

Sexting: A Digital Gateway to Understanding Risk Propensity and Alexithymic Traits

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Alexithymic traits, Risk taking behaviours, Sexting **Aim:** The current study explores the patterns of sexting behaviour among individuals actively using online dating apps, with a focus on whether sexting can predict Alexithymic traits and risk-taking behaviours, while also delving deeper into the relationship between the different variables.

Methods: This quantitative study employs convenience sampling to recruit 194 individuals, aged 18-25, who are active users of online dating apps across Chennai. The variables were quantified using standardised measures which include; Sexting Behaviours Scale (SBS), The Risky, Impulsive, & Self-destructive behaviour Questionnaire (RISQ), and Toronto Alexithymia Scale Questionnaire (TAS - 20). The data obtained were then subject to correlation analyses using SPSS software.

Results: The results of the study highlight significant relationships between sexting, alexithymia and risk taking behaviours. Findings show that individuals with high levels of alexithymia are much more likely to partake in sexting and the other array of risk taking behaviours as a form of coping mechanism. These results underscore the role of emotional dysregulation in driving risk - taking tendencies, providing us with valuable insights into the psychological factors influencing the behaviors.

Conclusion: The findings of the study delve into the complex relationship between young adults' risk taking behaviors, alexithymia and sexting behavior, with a focus on the domain of online dating. They contribute to the growing body of literature by emphasizing the psychological and behavioral implications of sexting in the digital age, thereby paving the way for developing targeted interventions to mitigate these risks.

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Introduction

In contemporary society, the digital landscape has firmly ingrained itself as a vital component in the realm of interpersonal communication, ultimately redefining the dynamics of human interaction. Given the vast forums of communication that currently exist, indulgence in the act of “sexting” has rapidly gained prominence, solidifying its presence among users of online social media platforms. Sexting can be understood as the circulation of sexually provocative messages, images, or videos through digital devices ^[10]; ultimately providing the users a sense of vague anonymity and confidence, stemming from the lack of face-to-face interactions that are deemed necessary in other forms of communication. Moreover, the intimate nature of this behaviour can create a sense of excitement and vulnerability among the individuals, causing them to engage in more dangerous activities. Research suggests that engaging in sexting may ultimately mask an individual’s ability to understand the negative consequences of sharing explicit content by immersing them in a state of excitement ^[18,5]. This fosters in them a mindset that makes them susceptible to risk. The study by Machimbarrena et. al, 2018 ^[9], stands as an attestation to the fact that the prevalence of online behaviour has significantly furthered the experimentation with several other forums of risky behaviour, ultimately converging into an amalgamation of behaviours that cannot be described as being mutually exclusive.

While deconstructing the association between sexting and other risky behaviours, the pertinence of the psychological construct “Alexithymia” to the subject at hand is observed. Alexithymia can be understood as an affective impairment, wherein the individual displays a very restricted ability in being able to identify and verbally articulate their feelings ^[17,16]. Delving deeper into Alexithymia in relation to sexting, the prominent role of the latter as a coping mechanism for alexithymic individuals is established. The asynchronous nature of online interaction relieves alexithymic individuals of the significant distress that is associated with having real-time communication. These coping behaviours are not only limited to sexting; they encompass a range of behaviours that fall under the radar of “risky behaviours”, such as, risky/unprotected sex, smoking, alcohol usage, self-harm, dangerous driving, gambling, etc. This has been backed by empirical support stemming from the study by Gola, Miyakoshi, and Sescousse, 2015 ^[6], which revealed that individuals with high levels of alexithymia showed significant involvement in impulsive sexual behaviours, thereby providing grounds for continued participation. Studies by Grynberg et al., 2012 ^[7] and Honkalampi et al., 2009 ^[8] further substantiate the engagement of alexithymic individuals in risk taking behaviours. By deconstructing the relationship between sexting, risk-taking behaviours and alexithymic traits, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between these variables. Additionally, it also seeks to provide an empirically supported explanation of the impact digital interactions have on an individuals’ attitudes and behaviours.

