough discussion on consent, including the non-consensual sending of lewd images. Educators must also not forget to discuss the potential mental health risks that may be of consequence if one is criminally charged, exposed, or abused/manipulated by the receiver of the sext.

Our findings showcase the potential clinical utility of sexting among patients in individual or couples therapy for sexual dysfunction(s), intimacy, and communication issues. The fact that sexting is a behavior that does not require physical proximity may be a more straightforward first step for expressing sexual wants, needs, desires, and fantasies to their partner rather than having a face-to-face dialogue. Therefore, the first step may be encouraging the patient to sext their partner to begin sexual conversations; then, a therapist may provide scaffolding for the couple to start to experiment in expressing their sexual thoughts face-to-face. This method may lead to better communication and a more profound sense of intimacy. However, sexting after this process can still be incorporated to keep communication open, be spontaneous, and engage with a partner when proximity cannot be attained. The aim of utilizing sexting as an intervention should be to improve communication, intimacy, and sexual satisfaction. Future research is encouraged on the above educational and clinical points.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study reaffirmed past research, showing potential benefits of sexting behavior on sexual satisfaction and the couple's relationship with young adults in long-term

committed relationships. Participants who reported higher sexting behavior also reported a higher rate of discussion of STIs and the use of protection between couples. Future research should expand on these relationships. The results from this study highlight the importance of not painting sexting with an overly broad brush. It is essential to understand the behavioral and legal consequences of sexting, especially among adolescents. However, one must not ignore the growing evidence of the benefits sexting behavior has, particularly among heterosexual cisgender long-term committed relationships.

Despite the critical findings of this study, it is not without shortcomings. One limitation is the transient nature of the study. While shorter length likely encouraged better participation, it limits the information collected from the participants. The results indicated the potential benefits of sexting behavior but cannot determine the specific mechanisms causing the change. In addition, the use of self-constructed measures prevented a more conclusive finding as well. Future studies should either expand on the quantitative data collection and utilize measures with better reliability and validity or turn to qualitative methods to uncover how couples perceive that sexting improves their sexual satisfaction.

Another limitation of the current study pertained to the shortage of diversity in the data. However, 272 individuals completed the questionnaire, a small number of those identified as minority groups. Most participants were cisgender, heterosexual, and identified as white or of European descent. Thus, the authors could only examine ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation in dichotomous categories (i.e., White/European or non-White; male or female; heterosexual or LGBQ+). Future studies must identify barriers preventing the participation of these minority groups. It would be essential to conduct more research focusing on the benefits of adults sexting in the LGBTQ+ community and ethnic minorities. One potential solution is to have more specific criteria when future studies are conducted, explicitly targeting the transgender and gender non-conforming community or ethnic minority groups when studying the benefits of sexting. Also, the researchers only targeted monogamous couples in committed relationships. Future studies should dive into the potential benefits of sexting within the hook-up culture and polyamorous relationships to identify if such benefits are consistent across different types of relationships.

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