Methodology

This study aims to explore the patterns of sexting behaviour among individuals actively using online dating apps, with a focus on whether sexting can predict Alexithymic traits and risk-taking behaviours, while also delving deeper into the relationship between the different variables. A convenience sampling method was utilized to recruit 194 participants who are aged 19-25. It was ensured that all participants were active users of online dating apps and were not be diagnosed with any active psychiatric illnesses or visible physical disabilities. Participants were briefed on the purpose and protocols of the study, potential risks, confidentiality of the information provided and the availability of psychological assistance as needed. Face-to-face interviews were conducted after obtaining necessary informed consent. These semi-structured interviews were based on the following questionnaires: The Sexting Behaviours Scale (SBS), The Risky, Impulsive, & Self-destructive behaviour Questionnaire

(RISQ), and the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS – 20). The collected data were tested for normality using the Shapiro Wilk Test and then subsequently subjected to Spearman Rank Correlation Analysis in SPSS.

Results

Descriptive Statistics of Variables Under Investigation

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and normality tests for the variables under investigation. A Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to test for normality of variables. All variables showed significant deviations from normality ($p < .001$), indicating that non-parametric methods may be appropriate for further analyses.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Variables Under Investigation (with Shapiro Wilk Test)

	Min.	Max.	M	SD	W	p
Sexting Behaviour	13.000	42.000	30.859	3.535	0.941	< .001
Alexithymia	36.000	84.000	64.434	6.340	0.930	< .001
Risk Taking Behaviour (Lifetime Frequency)	19.000	801.000	157.237	73.455	0.759	< .001
Risk Taking Behaviour (Last Month Frequency)	6.000	262.000	36.904	25.962	0.658	< .001
Risk Taking Behaviour (Affective Behavior)	0.361	5.631	2.490	0.831	0.968	< .001

Correlation Analysis:

A Spearman Rank Correlation Analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the variables under Investigation.

Table 2: *Correlation Matrix between Overall Risky Behaviour, Sexting Behavior and Alexithymia*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Alexithymia	—							
2. Difficulty Identifying Feelings	0.939 ***	—						
3. Difficulty Describing Feelings	0.925 ***	0.822 ***	—					
4. Externally Oriented Thinking	0.887 ***	0.861 ***	0.726 ***	—				
Risk Taking Behaviour								

5. Risk Taking Behaviour (Lifetime Frequency)	0.635 ***	0.495 ***	0.746 ***	0.468 ***	—		
6. Risk Taking Behaviour (Last Month Frequency)	0.522 ***	0.371 ***	0.696 ***	0.313 ***	0.917 ***	—	
7. Risk Taking Behaviour (Affective Behavior)	0.448 ***	0.387 ***	0.336 ***	0.532 ***	0.238 ***	0.09 4	—
8. Sexting Behaviour	0.784 ***	0.718 ***	0.711 ***	0.808 ***	0.597 ***	0.42 2***	0.54 5***

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

Sexting behaviour shows a strong positive correlation with alexithymia ($r = 0.784$) and lifetime risky behaviours ($r = 0.597$). Alexithymia also correlates strongly with both lifetime ($r = 0.635$) and recent risky behaviours ($r = 0.522$). Subdimensions of alexithymia further correlate with lifetime and recent risky behaviours, as well as affective behaviours leading to risk-taking. Lifetime and recent risky behaviours are highly correlated ($r = 0.917$), while affective behaviours show a moderate association with lifetime risky behaviours but no significant correlation with recent risky behaviours.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix between Various Risk Taking Behaviours and Alexithymia & Sexting Behaviour

Risk Taking Behaviours		Sexting Behaviours		Alexithymia	
Drug Using Behaviours	Lifetime Frequency	0.666	***	0.694	***
	Last Month Frequency	0.588	***	0.673	***
	Affective Behaviour	0.531	***	0.359	***
Aggression	Lifetime Frequency	0.030		0.419	***
	Last Month Frequency	0.262	**	0.515	**
	Affective Behaviour	0.602	**	0.709	***
Gambling	Lifetime Frequency	0.450	**	0.391	**
	Last Month Frequency	0.408	**	0.447	**
	Affective Behaviour	0.641	*	0.608	***
Risky Sexual Behaviour	Lifetime Frequency	0.572	***	0.685	***
	Last Month Frequency	0.610	***	0.668	***
	Affective Behaviour	0.328	**	0.205	**

Heavy Alcohol Use	Lifetime Frequency	0.683 ***	0.613 ***
	Last Month Frequency	0.589 ***	0.612 ***
	Affective Behaviour	0.480 ***	0.330 ***
Self-Harm	Lifetime Frequency	0.488 *	0.690 **
	Last Month Frequency	0.375 **	0.433 *
	Affective Behaviour	0.531 **	0.614 ***
Impulsive Eating	Lifetime Frequency	-0.157 *	-0.207 **
	Last Month Frequency	-0.496	-0.401
	Affective Behaviour	-0.304	-0.268 *
Reckless Behaviour	Lifetime Frequency	0.692 ***	0.498 ***
	Last Month Frequency	-0.185 **	-0.033
	Affective Behaviour	0.508 ***	0.344 ***

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

The correlation matrix in Table 3 shows significant positive relationships between sexting behaviour, alexithymia, and various risk taking behaviours. The Lifetime Frequencies, Last month frequencies and the Affective behaviours that of each dimension of risk taking behaviours were correlated with Sexting behaviour and Alexithymia. The 8 dimensions of risk taking are: Drug Using Behaviours, Aggression, Gambling, Risky Sexual Behaviour, Heavy Alcohol Use, Self - Harm, Impulsive Eating and Reckless Behaviour.

Discussion

A study by Benotsch E.G. et al., 2013 [2], highlighting the public health implications of sexting among 763 young adults, conducted a detailed analysis revealing an increased likelihood for participants who engaged in sexting to report recent substance use and high – risk sexual behaviours when compared to their non-sexting counterparts. Similarly, the findings of this study highlight a significant association between sexting and risk-taking behaviours. Risk Taking Behaviours act as an umbrella term for a wide array of behaviours ranging from gambling, substance use, alcohol use, unprotected sex, self-harm, etc. The strong association between these constructs can be understood by the underlying mechanisms of impulsivity, sensation seeking and recklessness that stem from a sustained exposure to extrinsic stimuli. Studies indicate that engaging in sexting tends to desensitise individuals to the potential negative consequences of sharing explicit content [18,5]. This fosters a mindset in them that is much more receptive to risk, thereby furthering their propensity to engage in

risky behaviours. Such individuals may struggle with emotion regulation and impulse control, causing them to often display aggressive outburst. Sexting by itself can be viewed as a risky sexual behaviour and may be linked with other activities that are considered as risky or potentially harmful. Such parallels can be drawn between sexting and various other risky behaviours that have been shown in the correlation matrix.

The role of sensation seeking, impulsivity and other mechanisms underlying sexting can be understood by the Acquired Preparedness Model (AP Model) [15]. This model suggests that the inherent personality traits of individuals predispose them to engaging in risky behaviours; these include Impulsivity, Sensation Seeking and Reward Sensitivity. This model also establishes the recurrence of such behaviours through the increased likelihood of the individuals remembering the gratifying responses associated with the risky behaviours. This consequently creates a repetitive pattern of continued engagement, reflecting on the diminished abilities of the individual to identify the potential harm associated [15]. This AP model can thus be used for explaining the inherent predispositions of individuals who engage in sexting to ultimately expose themselves and be involved in a cycle of risky behaviours that are reinforced by perceived rewards. The Attention Appraisal Model of Alexithymia [11,12], integrates the construct of Alexithymia within the framework of Process Model of Emotion Regulation. According to this framework, Alexithymia is defined as the difficulty in identifying, understanding and describing one's feelings, that is accompanied by an externally oriented cognitive style. This psychological construct is said to comprise three interrelated facets; namely, Difficulty Identifying Feelings (DIF), Difficulty Describing Feelings (DDF), and Externally Oriented Thinking (EOT). These facets are said to represent the difficulties individuals display at various stages of emotional processing. The Attention Appraisal Model of Alexithymia basically proposes that the alexithymic individual displays difficulties in the attention stage (EOT facet) and the appraisal stage (DIF and DDF facets) of emotion processing [13]. A closer examination of these 3 facets highlight the specific mechanism through which alexithymia influences sexting.

While focusing on individuals with high levels of Difficulty Identifying Feelings (DIF), they experience basic difficulty in identifying and comprehending one's emotional experiences, thus relying on external cues (i.e., external validation, feedback, appraisal system, etc.) that help better understand their feelings. They often resort to sexting as a means to explore and express emotions indirectly, therefore circumventing the requirement for precise emotional identification. The immediate responses and interactions that are involved in sexting provide individuals with the necessary external cues to aid the process. Similarly, Difficulty Describing Feelings (DDF) pertains to challenges in verbally expressing emotions. The strong positive correlation between sexting behaviour and DDF, provides empirical support for the understanding that sexting offers an alternative form of communication that relies on visual and textual messages, which can convey emotions more precisely and are more suitable for those who struggle with verbally articulating their feelings. The strongest correlation with sexting behaviour is found with Externally Oriented Thinking (EOT), where sexting serves as an externalised means of emotional expression or seeking validation and attention from others. This suggests that the externally oriented cognitive style of persons with alexithymia typically result in a prioritisation of immediate sensory experiences and a reduced regard for long-term outcomes.

As a result, this heightened disposition increases the likelihood of engaging in sexting, which in turn extends to other risky behaviours such as alcohol use, self-harm, substance use, gambling, etc. This establishes the role of sexting and other risky behaviours such as the temporary disinhibiting and euphoric effects of alcohol and drugs, alternative physiological arousal or heightened emotional response associated with self-harm and risky sex, appraisal

arousal associated with gambling, etc., as active maladaptive coping strategies for Alexithymic individuals. Furthermore, alexithymia is further associated with challenges in forming and maintaining close interpersonal relationships, causing people to resort to sexting as a way to seek intimacy or connection in a more externalised and potentially superficial manner due to their emotional deficits.

Overall, the study's hypotheses are largely supported by the data, indicating significant relationships between sexting behaviour, alexithymia, and risk-taking behaviours among young adults using online dating apps. The findings suggest that individuals who engage in sexting and those with higher levels of alexithymia are more likely to participate in such risky behaviours, potentially as a means of coping with negative emotions, seeking pleasure, or managing emotional experiences they find difficult to identify or express.

Conclusion:

This study underscores the complex connection between young adults' risk-taking behaviors, alexithymia and sexting behavior, particularly in the context of online dating. According to the research, individuals who engage in sexting and display higher levels of alexithymia are more likely to partake in impulsive and potentially harmful activities, like frequent drug use, heavy alcohol consumption, and gambling, hazardous sexual engagement, self-harm and reckless behaviors. These associations demonstrate the integral role of emotional dysregulation in driving such risk-taking tendencies.

While the study provides valuable empirical evidence linking sexting to more general patterns of risky conduct, it is not without limitations. The accuracy and generalizability of the results may be constrained by the usage of self-report measures and convenience sampling employed. Additionally, the lack of an in-depth exploration of specific motivations behind sexting - such as emotional distress, social pressure or exploratory behavior - leaves room for further investigations. Despite all these limitations, this study contributes significantly to the growing body of literature by emphasizing the psychological and behavioral implications of sexting in the digital age.

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Data Availability: To access the data, please contact the author at (rpdurga87@gmail.com) while specifying how the data will be used and cite this article in your publications.

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